

In-View: The Value of Using BWC Video for Training

Body-worn cameras (BWCs) are effective at providing agencies with an additional layer of accountability and transparency. In turn, BWCs help address community concerns, mitigate liability, and often provide the primary evidence to determine whether an officer's actions were justified in the moment. Not surprisingly, the level of BWC adoption in police departments continues to grow, both because the technology offers many benefits and also because many states now require agencies to use them.

Most organizations review BWC video reactively. Post-incident review will occur in response to a specific action (e.g., force is used; someone is injured) or because a complaint has been made. Many agencies also have some type of proactive random review of BWC footage, which is often meant to ensure compliance with existing policies regarding BWC use (e.g., activation, termination, categorization). The purpose of this *In-View* is to outline the benefits of proactively reviewing BWC video for training, both for individual officers and for the organization as a whole.

Training is a critical component of law enforcement, and officers must receive ongoing training to ensure they follow policy and are up to date with the latest trends, techniques, and tactics. The benefits of training include increased officer safety, risk mitigation, and performance improvement. Incorporating BWC footage into training can enhance the benefits in each of these areas.

Reviewing BWC Video: A Reality Check

Police agencies across the country are struggling with staffing, and many are operating well below their authorized strength. As a result, supervisors are often handling calls for service, and all parts of the organization are generally focused on priority activities. Reviewing BWC videos takes time, and the review process needs to be reasonable given the total workload within agencies. To ensure balance, policies should require reviews for some BWC videos, but each department will have to establish a review methodology and frequency that is feasible for them. If a review policy is put in place but not followed, it is counterproductive and can actually be used against an agency in a case or formal proceeding. For more information on establishing a review process, check out the recent *In-View* article [“Audits and Compliance Reviews Can Strengthen Body-Worn Camera Programs.”](#)

Training at an Individual Level

By reviewing BWC video with an individual officer, a supervisor has an opportunity to recognize good performance and provide coaching on areas needing improvement. A good technique is to explain the purpose of the review and the desired outcome, emphasizing that this is a learning opportunity and not a disciplinary action. Prior to the one-on-one interaction, the supervisor should review related reports or statements to fully understand the situation depicted in the BWC footage. The officer should be given an opportunity to provide their perspective and to objectively consider what might have

been done differently. The supervisor should provide specific feedback and encourage self-reflection to help the officer to take ownership of their actions and foster a culture of continuous learning. If appropriate, the supervisor should ask the officer if they feel a training opportunity (e.g., de-escalation training) might be beneficial. This type of supervisor–subordinate interaction is key to organizational health and individual growth. It also provides meaningful content for an employee evaluation by capturing how the officer handled the incident and how they responded to the constructive review.

Training at an Organizational Level

At an organizational level, BWC video can increase the effectiveness of departmental training, both field and specialized. Senior Corporal Jared Douds, who leads the Tampa, Florida, Police Department’s Training Unit, has seen firsthand the value that BWC videos can bring to training. “We’ve been using videos for training since we got the cameras [more than two years ago] because we knew they would be a good source of material,” Douds said. “For instance, during stressful situations, we know that the perception of what occurred in the officer’s mind may not be what actually happened. This lets us effectively point out the effects of stress.”

According to Douds, BWC videos also help underscore key points for specialized training. “When we’re doing CPR training, we have a couple of really positive [BWC] examples of officers showing up on scene and doing a great job,” he said. “When the other officers see this, it’s more effective. When it’s one of ours, it really has more impact.”

The Tampa Police Department has a review process that randomly assigns videos to supervisors who automatically all videos that involve use of force above a certain level. Douds notes that reviewing videos has both confirmed training methods and led to some changes. “It really helps to validate the way we train when we see it being used in the field,” he said. “And sometimes the videos have helped us to adjust our training approach to increase effectiveness.”

BWC review can also promote shifts in organizational culture. At the Colorado Springs, Colorado, Police Department, BWC videos play a key role in an agency-wide emphasis on procedural justice.

