

City Beat: Fresno's police auditor supports putting cameras on all officers



Fresno police Sgt. Robert Dewey displays a video camera that officers will wear. The city has approved the purchase of the 100 devices.

JIM GUY — THE FRESNO BEE



THE CITY BEAT GEORGE
HOSTETTER

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Fresno's police auditor has a none-too-subtle suggestion on how the city can help avoid a Ferguson-type tragedy.

Put body cameras on all officers, Rick Rasmussen said.

With a video of an officer-civilian incident in hand, Rasmussen wrote in his report for the third quarter of 2014, "sorting out the submitted complaints becomes incredibly easier."

Rasmussen didn't specifically identify the Aug. 18 officer-involved shooting in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson. Michael Brown, 18, was fatally shot by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson, 28. What actually happened is still at the heart of a nation-rending controversy.

But two points are clear about the Ferguson incident. The shooting led to widespread civic turmoil, and municipal law enforcement's use-of-force doctrine has come under intense scrutiny at every level of government.

Rasmussen said he reviewed a single case of an officer-civilian confrontation in which the officer had an "on-body" camera.

"In the matter, two allegations were put forth by the citizen and the videotape provided by the officer absolutely proved that no unreasonable force was used during the encounter," Rasmussen said. "In fact, the recording demonstrated that the complainant's version did not occur in any manner he described."

Rasmussen didn't give details on the cause of the confrontation or the civilian's two allegations. Rasmussen simply noted the video showed the first allegation did not occur. He said this cast an unfavorable light on the second allegation.

Rasmussen said he couldn't stress enough "how helpful officer-worn cameras are in figuring out the actual events in any complaint." He said anecdotal information from across the U.S. supports the belief that "when officers are wearing video cameras, conduct by officers and citizens alike is much improved and complaints decrease."

Rasmussen said "the expense of equipping all officers with video cameras is likely to be offset by decreased costs" due to fewer complaints and legal bills.

The Fresno City Council last summer authorized the purchase of 100 body cameras and support services for \$159,732. Funding comes from the city and a \$70,000 state grant. Chief Jerry Dyer said his goal is to equip all sworn officers (about 715) with body cameras.

The Police Department will hold a news conference about body cameras at 1:30 p.m. Tuesday.

Rasmussen in his report also encouraged police to use "officer discretion" when deciding whether to tow a vehicle.

Rasmussen said his review of tow cases showed that officers "always followed the law"

However, Rasmussen added, "there may be situations wherein family members are present and the vehicle can lawfully be turned over to them rather than having it towed."

Rasmussen looked at several reasons why it's wise public-safety policy to tow a vehicle. For example, the vehicle may belong to a repeat offender. The vehicle also may be key to an investigation.

But if no policy reasons apply, Rasmussen said in conclusion, "not towing a vehicle will save a great deal of money for the family and will show that officers used discretion in such a way as to bring closer together the police and the public."

Rasmussen was hired in September 2012, filling a job that had been vacant for more than a year. He succeeded Eddie Aubrey, the city's first police auditor.

The police auditor operates in the Office of Independent Review. The auditor reports to the city manager. Creation of the job culminated many years of heated public debate. The job's value to public safety continues to evolve.

Aubrey was full-time, but Rasmussen was hired as a half-time employee at \$6,400 per month (City Hall was battling

money woes at the time). Rasmussen in the beginning split his time between Salt Lake City, where he was administrator of Salt Lake City's Police Civilian Review Board, and Fresno. The Office of Independent Review in September 2012 was to have a full-time assistant at City Hall and an annual budget estimated at less than \$200,000.

City officials at the time said they expected Rasmussen to become Fresno's full-time police auditor by July 2013.

By all accounts, City Hall officials are pleased with Rasmussen. He is diligent with quarterly reports of considerable detail (although I find some of the detail hard to grasp -- my fault).

I gather by the city's website that the Office of Independent Review does have a full-time assistant at City Hall to serve the public. It's unclear to me if Rasmussen has been made a full-time police auditor or if the office's budget has increased.

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