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WICHITA, KS



DEPLOYING BODY-WORN CAMERAS TO SWAT

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INTRODUCTION

Many people know Wichita, Kansas, as the “air capital of the world,” or as the birthplace of both White Castle and Pizza Hut. Wyatt Earp also worked as a Wichita police officer long before the famed 1881 shootout at the O.K. Corral in Tombstone, Arizona. More recently, we recognize Wichita as an early adopter and innovator of police body-worn cameras (BWCs). The Wichita Police Department (WPD) first deployed a pilot BWC program with 20 cameras in February 2011, and it was among the inaugural grantees in the first year (2015) of the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) BWC Policy and Implementation Program (PIP). The PIP grant allowed the department to issue cameras to all 429 patrol officers. In 2018, WPD received additional BJA BWC PIP funding to outfit its patrol supervisors with BWCs.

The deployment of BWCs to patrol supervisors led to internal discussions about which other units in the department could benefit from having cameras, most notably the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team. Over the past few years, there has been a vigorous debate in law enforcement circles about the deployment of BWCs to SWAT officers. Concerns about deploying BWCs to SWAT teams range from the potential to expose tactics, to privacy issues, to concerns over battery life and camera placement.

WPD weighed the pros and cons and, in 2020, decided to issue cameras to SWAT officers. Captain Travis Rakestraw notes that WPD sought to accomplish three goals with the SWAT BWC deployment:

“I think number 1 is **transparency and building trust within the community**. We haven’t had, necessarily, a call for video from a SWAT incident yet, but if there is an incident where force is used or something that is called into question and we don’t have that video, we are going to lose trust of our community. Number 2, is **protection for our officers**. I think it’s been widely reported across the country how having cameras has turned into a security blanket for most officers to show that, “I’m doing what I’m supposed to do.” Maybe defend them from false allegations. And 3, it’s a really good way to document (situations) for **evidentiary purposes**. It’s great to have that camera (footage) in court.”

WPD is a relatively large department with nearly 700 sworn officers, but its SWAT team personnel are only part-time SWAT officers who serve in a variety of other primary roles in the agency. SWAT team personnel are always on call for emergencies. When a SWAT call-out comes in, officers may already be on duty and engaged in other activities (e.g., patrol, criminal investigations), or they may be off-duty. As such, officers may respond to the SWAT call-out from headquarters, from their patrol sectors, or from their homes. The part-time nature of the team created a number of challenges for

BWC issuance, policy, and training. Below, we describe those issues and how WPD handled them. We also describe a series of lessons learned based on WPD's experience.

CHALLENGES

SWAT-Use-Only BWCs

Some, but not all, WPD officers are assigned a BWC. SWAT officers who are primarily assigned to patrol carry BWCs, but those in other assignments do not. This presented an early challenge. Should officers who already have a BWC also use that BWC for SWAT operations (i.e., dual use)? However, imagine that your shift has ended, you dock your camera for charging and upload, and head home. But then a SWAT call-out comes in. Should you interrupt the download to take the BWC on the call-out? Perhaps SWAT officers should get a second BWC? And what about the SWAT officers who do not have a BWC because they work in non-patrol assignments? Though it came with additional cost, WPD decided to purchase and issue SWAT-use-only BWCs.

Officers generally keep the SWAT BWCs with the rest of their tactical gear. This eliminates a number of concerns stemming from dual-use BWCs that would have footage from patrol encounters and SWAT encounters on the same camera. First, battery life would likely be an issue for officers who have been on patrol for several hours and then respond to a SWAT call-out with their patrol BWCs. Second, the decision to issue SWAT-use-only BWCs addressed potential delays in uploading footage from both cameras (e.g., the officer can dock the patrol BWC, grab the SWAT BWC, and head to the SWAT call-out).

Making Sure Everyone is Up-to-Speed with BWCs

Detective Tim Reynolds, a WPD SWAT supervisor, highlighted the importance of making sure all SWAT officers are properly trained and "up-to-speed" with BWCs. Several of the officers

Our SWAT unit is not a full-time team; it's a part-time team. The members are police officers, detectives. They have different primary roles within the organization and then they train every other week and two full weeks throughout the year to be on call 24/7 to respond to SWAT-type emergencies.

– Captain Travis Rakestraw

We have outfitted every one of our officers that are currently assigned to SWAT team with a **SWAT-use-only camera**. That camera and controller set is to be used for SWAT call-outs and SWAT call-outs only.

– Sergeant Bill Stevens

assigned to SWAT have been in non-patrol assignments for years. They may have carried a BWC in the past, or they may never have carried one. SWAT officers may need initial or refresher training on BWC activation, de-activation, and other key aspects of the BWC policy. One way to accomplish this is to incorporate BWCs into the regular SWAT training.

Activation and De-activation

For patrol officers, Wichita's BWC policy on activation and de-activation is fairly straightforward: turn the BWC on before or as the encounter begins and keep recording until it is over. However, SWAT call-outs are much longer than typical patrol encounters. They can last hours, or even days. When should SWAT officers activate their cameras? Should the camera record hours of an officer engaged in a tactical position while negotiators are talking to a barricaded person? WPD leadership and SWAT supervisors and officers discussed the activation question and decided to limit activation to only times when officers are taking enforcement action. Captain Rakestraw noted the following:

For most officers on the street, they are asked to keep their cameras on for the entire situation or a call that they're on. For SWAT operators that's not really practical. They may be sitting behind a tree, car, or house for hours and hours while that negotiation process is going on. So, in our policy we were able to incorporate that you don't have to have your camera on for that entire (time). But anytime you are going to move forward to take... enforcement action, that is when you have to have that camera on.

