

COPS' DEATHS PROMPT EMPHASIS ON VIDEO - POLICE OFFICIALS SAY CAMERAS DON'T WORK

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Detroit police officers could soon get new rules about the video cameras and microphones in their patrol cars: Keep them on, all the time.

In the long run, though, the new regulations might be meaningless, since some officials say many of the cameras never work properly.

Under current rules, cops often turned off the in-car cameras and microphones and switched them on only when they came in contact with the public.

"We are giving less leeway for when they turn them off," said Inspector Jamie Fields, of the department's Planning and Accreditation Section. "The rule will be officers can't go out unless they have a functioning camera."

But since the department first began installing the cameras in October 2002, there have been numerous "technical problems," said Cmdr. Ralph Godbee of the department's Risk Management Bureau, who wouldn't elaborate.

Some patrol officers and police officials have complained that the cameras' images are often blurry -- when they do work -- and that because the cameras are in a fixed position next to the rearview mirror, they don't capture everything that happens.

The camera issue arose after the Feb. 16 fatal shootings of Officers Matthew Bowens and Jennifer Fettig. Police said their patrol car's camera was at the "wrong angle" and that images of alleged shooter **Eric Marshall** turned out blurry.

Detroit Deputy Chief Gloria Reynolds, of the department's Science and Technology Bureau, however, defended the cameras.

"These are sturdy cameras made for police. This is not something we purchased from a local appliance store," she said. "They work as well here as they do anywhere else."

At a January meeting of the Detroit Board of Police Commissioners, Commissioner Megan Norris said 99 percent of the tapes she has reviewed while handling complaints about officers have not captured images properly.

Supervisors are supposed to check the video equipment in police cruisers before officers begin their patrol. But Norris said supervisors often say the cameras are working, even if they are not.

"I'm always disappointed in how rarely the cameras are working," Norris said. "When they are working, they answer so many questions and often verify what the officers say happened."

Sgt. David Malhalab, of the 6th (Plymouth) Precinct, said, at first, officers were reluctant to use the cameras, but have since embraced them for liability reasons and for training purposes.

"We can see the mistakes and learn from them," Malhalab said.

The department currently has 640 cameras. It has installed 628 in its patrol cars. The rest are in storage. The cameras are made by Mobile Vision, a New Jersey company that specializes in police cameras.

Police spokeswoman Tara Dunlop said supervisors are being "held accountable if the equipment isn't used the way it's supposed to be used."

The police commission is scheduled to vote on the department's proposals -- including archiving tapes for 90 days, instead of the current 60 days -- on Thursday. Fields could not say how soon the changes would be enacted if the commission approved the proposals.

Reynolds defended the performance of the in-car camera in Bowens and Fetting's patrol car.

"It's only designed to capture what is in front of it -- what is directly in front of it," Reynolds said.

Some witnesses of the officers' shootings have said that Bowens' and Fetting's patrol car was not parked behind Marshall's vehicle at the time of the stop -- which is standard procedure -- and that perhaps that was how Marshall allegedly was able to ambush the officers.

Ellen Ha, an attorney for the city's Corporation Counsel, said the department would not release the video from the shootings because it could be used as evidence in Marshall's upcoming double murder trial.

In October 2000, the department spent \$1.1 million to purchase and install the cameras. By January 2001, the equipment was recalled to change the software because the department did not want officers to be able to turn the cameras off. The department spent between \$150 and \$300 to change the cameras' software.

By 2002, only 50 of the 450 cameras purchased had been installed. The department finished installing the cameras in 2003.

The use of cameras in squad cars varies widely among departments throughout metro Detroit.

Michigan State Police started installing cameras in its cars in 1990, said Sgt. Kevin Beasley, in Lansing. In metro Detroit, he said, the State Police have about 155 cars, nearly 65 percent of which have cameras.

The Oakland County Sheriff's Department has cameras in all of its 135 police cars. It started putting the cameras in its traffic enforcement cars about 10 years ago and it is upgrading the equipment to digital. The cameras record when the flashing lights are on. In Detroit, the cameras come on automatically when the patrol car is started.

Oakland County Undersheriff Mike McCabe said an in-car camera recently proved its value when it recorded a high-speed chase after which a man allegedly used his pet toy poodle to attack an officer.

The incident otherwise might not have been believed, McCabe said.

In Mt. Clemens, Sgt. Michael Santini said, the police department's six squad cars had cameras, but they didn't work that well and were too expensive to maintain and were removed from cars two years ago.

The Wayne County Sheriff's Department does not have cameras in any of its 70 cars and likely won't have them before September -- the end of the budget year -- said spokesman John Roach said.

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Caption: Photo ROMAIN BLANQUART/Detroit Free Press

Birmingham Police Officer Ryan Kearney stops a motorist, and a camera installed in the car records the stop. The officer puts an 8-hour tape in the recorder at the beginning of each shift, and the tapes are kept for about 30 days or longer, if needed as evidence.

Birmingham Police Officer Ryan Kearney rides with his camera loaded for 8 hours of taping. Detroit has tried cameras, but there have been problems. They don't capture everything that happens.

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