“At the end of the day, we’re all serving the community; it’s really about developing a relationship and building police legitimacy,” explained Commander Jeff Strossner. “We can use BWC videos to overcome issues and learn to treat people in a different way. We’re starting the training with supervisors, and we took two incidents where [an] officer didn’t do well, then told the supervisors to view the videos through the new [procedural justice] lens. We’re also emphasizing that [supervisors] have to set the tone, to be the example,” he said.

External Training Benefits

Although it's not training in the traditional sense, sharing BWC videos with external stakeholders can effectively illustrate the challenges associated with decision-making in police work. Sharing videos can also demonstrate the realities of BWC operation—specifically that recordings of rapidly unfolding incidents in the field will not have the quality or detail of a studio production. Videos of police interactions during difficult situations can be very instructive for citizen academies, civic groups, and even the media. The same videos can also provide a helpful “field” perspective for non-sworn members of an organization. These engagements with external stakeholders do take time and commitment, but they can go a long way toward educating people about police work and building or improving relationships.

Addressing Concerns

Some agencies may be reticent to use BWC videos that depict anything less than positive actions. This is an organizational decision, and agencies may vary greatly in their acceptance of this approach. State public disclosure laws may also be a factor. “Although we try to find positive examples, there are times when officers can learn from the mistakes of others,” said Douds. “We try to be diplomatic, and sometimes we can blur identifying details. We also tell them up front so they won't be caught by surprise, and we explain that the video will be used constructively.” Douds noted that due to Florida law, all videos are subject to public release upon request, and this fact serves to minimize resistance to departmental use.

Strossner explained that the officers involved in the videos used for procedural justice training in Colorado Springs were assured the videos would be viewed by only supervisors and would help to build the program. “We want to reinforce the positive as much as possible,” he said. “That's how you change the culture.” Strossner shared that BWC videos from on-line publications like *Police1* are frequently used during briefing or training to generate discussion. “We want to generate discussions in the same way with our videos, but we will be focusing on the positive,” he said.

The Risk Associated with Minimal Review

Some agencies limit BWC reviews to complaints and critical incidents, which means the organizations may miss opportunities for improvement through training. Reviewing videos can identify trends and patterns in officer behavior that can be addressed with targeted training efforts. Absent training, officers may continue to make the same mistakes or exhibit problematic or risky behavior. Agencies also miss the opportunity to increase transparency and effectively demonstrate positive police actions in their communities.

“There's no doubt that spot checks help to identify problems,” said Douds. “We've identified issues, then followed up with more review, and sometimes it has resulted in termination,” he explained. “Better for the agency to address the issue than to bring more officers into it. The sooner [a problematic behavior] is identified, the better for the organization.”

“It’s hard for me to wrap my head around agencies not reviewing [videos],” said Strossner. “We have to be able to use this as a supervisory tool. There is too much liability if we don’t. If officers are doing something wrong repeatedly, we’ll be liable if we haven’t identified that problem. And that’s what we’re emphasizing to our supervisors.”

The Emerging Role of Artificial Intelligence

In the last few months, the power and potential of artificial intelligence (AI) has become part of daily conversations and national news. AI is related to the BWC video discussion because it may offer a viable solution to one of the most vexing problems of BWC programs—how to review the huge amounts of captured video that cameras record every day in American law enforcement. A key component of AI is machine learning, which enables computer systems to learn and improve from experience without being explicitly programmed. This means that AI algorithms can continually advance in capability and accuracy. Since recorded video and audio are data, AI can be trained to look for specific types of behavior or speech. The concept is new, but a small number of departments have begun using the technology. AI is an area of great promise but also generates some concern. This will be the topic of continual review as the role of AI evolves. For more information on the role AI will play in police accountability, check out the recent *In-Depth* [“How Can Body Worn Cameras Maximize Police Accountability.”](#)

Conclusion

Reviewing BWC video and using it as a training tool can improve officer performance, increase safety, reduce the risk of litigation, and build trust with the community. Remember this core principle: actions ignored are actions accepted, but actions rewarded are actions repeated.

For more information on using BWC review to advance procedural justice perspectives, check out the Bureau of Justice Assistance Training and Technical Assistance one-pager [“Leveraging Body-Worn Camera Footage to Examine Officer—Community Member Encounters.”](#)

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