This policy decision avoids the recording of hours of unnecessary footage, which drains battery life and strains BWC storage capacity.

BWC Mounting and Equipment Options

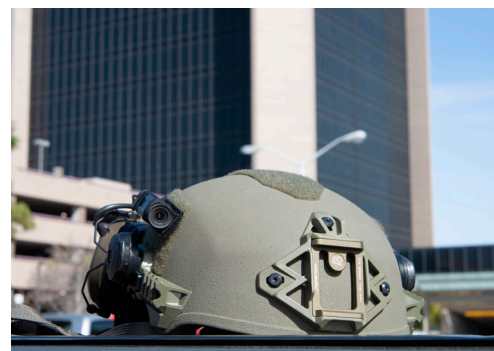
The deployment of BWCs to SWAT officers is more complicated in terms of mounting and equipment. Most BWCs are placed on the officer's torso, but SWAT officers are outfitted with much more gear than the average patrol officer. Detective Reynolds highlights this point:

With SWAT we carry quite a bit more equipment than we do on patrol. The way they wear their camera isn't necessarily conducive to the way we wear ours. We had to figure the challenges of where to place things because it's not apples to apples.

For SWAT deployments, WPD opted to use a BWC mounted to the helmet with Velcro. This approach addressed concerns about the camera being knocked off and camera point-of-view. Sergeant Bill

Stevens noted the helmet mount also presented problems in terms of wires, as the cameras are not Bluetooth enabled:

“Having a controller on the vest and the camera on the helmet, there would be issues of the camera being entangled in slings. That was one of the things the officers were worried about. That’s why we opted with the option of keeping everything on the helmet.



Concerns about Revealing Tactics

One of the biggest concerns about issuing BWCs to SWAT is that the footage will publicly reveal the tactics used, thereby giving suspects knowledge that could jeopardize an operation, as well as the safety of officers. Though there was some hesitancy among officers initially, SWAT supervisors noted the concerns quickly disappeared. Detective Reynolds pointed out that most of what the team does occurs in public view, is often recorded on citizens’ cell phones, and can be found on social media.

Sergeant Carl Lemons, a WPD SWAT supervisor, also noted that BWCs are not activated until enforcement action is being taken. BWCs do not capture tactical planning:

“Ours should be shut off up until the point where we are either entering into a house or making an arrest. As far as when you are formulating a plan, they should be turned off.

You can go on YouTube right now and view any sort of video that’s been out there from someone recording off of their own camera. Keeping your tactics a secret is not a viable thing and to me, it’s not a viable argument. It’s more the timing of when you do something. You don’t want somebody to know the moment you’re going to do something. The surprise of when we are going to do a specific action is more important.

– Detective Timothy Reynolds

Uploading Footage from a SWAT Call-Out

Uploading video from a SWAT call-out presents an additional challenge. Most BWC policies, including WPD’s, require patrol officers to return to the station at the end of their shifts to dock the cameras for recharging and uploading footage. Should SWAT officers also have to dock and upload after the call-out ends? Officers may be on scene for extended periods of time, and it places an undue

burden on them to return to the station to dock the camera. Captain Rakestraw noted the WPD leadership recognized this burden and devised an alternative approach:

“We are not telling them after a call they have to immediately, in the middle of the night when you’re really wanting to get back to bed, that you have to go back to the station and download your camera immediately.

The only exception is if the camera contains footage of a critical incident, such as an officer-involved shooting. That footage is downloaded immediately.

LESSONS LEARNED



Do Not Reinvent the Wheel

When WPD made the decision to issue BWCs to SWAT, it engaged in a comprehensive planning process. As a BJA BWC PIP grantee, WPD has access to a wide range of training and technical assistance from the BWC TTA team. WPD reached out to the training and technical assistance lead, who connected WPD with the Fresno, California, Police Department. Captain Rakestraw describes the value of this peer-to-peer connection:



“It was through Fresno PD, and we reached out to them, and they were in the same position we were. They had a part-time team and they just implemented their program. They were probably the biggest help to us, to understand what some of the pitfalls were, what some of the challenges were, and they had actually just completed writing their policy and so we were able to take and borrow things from them that were very helpful to us.



Listen to People “In the Know”

WPD leadership also engaged collaboratively with the SWAT team members. Those members were involved in planning, decisions about equipment, and discussions about policy. The SWAT officers valued the opportunity to have their voices heard, and the leadership used team members’ expertise and experience to shape their BWC deployment. Detective Reynolds states the following:

“Our command staff was really receptive to our input on the matter of setting up that policy... from a SWAT sense of when those cameras come on and when they come off. You could have had someone say, “No we want them on the whole time.” They took their input and they accepted that. That would probably be my number one positive on this.

Captain Rakestraw agreed, stating, “We wanted to do something that was seamless, that was easy for the SWAT team members to use and didn’t become a burden to them, so that they wouldn’t be frustrated and didn’t want to use it anymore.”



Leverage BWCs for Their Training Value

BWCs have significant training value for SWAT. SWAT officers and supervisors can review footage to assess tactics, to identify gaps in policy or training, and to demonstrate proper performance. Sergeant Lemons highlighted this value:

“With a (BWC), you can look back and see what you were doing; you can look at it from different camera perspectives...For me personally, I think of it as a learning tool that can help you get better. As a supervisor we look at BWC videos all the time of different officers and you look at ways to teach and improve. As far as the SWAT team, we are always looking for ways to improve, ways to continue to get better. For me, again, it helps us learn, it helps us move forward.”

For more information on the Wichita Police Department BWC program, please contact:

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To request training and technical assistance, email: BWCTTA@cna.org or visit our website: www.bwctta.com.

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