

Bureau of Justice Assistance
Chief Sean Whent Body-Worn Camera Interview
7/30/15

Mike Roosa: Hello. I'm Mike Roosa, a Senior Policy Advisor at the Bureau of Justice Assistance, and today, I'm speaking with Chief Sean Whent of the Oakland, California, Police Department as part of BJA's Body-Worn Camera Podcast Series. Chief Sean Whent joined the Oakland Police Department in 1994. During his career, he has worked on a multitude of assignments, including the Patrol Division, Criminal Investigation Division, Special Operations Division, Internal Affairs Division, and the Office of Inspector General.

In May of 2013, he was appointed as the Interim Police Chief, and on May 14th, 2014, he was appointed as the Chief of Police for the Oakland Police Department. Chief Whent has attended the Senior Management Institute for Police and the FBI and National Executive Institute. He holds a Bachelor's degree in criminal justice administration from California State University at East Bay and a Master's degree in criminology, law, and society from the University of California at Irvine.

Chief Whent, thank you for speaking with me today.

Chief Whent: Thank you. It's my pleasure to be here.

Mike Roosa: So to start, as an early adopter as Oakland was, what is the most important thing other large agencies should consider as they evaluate the implementation of a BWC program in their community?

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Chief Whent: I think they need to think through all aspects of it in advance so you kind of have a plan. So you need to figure out which device you want, how you want to go about storage for that, and then what kind of administrative support it's going to take to support that program. And then, obviously, as well, in most cases, you're going to need to get your police unit involved in development of the policy prior to the kickoff of the program.

Mike Roosa: So really focus on the big picture in that sense?

Chief Whent: Exactly, yes. There's a lot of aspects to consider, but have a good plan before you go into it.

Mike Roosa: Okay. Oakland is one of the Violence Reduction Network cities, and it's partner is Richmond. They're piloting BWCs at this point. But, they're a smaller agency. Did you have any particular advice to give to Chief Magnus?

Chief Whent: We did have some discussions about policy considerations regarding when officers are allowed to view video. It's kind of a hotly debated topic. And so, we had some discussions about that. And then I certainly offered any other - to share my experiences with him in any way I can if they need help along their path.

Mike Roosa: Right. And I imagine that the close proximity, so there's going to be some overlapping there.

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Chief Whent: Yeah. So a clear ten minute drive down the freeway, so not too far away.

Mike Roosa: Right. Well, in that consideration and in those areas that, you know, obviously where your advice comes from, could you explain how your body-worn camera policy has changed over time, maybe how the public reactions have affected the changes in the - in your BWC policy?

Chief Whent: That's interesting. I don't know that the public reactions have really affected our policy that much, in that we were, you know, an early adopter of this. So, we started down this road long before body-worn cameras really got into being the norm or being the hot topic in the industry. So, we had kind of fixed or made modifications long before then. So, I guess sort of our policy changes along the way have to do with retention. Obviously with memory being as expensive as it is, we've had to adjust our retention period. We have along the way looked at when officers are allowed to view video. And then, also I guess probably most of the changes we've made have really not so much been in the policy, but in the training aspect of it of what we can do is not as simple as just handing them out. It's a lot more complicated than that.

Mike Roosa: All right. Well, that leads right into this next question. You know, what types of lessons learned from the BWC program and officer-related events? Did you use those as learning tools for the whole department, or are there some specifics that you can point out?

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Chief Whent: Yeah. So, one example that I think is pretty helpful is that, you know, the officer has to manually turn on the camera, right? So, what we found is that when we first handed them out to people, particularly, you know, your senior officers that have been operating the same way for 20 plus years, you give them something new to do, they don't exactly take to it very quickly because it's a muscle memory issue. So, like, for example, what we had to do was start incorporating the body-worn cameras into all the training that we do. So, that's in the policy academy and at in-service training where we do scenario-based stops and other things like that.

When officers in the academy learn how to make a car stop, they're incorporating the body-worn camera into that process so that they develop that muscle memory from early on. And additionally, regarding turning on the cameras, so we found when we first implemented it that officers would turn on the camera as they walked up to a vehicle or a person that they had stopped. And that works okay for - in most instances. Where it doesn't work is in instances where the person takes off running or is instantly confrontational.

In those circumstances, the officer is now dealing with a more pressing situation and doesn't remember to turn on the camera. So, what we've had to incorporate into the training is that you turn on a camera before you even attempt to make the stop. Before you turn on the lights in the police car and get on the radio to put out the stop, the first thing you're doing is turning on the camera. And that way,

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regardless of what happens after, it's all going to be captured on video. So, that was a good learning thing.

And then I guess we have used some events that have been captured on video in adjusting our training for tactical things as well. So, we're trying to learn from it. And then also, another project that we're actually quite proud of is our partnership with Stanford University and Dr. Eberhardt, where they are looking at a lot of footage in the aggregate. And they've developed algorithms to search for keywords or other things to help really try and define what makes incidents go well, what makes incidents not go well. And when that is complete, we anticipate being able to roll out some good training department-wide based off of that.

Mike Roosa: That's great. So, could you go a little bit further into the Stanford University collaboration? It - like, how is it set up? And how many officers are being worked? Is it more just a data review?

Chief Whent: So, it's largely a data review. I mean we do have some support staff that have helped or are helping them in this process. But, we gave them access to I believe it's a couple months' worth of all of our body camera footage. And so, they're going through all of that footage and characterizing incidents, basically saying they went well, didn't go well, whatever, and then, you know, looking for commonalities in those various encounters.

