

San Diego police body camera report: Fewer complaints, less use of force

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The use of body cameras by San Diego police has led to fewer complaints by residents and less use of force by officers, according to a city report released Wednesday.

Complaints have fallen 40.5% and use of "personal body" force by officers has been reduced by 46.5% and use of pepper spray by 30.5%, according to the report developed by the Police Department for the City Council's Public Safety and Livable Neighborhoods Committee.

By year's end, the department plans to have nearly 1,000 officers equipped with the small cameras, including patrol officers, gang-unit officers and motorcycle officers. Currently, 600 officers have the cameras.

The report to the council is based on preliminary statistics gathered for 2014 and January 2015.

"Body-worn camera technology is a win-win for both the officer and the community," Deputy Chief David Ramirez said in the report, set to be discussed at Wednesday's meeting.

The department began testing the use of body cameras in January 2014, two months before city leaders called for an audit of the department's managerial practices by the U.S. Department of Justice.

The report from that audit was released Tuesday. Among its recommendations was that the department give body cameras to its officers.

To make use of the cameras, the department needed to upgrade its "cloud-based storage and digital evidence management system," according to the report submitted to the council committee.

Still to be decided is the issue of what video from the cameras will be released to the public and media. The department's restrictive policy has brought criticism from the American Civil Liberties Union and others.

Police Chief Shelley Zimmerman, a strong supporter of body cameras, has said that she is reluctant to release the videos, in part, because citizens shown on the videos have privacy rights.

But in the case of a controversial officer-involved incident, like the shooting in Ferguson, Mo., Zimmerman said she would be inclined to release the video as soon as possible.

The policy on release of the videos is meant to "balance a citizen's right to a fair trial, the preservation of evidence, the protection of privacy rights, and police officer accountability," according to the report sent to the council committee.

The same questions about privacy and public access to body camera footage have arisen in Los Angeles. In December, Mayor Eric Garcetti announced the city would purchase 7,000 body cameras to equip every Los Angeles Police Department officer by summer 2016.

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