

# The Columbus Dispatch

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## Eyeglass-mounted video cameras earn police respect Law-enforcement agencies find that they protect officers as much as the public; some remain skeptical

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Sunbury Police Officer Steve Alexander wears a personal camera attached to his glasses that he uses every day on the job.

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By **Dean Narciso**

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The officers raced to the high-priority call, where parents were fighting and a young child was present.

The Sunbury police officers quickly learned that a gun was in the kitchen and went in to get it. A tense situation was easily defused; that is, until the father accused the officers of illegally searching his home and seizing weapons and a knife.

If not for the officers' eyeglass-mounted video cameras, the case might have brought charges of police abuse, Fourth Amendment violations and a lengthy investigation. Instead, video from the pencil-size cameras, downloaded back at the station, showed the officers simply doing their job.

"A lot of times, we're able to close these cases out in five minutes," said Sunbury Police Chief Pat Bennett.

It has been a year since Sunbury became the first central Ohio town using body cameras.

When dash-mounted video cameras began failing two years ago in his fleet of five police cars, Bennett sought alternatives. Replacements cost about \$7,000 each. So he contacted Arizona-based Taser International, which offered him eight body cameras at no cost if Sunbury agreed to store the video on Taser's computers at a cost of \$9,000 a year for three years. After that, the department will assess their value.

"I just wanted to get video back in our system," Bennett said. "This is the way things are going. Technology is driving this. You almost hear now in court that if it's not on video, it didn't happen."

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Officers initially were wary of having to lug more equipment, activate the devices when on patrol and deal with the feeling of being watched. (The cameras constantly record video but save audio and video only when a button is pushed.)

Gradually, they discovered the cameras' value.

"They have exonerated a bunch of complaints on us," said Lt. Tom Daniels. "They keep officers true; we talk to people differently."

The message became clear: "This camera's gonna save you. It's not gonna hurt you," said Daniels, who helped determine when cameras are to be used, how video is stored and when the footage is deemed a public record.

In the first year, all criminal cases in the village have been settled without going to trial, Daniels said, the first year he can recall that happening in his 21 years as an officer. Daniels thinks some of the irrefutable new evidence is the reason.

"It's stopped the lawsuits and a lot of the crap," he said.

There are critics, however. Jason Pappas, the president of the Fraternal Order of Police Capital City Lodge No. 9, which represents Columbus and many other Franklin County police departments, says there are too many cameras, from street-pole mounted and red-light cameras to security cameras and smartphone users.

"There's really no part of your day that's not being recorded already," he said. "When management makes that decision to purchase cameras, the message delivered is that 'We can't trust you.'"

But Delaware County Prosecutor Carol O'Brien said the evidence can be crucial when assessing the merits of a case.

"It may solidify a decision to take the case to a grand jury," she said.

Pappas also worries that gritty crime scenes will be made public.

"We see people when they're at their worst. The system is going to victimize some people twice," he said. "We're going to see some things that shouldn't be on those cameras."

In the past month, the Delaware County sheriff's office has been testing four cameras and has budgeted about \$100,000 next year for a full program, said Capt. Scott Vance, who oversees patrol operations. He calls the cameras "the next logical step forward for law enforcement," prodded in part by high-profile cases in which officers are accused of abuse such as in Ferguson, Mo.

"Is it bad that we catch (an officer) doing something wrong? Not at all," Vance said. "That's how we make the agency better."

But, he said, as with dashboard cameras, "more times than not, we're finding our officers are doing the appropriate job. It vindicates them."

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