

## The Language of Liberty Series



### Electronic Eye Witnesses for Law Enforcement Protect Citizens and Officers

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In a day when the “Black Lives Matter” movement and the events surrounding its creation and rise to prominence has cultivated a heightened level of scrutiny toward the people who protect us, law enforcement body cameras are an indispensable tool. The benefits of these body cams vastly outweigh the cost of providing them and can be sustainably purchased and maintained. Technology has advanced in the last fifteen years to such a degree that they can be worn without impeding an officer’s ability to perform whatever action is required of them. Body cams provide a dual measure of accountability and protection to officers and civilians alike, and have an overall positive effect on the national attitude toward law enforcement.

Most body cameras are usually not much larger than the average iPhone 5. The most popular model, designed to strap to an officer’s uniform or vest close to the shoulder, can be turned on and off at the officer’s discretion and is capable of both audio and video recording. The average price of a quality body camera is between \$200-\$300. In addition, massive improvements have been made in the cost of video storage. An officer can simply download whatever footage they captured into a server at the end of every shift.

California, South Carolina, Nevada, New Jersey, Connecticut, Florida, and Maryland have already passed legislation regarding mandatory body cameras for their officers, and have seen a huge increase in public approval for law enforcement. Illinois, Texas, Washington DC, Massachusetts, and Colorado have allocated funds for the purpose of providing body cameras and have received much support from the police precincts in each respective state. A number of other states have issued studies on the viability of body cameras, many of which are coming back with positive results.

Some have raised concerns about body cams, referring to a violation of privacy. However, Part 1, Title 18, Section 2(d), of the US Code states that “It shall not be unlawful under this chapter for a person not acting under color of law to intercept a wire, oral, or electronic communication where such person is a party to the communication or where one of the parties to the communication has given prior consent to

such interception unless such communication is intercepted for the purpose of committing any criminal or tortuous act in violation of the Constitution or laws of the United States or of any State” <https://www.law.cornell.edu>

Essentially, this [federal law](#) states that, as long as one person engaged in the conversation (including the one recording) gives their prior consent, then it is perfectly legal unless it is for the purpose of committing a crime. The law provides the necessary groundwork for the implementation of the body cameras and puts to rest any qualms about violation of privacy.

Because of recent events in the news, the accountability of law enforcement officers is under greater scrutiny than ever before. A much-needed sense of context is sorely lacking in the media’s harsh and critical analysis of the recent actions of officers. Body cameras would more than adequately provide this context. If an officer could turn on their body camera at the beginning of every civilian interaction and capture sure proof that they handled themselves in an appropriate manner should a situation suddenly go south, it would all but eliminate the controversies that have plagued the honor of law enforcement officers across the nation. While no one is able to make the right split-second decision in every situation, especially when the wrong decision could cost an officer his or her life, legitimate concerns still exist with the abuse of authority by a few officers. The cameras would serve as a measure of higher accountability, and thus serve not just as protection for officers, but for civilians as well.

Many videos clips that have come out surrounding the controversies in the news are taken after the incidents have already escalated. Whether there was more video footage leading up to the incident in question that was not shown to the public is a question investigators must address with the media. As a result of quick sound bites and edited or missing video, it is easy to see how some might question the integrity of the officers involved. All the public can see is how the officer responded, without seeing the suspect’s previous actions or know other vital information about the stop. This type of reporting is irresponsible. It is absolutely essential to have all the facts in a case before accusing law enforcement or a citizen of wrongdoing. A news story without all the facts can devastate an innocent individual for life, and in the case of law enforcement, can cost the lives of other officers.

The opportunity provided by body cameras can prevent cases like Freddie Gray’s and others from becoming an exaggerated and over-reported news story that undermines and jeopardizes our nation’s law enforcement. Body cams can help provide clear and concise evidence as to who is truly in the wrong, making a just ruling much more likely in court. Clearly, the media must act in a responsible manner toward those who protect us, as the consequences of sensationalized reporting has generated fear and flared tempers, costing the lives of law enforcement officers across the nation. However, if the facts show there is a clear case of abuse of authority, his or her superiors must deal with the officer appropriately. In either

case, the responsibility that comes with freedom of speech demands that personal opinion must be set aside in order to rely solely on the facts.

The benefits of equipping law enforcement officers with body cameras can protect their honor as well as keep them accountable. These electronic “eye witnesses” can vastly improve the national attitude toward all officers. The men and women who don their uniforms day after day and never cease to protect and serve the people of the United States should be held in the highest regard. They should be provided with the greatest possible advantage to help them do their crucial jobs. If body cameras were implemented, this measure would go a long way to defend the officers who deserve our utmost gratitude and expose the officers not worthy of their badge or our respect. When that greatly needed sense of context is added to the equation, the national attitude toward law enforcement officers will vastly improve.

Law enforcement officers are the noblest and most courageous of all public servants, willing to lay down their lives for their fellow citizens. Officers’ families must also sacrifice, as their loved ones risk their lives for us every single day. It is simply too much to ask them to relinquish not only their lives, but also their honor. If an accusation against the character of an innocent officer is made, it is the duty of every citizen and every elected official to make sure that the officer’s honor is adequately protected. The integrity and trust of all law enforcement agencies demand no less than this from us.

The evidence is clear. Body cameras would be an indispensable resource for law enforcement, and essential aid in re-establishing the honor of the profession. The public must adamantly support implementation of this vital piece of equipment.

*The Language of Liberty series is a collaborative effort of the Center for Self Governance (CSG) Administrative Team. CSG is a non-profit, non-partisan educational organization, dedicated to training citizens in applied civics. The authors include administrative staff, selected students, and guest columnists. The views expressed by the authors are their own and do not reflect the views of CSG. They may be contacted at [info@tncsg.org](mailto:info@tncsg.org)*

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