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The Cost of Body Cameras for St. Louis Police and Citizens

By Courtney A. Lindbeck*

St. Louis City agreed in September 2017 to accept over 1,000 free body cameras - enough for the entire police force - from a company called Axon, as part of a year-long trial. The decision came after a “contentious and chaotic” vote of the St. Louis Board of Estimate and Apportionment.¹

The vote came after 11 days of protests in St. Louis following the not guilty verdict of Jason Stockley, a white St. Louis Police Officer who killed Anthony Lamar Smith in 2011. The verdict echoed some of the same issues surrounding police that sparked demonstrations in Ferguson in 2014 following the police killing of Michael Brown. Additionally, the ACLU is bringing suit against the police department for “unlawful and unconstitutional” police conduct surrounding police treatment of protestors.

Advocates for the body cameras insist on implementation as soon as possible, arguing the department is delaying utilizing the tool. A 2016 survey by the Major Cities Chiefs Association and Major County Sheriffs’ Association found that 95 percent of the 70 law enforcement agencies polled were using or planned to use body cameras.² According to data from Axon, the company providing the free trial, 41 of the 69 biggest cities in the U.S. use or have decided to use the technology.³ However, some city officials

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¹ Patrick, Robert, *St. Louis police to get body cameras*, ST LOUIS POST---DISPATCH, Sept. 21, 2017, http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/st-louis-police-to-get-body-cameras/article_4ed57260-e29d-5758-b853-ece51e2cb882.html.

² *2016 Body-Worn Camera Symposium*, available at <https://www.policefoundation.org/general-resources/2016-body-worn-camera-symposium/>.

³ Rachel Lerman, *Axon offers 1-year free trial of body cameras to all US police departments; rival Viewu rips plan*, The Seattle Times, April 5, 2017, <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/technology/axon-offers-to-give-police-free-body-cameras-to-speed-companys-growth/>.

told local news organizations that, although they support the use of body cameras, they believed the process is “rushed” in light of recent events.⁴

One major concern is potential future costs. The language of the free trial states that Axon (formerly known as TASER International) would provide up to 1,300 cameras and all the necessary equipment for recording and storing the data. Critics of the free trial however, argue Axon traps cities into using the technology when they are no longer able to access the data after the year-trial is concluded.⁵ This would essentially force police departments to sign a long-term deal with Axon. According to the contract with Axon, each body camera would cost the city \$1,000 after the first year is up, which would add up to \$1.3 million.

In December 2015, the Saint Louis Police Department initiated the first steps of implementing a body camera program. The department took part in a 90-day pilot program where a select group of sergeants wore body cameras. The department however did not implement a wider effort due to cost constraints.⁶ The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported that at the end of the trial period, St. Louis could return all the equipment or decide to pay the \$1.3 million and retain the data.⁷ Is the free trial period just a show to quiet the demands of advocates for more transparency in the St. Louis Police Department? Only time will tell.

Due to a 2016 Missouri law that bars public access to police body camera footage during ongoing investigations and restricts the release of the recordings filmed in “non-public” areas for privacy concerns, such as

⁴ Celeste Bott, *Big Questions remain about body cameras for St. Louis Police*, ST LOUIS POST--DISPATCH, Sept. 26, 2017, http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/big-questions-remain-about-body-cameras-for-st-louis-police/article_3abd4cf7-71d1-51fd-b6c3-72243a876b36.html.

⁵ Rachel Lerman, *Axon offers 1-year free trial of body cameras to all US police departments; rival Viewu rips plan*, The Seattle Times, April 5, 2017, <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/technology/axon-offers-to-give-police-free-body-cameras-to-speed-companys-growth/>.

⁶ St. Louis Police Department Website, *Body-Worn Camera Program*, available at <http://www.slmpd.org/bodycamera.shtml>.

⁷ Celeste Bott, *Big Questions remain about body cameras for St. Louis Police*, ST LOUIS POST--DISPATCH, Sept. 26, 2017, http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/big-questions-remain-about-body-cameras-for-st-louis-police/article_3abd4cf7-71d1-51fd-b6c3-72243a876b36.html.

homes, schools, and medical facilities, other skeptics argue that body cameras are not a “cure-all” for transparency issues.⁸ The law allows a judge to consider whether the release of the video to the public is “reasonably likely to bring shame or humiliation to a person of ordinary sensibilities.” This law was implemented after police groups argued it would help more law enforcement agencies to take up the technology if they knew there would be some degree of privacy and judicial interpretation.

Will body cameras make a difference in St. Louis? Would it have made a difference in the case against Jason Stockley? Perhaps. The police department itself would play a role in the implementation of the cameras, however, and the Missouri Law could hinder the use of such transparency. Only time will tell if advocates will find relief from the use of body cameras, or if this will be just another trial run for the police department.

Edited by Luke Jackson

⁸ Kurt Erickson, *Missouri gets new law limiting access to body camera footage*, ST LOUIS POST---DISPATCH, July 8, 2016, http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/missouri-gets-new-law-limiting-access-to-body-camera-footage/article_b6009df2-2b8b-52d0-b6e8-2f4cc2ca881d.html.