

# More eyes on Alton? A closer look at body cameras and community policing

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**FLORISSANT** - During a meeting of the "Discussion and Solutions Committee" at John Knox Presbyterian Church in Florissant Thursday, the subject of body cameras was breached by several police officers and members of the community.

Since the Stockley verdict, the debate for police having body cameras has been reignited. Following the killing of Mike Brown by Officer Darren Wilson, the Ferguson Police Department has utilized the cameras. All of the officers attending Thursday's meeting were in favor of the idea of body cameras, but there are a lot of issues with body cameras the general public does not consider.

Besides the costs, which could amount to over \$1,000 a camera, and as much as \$100,000 for storage in the Alton Police Department with 59 officers, many civil rights issues come into question when body cameras are involved.

While officers from the Ferguson Police Department currently utilize the technology and officers from Hazelwood are doing trial runs of several different vendors, Alton's police department may have a bit longer to wait.

"It would take around \$100,000 to store all the data from body cams on 59 officers," Simmons said. "It's hard for me to get my community to get us new vehicles. How are we supposed to cover the cost of these cameras and storage after that, without having to take some of our officers off the streets?"

Besides those two obvious costs at the beginning of any consideration to utilize the cameras, other issues take hold - especially in Illinois where Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests cannot be easily denied and eavesdropping laws require two-party consent to be recorded.

Simmons said additional logistics would have to be considered for those laws in order to protect the privacy and civil rights of the community and the legal liability of the department. If body cameras were utilized by the Alton Police Department, Simmons said another person would have to be hired for the job or blurring faces of people in domestic disputes as well as juveniles in the system. Such individuals as well as mentally ill people police often assist in their jobs would be at risk of having their privacy in jeopardy following FOIA requests from the general public.

"Sexual assault cases are something that would scare me to death if we had body cameras," Simmons said.

If that privacy or those civil rights were violated in any way, even if by simple error, the police department would be placed at a high risk for legal ramifications as well. While Simmons said he is in favor of body cams, adding they are most likely in the overall policing of the entire nation, he would like to see some of the issues placing people's privacy and civil rights in constant jeopardy with their usage handled before utilizing them.

Currently, all Alton Police Department patrol vehicles are outfitted with cameras and officers have personal microphones to record both the video and audio of all stops made by the department. Simmons said it works well in the interest of both the public and police department.

"There are lots of benefits, but also lots of possible negative factors to the implementation of these cameras," an officer from the Hazelwood Police Department said. "These are also good-sized cameras. They are not pin-sized. We have to look past the initial costs and look five to 20 years from now. We have about 10 vendors currently trying to hook us up into their systems. Our ultimate goal is having our community represented by good and professional police officers."

The man presiding over the meeting, Rance Thomas, a professor emeritus of sociology and criminal justice from Lewis and Clark Community College and the President of North County Churches United for Racial Harmony and Justice, said body cameras would most likely be the way of the future in 95 percent of police departments and officers and administrators would need to keep track of what works and what does not work to ensure the experiment has a good result for both officers and the general public.