Seeking to keep costs down and reduce liability while improving officer safety, some law enforcement departments are turning to officer-worn video cameras as an additional crime-fighting tool.

While police departments have been using in-car cameras for years, body-worn cameras are gaining in popularity, either as an additional crime-fighting device or as a replacement for in-car, dash-mounted cameras, especially among departments trying to cut costs.

Proponents of body-worn video cameras say they can increase transparency of operations and reduce litigation while resulting in cost-savings for cash-strapped departments. Officer-worn cameras provide advantages similar to in-car cameras, including protecting officers from false accusations, collecting evidence for trial and improving community relations. The difference is the body-worn cameras can go wherever the patrol officer goes when he steps away from the patrol car, such as into an apartment building or a house, and record what the officer sees and hears. Detectives can use the cameras for field interviews and victim interviews.

Depending on the type of camera, recording can be activated by voice command or by pressing the record button. Some can be worn like a cell phone earpiece; others are clipped to an officer’s pocket. Features and quality vary among vendors.

Some police departments have conducted their own evaluations of the body-worn technology before deciding to purchase, including the Erlanger Police Department in Kentucky and the Lafayette Police Department in Colorado.

Erlanger, Ky.

The city of Erlanger is located approximately 10 miles south of Cincinnati, Ohio, and the police department serves a population of 23,000, including Crescent Springs, Ky.

The cameras used by Erlanger’s 41 officers are very small; only 2 inches tall and worn on the officer’s front-shirt pocket to record all contacts with the public and calls for service on 8 GB microSD memory cards. The device has approximately four hours of storage time; battery life is between two and three hours.

Erlanger began its program with a six-month evaluation period. “After that, we had a good handle on how to use them and developed policies and procedures for their use, which have been in place for a year,” says Capt. Robert Arens.

The department’s policies include that officers must turn on the camera when responding to a call or during any contact with the public, such as a traffic stop. Officers share the cameras. Ten officers are on a shift at one time, and each is assigned a camera at the beginning of a shift. Officers cannot download, erase or edit the video, and turn in the cameras at shift’s end. Designated individuals in the department download the information and reformat the cameras to make them

Pro’s and Con’s

NLECTC Camera Evaluation

The National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center System’s Small, Rural, Tribal and Border Regional Center is collecting information on two types of officer-worn cameras.

“The idea is not to evaluate a specific camera, but whether personal-worn video cameras are worthwhile to law enforcement,” says Kevin Vermillion, a technology systems analyst with the center.

Since October 2008, the center has distributed cameras to approximately 20 law enforcement agencies in various parts of the country, including Tennessee, North Dakota, Nebraska, California, Washington, Kansas, Georgia, Michigan, South Dakota, Kentucky, Illinois, Idaho and Florida.

Agencies are asked to fill out an evaluation sheet, but not asked to provide feedback by a certain date. Once enough information is received, the center will produce a report on the pros and cons of the cameras and include information received from the various departments.
available for the next officer. After wearing a camera for the first time, officers view the results to determine if the placement of the camera in the front shirt pocket needs adjusting to obtain the best possible video next time.

Erlanger’s switch to body-worn cameras was driven by financial concerns. “We had to find more economical ways of doing business,” Arens says.

Erlanger’s cameras cost about $70 each, compared to $5,000 for an in-car, dash-mounted camera. Several years ago, every cruiser in the department had an in-car camera system. Arens said the department has stopped purchasing in-car cameras with city money and is switching to body-worn cameras. The department will purchase an in-car system only if it receives a grant.

“The in-car video has its purpose, but it has its limitations, such as when an officer responds to a domestic dispute in an apartment,” he says. “We found that officer-worn cameras are more practical for us, and we get a great audio sound.”

He said the limited battery life is usually not a problem because two or three hours during an eight-hour shift is often enough to cover encounters requiring recording. Arens says officers initially were reluctant to use the cameras but have since found them useful.

“At first officers were leery, but I think they have bought into the program and realize it’s not the department watching over them, it’s to protect them,” he says. “Ninety percent of the time, it’s a complaint that an officer was rude, and when you can pull up the audio and listen, it’s fine, there is no rudeness. And if there is, or another problem, we take care of it. It dispels complaints against officers that aren’t true.”

Lafayette, Colo.

The police department in Lafayette has 40 sworn officers in a city with a population of 25,000, just north of Denver. The department conducted a 30-day evaluation of three types of body-worn cameras in late 2009, and as a result decided to purchase, according to Sgt. John Sellers.

“While the in-car cameras are useful, they are expensive at $5,000 per unit, and they only capture what the patrol car is pointing at so once the event moves away from in front of the car, the important video isn’t captured,” Sellers says. “It’s more important and better for our officers to have the worn cameras so they can capture anything they encounter. “Reasons to use officer-worn cameras are to increase officer safety, reduce agency liability, reduce officer complaints and improve the public perception of police.”

The cameras tested ranged in cost from $99 to $899. Officers were told to deploy the cameras throughout the day while on duty, and evaluated the cameras for quality of audio and video recording, comfort and usability.

The department stopped purchasing in-car video systems for new patrol cars in 2008. Sellers says the department decided to buy the most expensive of the three body-worn cameras evaluated because although all three worked well, it was the easiest to use. The company was also offering a “buy one, get four more at 50 percent off” deal. The department conducted the evaluation with loaned cameras and returned them once the evaluation was over. Currently, no officers have cameras on patrol. The department planned to purchase a camera for each of its officers by the end of 2010.

Sellers says the only disadvantage is that the cameras have two to four hours of recording capability, so if an officer forgets to turn the camera off between incidents during a shift, the available recording space fills up and the officer will have to come back into the office and download the video to free up additional space.

“Once an officer got used to wearing the camera, the four-hour time period was fine; it’s a matter of getting used to and remembering to turn the camera on and off,” he says.

For more information, contact Capt. Robert Arens of the Erlanger Police Department at rlarens@ci.erlanger.ky.us or (558) 727-7581, or Sgt. John Sellers of the Lafayette Police Department at johns@cityoflafayette.com or (303) 665-5571. For more information on the National Institute of Justice’s Sensor and Surveillance portfolio, contact Dr. Frances Scott at frances.scott@usdoj.gov or (202) 305-9950.

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