

Influx Of Records Requests May Force Police To Drop Body Cams

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POULSBO, WA – A new Youtube account is pushing local police agencies to reconsider their use of body-mounted cameras.

Despite considering officer accountability a top priority, police say records requests from that new website may make the programs too expensive and too invasive.

Poulsbo Police have been wearing body cameras for about a year, and the department says the results have been good.

"It ensures accountability for the officers," said Chief Al Townsend, "but it ensures accountability for the people the officers are encountering, too."

It's the same thing for Bremerton police, who finished a six week pilot project this summer and expect to receive funding to start a regular program in 2015.

"We had a great experience," said Bremerton Police Chief Steve Strachan. "The video that we had was very very good and we would like to go full steam ahead."

But last month reality hit, in the form of a new YouTube user website, set up by someone under the name, "Police Video Requests." The profile says it posts dash and body cam videos received after public records requests to Washington state police departments. There are just a couple of police videos there posted within the past week.

People can set up user accounts and if there are enough subscribers and page views they can make money — think of crazy animal videos. But in this case, it's videos of people the police have stopped or interacted with for one reason or another.

It doesn't sit well with local police departments.

"They're just using it to post on the internet," said Chief Townsend, "and I suspect it's for commercial purposes."

In September, "Police Video Requests" anonymously asked Poulsbo PD for every second of body cam video it has ever recorded. The department figures it will take three years to fill that request. And Chief Townsend believes it is a huge privacy concern, as officers often see people on their worst days.

"People with mental illness, people in domestic violence situations; do we really want to have to put that video out on YouTube for people? I think that's pushing it a little bit," he said.

Now the city of Poulsbo says it may have to suspend or even end its police body cam program. Bremerton PD is, at least temporarily, shelving its plans to start up its own body cam program because of the blanket requests received by Poulsbo and other agencies in the state.

"In a perverse way," said Chief Strachan, "this is driving us the opposite direction of where we should be."

Both departments say they have no problem with legitimate video requests from either the media or people with police complaints. But they don't want someone making money by posting police videos that could be an invasion of privacy.

Both departments also plan to ask the state legislature during its upcoming session to amend public records laws to specifically prohibit these types of blanket video records requests.

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