

IOWA POLICE JOURNAL

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION FOR THE IOWA STATE POLICE ASSOCIATION



BOARD SPOTLIGHT: INSTANT REPLAY FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT?

By Eric Snyder, ISPA Past President



Instant replay is becoming commonplace in sports. With technological advancements, we can look back in time and watch a play over and over again, in high definition, immediately after it happens. It's only natural that this technology, or the idea of it, will be transferred to other areas of our lives. How does this translate to law enforcement? Body cameras.

Body cameras are the quick fix for those who question the acts of law enforcement professionals. Put a camera on a cop, and you will know everything he or she said or did. Everything will be recorded and all questions answered.

Only that isn't how it works. Even with instant replay in high definition— with thousands of dollars' worth of equipment — we can't always get it right. Imagine your typical sporting event. Multiple cameras recording in high definition with trained operators behind the controls. How many times have we heard the words “inconclusive evidence to overturn the call”?

Now imagine your typical police officer who's handed a body camera designed to be worn on a uniform. He or she will go out into the world, the real world, where lighting isn't ideal and there aren't multiple cameras. He or she will be under stress. Will the public be satisfied with “inconclusive evidence to overturn the call” or will political pressure be the deciding factor?

And when the camera does provide conclusive evidence and we overturn the call? What about the officer who made the call under stress, based on the information he or she had, only to be told he or she was wrong? It isn't just an overturned call. It could be the end of a career and life as the officer knew it. A family could be without a mother or father who did the best he or she could but was overruled by technology. No Robocop here.

It may sound like I am making a case against body cameras. Not at all. Technology has helped law enforcement and will continue to do so. I believe body cameras will help law enforcement more than they will hurt. But with any advancement, there are usually unintended consequences that must be managed.

Body cameras in law enforcement will only give us one angle of an event. It will be from the officer's perspective, but others won't see, sense or feel what the officer experienced. It will do what a camera does, process images — but it won't do it like the human brain. The camera will

give us more information than we had before but will also give us temptation to speculate, or fill in the gaps of what we can't see clearly or don't understand because we weren't there. The camera will give a view of an event without proper context or background.

Body cameras will also strain our budgets. Even with grants or donations, the ongoing costs of maintenance and storage will cut down on training and wages for many agencies if proper research and planning isn't done ahead of time. Even then the money tree only has so many branches.

And maybe the biggest challenge of all is that body cameras will expand the growing rift in trust between law enforcement and the public we serve. We must remain vigilant in repairing that trust. Some won't like being recorded. Who wants a camera in their home? Body cameras will also see things that many are not ready for or won't understand. Imagine putting a camera in every factory and kitchen that our food is prepared in. There are some things better left unseen — not because they need to be hidden, but because only a certain portion of our population can handle seeing how things are actually made. Much like making hot dogs, keeping peace is sometimes an ugly job.

So you see this isn't as easy as going to the store and buying the latest and greatest gadget. All aspects must be thoroughly researched and evaluated. Policy, procedure, cost, technology and community dynamics are very deeply interwoven in this issue. We must all understand that body cameras for law enforcement aren't the quick fix to all of our problems. Integration between this technology and the law enforcement world is a complex issue and should be treated as such. Each community must look at the issue and decide if having instant replay is worth it. This call is under further review.