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WEB ONLY

Proposal for police body cameras may be seen again next year

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West Midlands Police/ flickr

Although a bill that would appropriate money annually to supply police body cameras has died, a senator says it will be proposed again next year.

“Every year there is a demand and competition for funds. The bill being stalled shows that it did have public support, which is an important factor,” Sen. Sam Slom said in an email.

Senate Bill 199 was proposed this January to appropriate \$1.35 million dollars annually for police body cameras – \$700,000 for Honolulu county, \$250,000 each for Maui and Hawai’i counties, and \$150,000 for Kaua’i county. The bill was referred to the Senate Ways and Means Committee in February but did not move forward, Sen. Laura Thielen said.

Body cameras

The bill was originally proposed by Sen. Will Espero.

"I had been reading and doing research on body and vehicle cameras. Stories on the nightly news also touched on the value of cameras. I felt it would be useful to have these cameras used in Hawai'i by law enforcement," Espero said in an email.

The proposal aims to help keep accountability of police officers and civilians by having the camera act as a third party. Slom said he has seen support from citizens wanting greater police transparency and from police officers who know the camera will help prevent the media from taking videos out of context.

"I think the camera would be helpful in certain cases, but I don't see myself as a person who would get involved in that kind of situation anyway," said Kristopher Nakamura, a Computer Science major.

With a HPD officer beating two men in a game room after not being able to find a suspect and a \$37,500 settlement after an officer swung at a citizen videotaping an officer, Hawai'i is not exempt from police brutality.

According to a White House press release last winter, President Barack Obama also tried to allocate federal funding to supply police departments with body cameras, but didn't make it onto the final fiscal budget.

"With smart phones, anyone can record what's happening, but people only get part of the picture. With this new technology we hope to show the entire picture," Slom said in a phone interview.

Possible use in Honolulu

The desire to implement police body cameras is not new, with Britain being one of the first adopters in 2007. But just as quickly as state are trying to purchase body cameras, larger logistical problems are still to be addressed.

"Looking at body cameras, just like with the rail project, initial cost aren't as important when you start to look at maintenance fees. Looking at the cost for maintenance of something over it's life time is critical," Slom said.

According to Thielen, the issues regarding implementation are generally discussed in the hearing process, which guides any amendments and appropriation figures.

"The introduced bill is just to start the discussion," Thielen said in an email. "Most bills are amended, some fairly heavily, due to implementation issues. For example, a department may have a preferred alternative

means to meet the same objective, we may need to amend other laws to provide the department the statutory authority to act, or to clarify other matters or a department may need additional time to implement a new policy or procedure.”

According to Michelle Yu, a spokeswoman for the Honolulu Police Department, the department is looking for grants or other forms of funding for the cameras.

“A pilot project will be conducted, and the officers' feedback will be taken into consideration,” she said in an email.

She added that there are currently no policies that address body cameras. These policies would have to be drafted.

Effects of body camera usage

According to a study by the Police Foundation, in 2013 there was a 50 percent reduction in use of force. This number can partly be attributed to the officers and civilians being recorded.

WolfCom USA, a manufacturer of police body cameras founded in 2001, shows on their website that 43 states are currently using body cameras, including Kaua'i's pilot program

Taser and Digital Ally, both body camera manufacturers, showed a 100 percent increase in stock prices respectively between April 2014 to April 2015. In addition, VIEVU is in the works with Microsoft to create a state-of-the-art cloud computing service to store the terabytes of data that are to be recorded by the nation's police departments.