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And at the end of that, they're going to develop a report that they will give to us that should have good information in there about lessons we - that they've been able to learn from that aggregate data of, you know, literally thousands of stops that occurred over that period of time.

Mike Roosa: All right. And also, this kind of data is soft data? It's not something that an officer captures and then they report it, speed reaction times and things of that sort.

Chief Whent: Right, absolutely, yeah. This is, yeah, much, much more complicated and a lot of details that would not come out in interviewing police reports, certainly.

Mike Roosa: That's great. Earlier you mentioned the officers viewing the video and the agency's policy. Would you mind explaining your agency's policy on officers viewing their body-worn camera video prior to making a statement or writing a report?

Chief Whent: Right, yeah. So, I guess we actually do differ from what would be the norm here in California, and it's been a very hotly debated issue. I've actually given testimony twice before the state legislature that was considering some legislation on this. But, our body-worn camera policy allows officers to view their video prior to writing a report on most low level incidents. But, it does not allow them to view footage prior to an interview after a critical incident, like an officer-involved shooting or an in-custody death.

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In those cases, we will interview the police officer, then allow them to watch the footage. And then, if they so choose, they can provide sort of a follow-up statement about anything they want to clarify after watching the video. And so, our reasoning behind that is that we really want to know what was going through the officer's mind at the time that they were involved in the critical incident, as opposed to what they just viewed on the video. We recognize and fully expect that the officer's statement may not perfectly match the video.

We know all kinds of studies about human memory and how that all works, particularly under stress. So, we don't have any expectation that they're going to be a, you know, a perfect match. But, we allow for that. We really do want to know what was going through the officer's mind during that critical incident. So, that's why our policy is written the way it is.

Mike Roosa: All right. So, obviously, you've had some of these incidents. Has that process – or it's still your process. So, I'm assuming that you -

Chief Whent: Right. So, after an officer-involved shooting, we do interview the officers. Our Criminal Investigations division will do a criminal interview. That interview is remotely monitored by Internal Affairs staff. And then, we do allow them to watch the video at the conclusion of that. In most cases, the officers have not made any follow-up statement after viewing the video. I mean what we see is their statements are largely accurate, close to what's on the video. And in none of

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those cases have we found anything to indicate that there was such discrepancy that indicated the officer was untruthful or anything like that.

So, I think that was kind of what the big fear was, was that an officer would be accused of being untruthful because his statement didn't perfectly match what was on the video. But, we went into this knowing that that's just not going to be very likely that their statements are going to match.

Mike Roosa: And I think that's really valuable advice for agencies starting into this area that have those questions being thrown at them. So, let's get into that kind of area. And just, if you were going to start your BWC program over from the beginning and recognizing those technologies in other areas, based on what you've learned though, is there anything, or what would you do differently?

Chief Whent: I definitely think that we would have worked more on the training early on so that it was a smoother rollout as far as making sure the people actually use the camera, use it appropriately. I just think that just throwing them in and saying, "Here they are," you know, it was a real learning curve to get people to start using them. So, I think that could have been done better. And I think that - let's see. I don't know a whole lot more than that we really would have changed.

I think we're pretty happy with the device that we've chosen. So, that was good. Yeah. I don't know. Beyond that, I don't know a whole lot we would really do differently.

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Mike Roosa: I think training is a great one to always look at, and it's questions I get all the time on, you know, do the officers actually need to be trained before they put the cameras on, or will they - you know, is it in the field, on the field, on the job training type pieces? But, again, lessons learned, that's why we do these podcasts. So, thank you.

Chief Whent: Yeah, absolutely. We actually in our academy give cameras, but it's not an actual camera. It's like shell, plastic version of the empty camera, essentially, that we give to every trainee in the academy so that they can, you know, begin working on it early on. You know, it's a \$2 piece of plastic that you give to somebody. But, you know, it really, really, helps develop that muscle memory. And, you know, for a brand new police officer, they don't know anything different. So, they just learned it from the beginning. So, that's been phenomenal.

Mike Roosa: Well, on that note, are there any final tips for agencies that might be just starting their BWC programs?

Chief Whent: Yeah. The training's a big issue. Make sure you have your policy issues worked out in advance. You don't want to be sitting there after an officer-involved shooting at that time trying to determine whether or not you're going to allow officers to view videos. So, you want to have that worked out in advance. And additionally, you know, a very clear set of times when you want officers to record, when to start recording, and then when they can terminate that recording

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as well. So, you really want to vet that policy very well in advance, otherwise you're going to run into real problems.

Mike Roosa: Great. Well, thank you, Chief Whent. We're grateful you could speak with us today to share your knowledge on this important topic.

Chief Whent: Great. Glad I could help out.

Mike Roosa: We encourage law enforcement, justice, and public safety leaders whose agencies are interested in learning more about the implementation of body-worn camera programs to visit the body-worn camera toolkit at www.bja.gov/bwc. This toolkit offers a variety of resources that agencies can use in the adoption and use for community engagement, policy development, data collection, officer training, and educational purposes. We also encourage listeners to share and promote these resources with their colleagues and staff.

Lastly, all of these resources and especially the body-worn camera toolkit have been designed as a national resource, your resource. Please submit your ideas for new content through the BWC Support link at the bottom of the homepage, or e-mail AskBWC@usdoj.gov. This is Mike Rosa at the Bureau of Justice Assistance, signing off. Thank you to our listeners for joining us today.

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