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Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on the Judiciary
Public Roundtable on The Metropolitan Police Department's Body-Worn Camera Program
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20004

Good afternoon and thank you for having me today. I am Dr. Daniel Lawrence, a research associate in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute. The views I express today are my own and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees or its funders. The Urban Institute is a non-partisan, non-profit, social and economic policy research organization located in D.C. Founded in 1968, the Urban Institute brings decades of objective analysis and expertise to policy debates. The Justice Policy Center focuses on criminological research and its law enforcement portfolio is quite extensive. Currently, the Justice Policy Center is the evaluator of former Attorney General Holder's legacy project—the National Initiative on Building Community Trust and Justice, a three-year project designed to improve relationships and increase trust between minority communities and the criminal justice system. I am the project director for Urban in that initiative. I am also principle investigator of a three-city police body-worn camera study. The camera study focuses on the impact of body-worn cameras on police use of force, citizen complaints, and related outcome measures. We will also be identifying best practices for police officers to inform the public they are being recorded as well as determining how the presence of a body camera may influence a community member's attitudes toward police officers and departments.

The purpose of these two projects is to both enhance police accountability as well as to improve the relationships between the police and the community members they serve. Past research has identified many behaviors and activities to improve the police-community relationship; for example, holding officers accountable for their behaviors, requiring officers to behave in a respectful manner, and creating departmental policies to be more transparent with its work. In fact, transparency has been deeply linked to improving public trust of a department's activities. And with increased trust comes increased views of "police legitimacy"—the degree to which the public accepts and voluntarily complies with the decisions and rules from an authority figure or organization. Increased legitimacy promotes stronger partnerships and greater public safety.

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Body-worn cameras have been viewed as the pinnacle of transparency in law enforcement. However, the research on body-worn cameras has yet to support this view and when a department has a body-worn camera program in place, its policy on how it manages and publicly shares the video footage is critical to enhancing transparency. Police departments around the country are now grappling with how best to manage the video footage captured by body-worn cameras and under what circumstances that footage should be shared with the public.

Policies are still under development regarding whether departments should require its officers to capture all community member interactions on camera, or leave it to the officers' discretion on which interactions to record. Departments are still determining how long to store footage, with some storing footage for a year's time while others are keeping non-evidentiary footage up to 30, 45, or 90 days. Perhaps most daunting, departments are being inundated with FOIA requests for camera footage and are trying to balance the release of these videos with the protection of both officer and community member privacy concerns. And perhaps most challenging, law enforcement agencies are faced with heavy human resource burdens associated with responding to FOIA requests, which require the redaction of footage that would identify innocent victims and bystanders.

It is clear that policies need to be carefully considered and developed on the use and management of cameras as well as the release of footage information. In terms of the expense associated with responding to public requests for footage, it is my expert opinion that instead of attempting to redact all footage for mass release, police departments should respond to individual requests for video on a case-by-case basis. Doing so ensures transparency while also protecting the victims, defendants, and police officers involved in the interactions.

I firmly believe that the Metropolitan Police Department is on track for enjoying increased police transparency and enhanced police-community relations as a result of its body-worn camera program. The department has already clearly detailed its video releasing policy to the public on its website and has carefully piloted its body camera program in recent months. The thoughtfulness and caution that MPD has demonstrated in development of its body-worn camera policies exemplifies that it is treating this technology very seriously and would handle a broader implementation professionally, legitimately, and with a high degree of public transparency. I would encourage DC's leadership—the Mayor, the City Council and the Chief of Police—to continue working to enhance police accountability through body-worn camera use, and to do so in the spirit of transparency while ensuring the privacy of its citizenry.

Thank you for your time.