

Body-Worn Cameras and K-9 Handlers

Background

Thousands of law enforcement agencies have expanded their use of body-worn cameras (BWCs) to officers in specialty assignments, but some agencies have been reluctant to equip their K-9 handlers with BWCs. Our training and technical assistance team interviewed the following four subject matter experts to get their perspectives on the issue:

- Lt. Ari Morin, Fairfax County (VA) Police Department
- Major Mark Flynn, Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services
- Sgt. Mike Murphy, El Cajon (CA) Police Department
- Mike McGuinness, City Attorney, Escondido (CA)

The following are some of the important points they discussed.

Risks and challenges

The primary source of resistance to assigning BWCs to K-9 handlers involves the optics of K-9 deployments, specifically encounters in which a dog bites a suspect. Public release of BWC footage showing K-9 bites may raise questions among community members who do not understand the circumstances around a K-9 deployment. To address these questions, departments must provide background information and context to explain the footage.

Benefits

BWCs can capture the details of an encounter, from the suspect's behavior to the K-9 handler's announcements (i.e., warnings) and the dog's "alert" to contraband.

The footage captured during a K-9 deployment also has significant training value. Footage can be used to review K-9 behavior and handler/K-9 communication and to demonstrate good and bad deployments for training purposes.

BWC footage is also valuable for conducting internal after-action reviews of an encounter, investigating community member complaints, and providing evidence in criminal prosecutions and civil litigation that may arise from a K-9 deployment (e.g., a bite).

Conclusion

BWCs have important benefits for K-9 handlers and for the review of incidents in which a K-9 is deployed.