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Body-Worn Cameras for Moraga Police Officers

By Sophie Braccini



Corporal Randy Pacheco has his camera on as he interacts with a driver during a traffic stop. Photo Lt. King

A Moraga driver was recently stopped by Moraga Police Lieutenant Jon King for failing to halt behind a school bus with flashing lights. As King approached the car, he automatically reached for a small black box pinned to the front of his uniform. With a quick thumb movement, he slid the front to reveal a camera lens. The body-worn camera, activated by the unmasking of the aperture, recorded everything about his interaction with the driver until the lieutenant closed it.

Moraga is the first Lamorinda city to equip its force with the devices. Many other agencies have them, including the Oakland Police Department and the East Bay Regional Park District where King used to work. Contra Costa County is testing its usage at this time. "Our objective is to maximize transparency and accountability," said Moraga Police Chief Bob Priebe when he asked the town council to authorize the purchase of system. "Each officer has been issued a camera to record their law enforcement contacts, to document actions of involved parties, and to provide our officers the opportunity to see how the public sees them."

King, who joined the department a few months ago, is familiar with the device; he wore a camera for five years in the park district. "At first it was an interesting feeling," he said. "(We thought that) somebody could see what we were doing and

would be checking up on us. But what we quickly realized is that if you are a police officer doing your job well, who cares? And I know that the officers here do a good job." King added that these days, officers are usually the only ones not filming as everybody else uses their cell phones or other devices.

The lieutenant has stories about the usefulness of the cameras. "Sometimes a camera can see more than the officer notices at the time of the encounter," he said. He remembered the case of an officer who stopped a gang of young men in a park and had a normal discussion with them. When reviewing the film, he noticed that one of the men took a concealed weapon from his pocket and hid it behind a rock. The man was on parole and not authorized to have a weapon, and the film was used to arrest him. "The judicial system likes the evidence provided by cameras," said King, adding that sometimes more than one recording is needed to see all the angles. "During the BART Fruitvale shooting inquiry, the recordings of 23 different cameras were used."

King is in charge of the implementation of the system in the department. He says that the cameras can be useful tools for officers to monitor their behavior. "My perception of how I speak to people might be something completely different from theirs," he said, "so officers can go back and review their own recordings." King explained that if the department gets a phone call saying that an officer was rude, he will sit down with that officer, review the tape, and discuss it. He adds that he hasn't had a phone call like that yet in Moraga. The cameras have only been active since the end of February, but he remembers cases in the park district where officers were surprised to hear how they sounded, and they changed some things they were doing.

Moraga police officers are now wearing their personal cameras whenever they are on patrol. The rule is that when they enter into an enforcement or investigative contact, they turn the camera on. "Sometimes we would be talking to somebody during a friendly contact, then for whatever reason it becomes adversarial. At that point in time the officer should be thinking about recording the conversation," said King. He added that it is important that the officers stay sensitive to the dignity of the individual when in an embarrassing situation; then, they should not record.

The recordings will not find their way onto the Internet. The cameras are downloaded into a secure standalone computer in the department. Each device can record four hours before it needs to be downloaded. The films will be kept for at least 180 days, and much longer if they are part of an investigation such as a DUI that could take more than 180 days to go to court. Only King and Sargent Brian South have the authority to erase a film.

King said that all the officers are embracing the system. "With this, everybody is protected."

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