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New APD policy for body cameras falls short:

Council should direct a process to quickly improve it by the time the first 500 cameras are given to officers

Austin May 16, 2016: Thursday, City Council will consider APD's proposed \$12 million contract with Taser to provide body cameras and data services. Yesterday, The Austin Police Department released an updated body camera policy which community groups say falls short.

"We congratulate the city on moving quickly to adopt body cameras, a technology that has the potential to reduce police misconduct and improve relations between officers and those they serve," said Kathy Mitchell, Texas Criminal Justice Coalition. "But that potential won't be realized if we don't have a strong policy, so we ask that Council quickly convene a community process to review the new body camera policy and improve it before the cameras are issued to officers later this summer."

The policy includes new rules on video retention and provides guidance on when body worn cameras must be turned on. Beyond that, it fails to address any of the critical issues of privacy and public accountability. Attached is list of best practices recommended by a range of national public interest groups. The new APD policy does not include most of those recommendations.

"APD's new body camera program is a welcome development," said Matt Simpson, Senior Policy Strategist of the ACLU of Texas, "However, until APD provides transparent guidelines regarding the release of recorded footage, the public will assume—perhaps correctly—that the department has something to hide. We call upon APD to develop release policies that build community trust."

“After someone has been shot by an officer, the community deserves to know the facts,” said Fatima Mann, Austin Justice Coalition. “If video is never released, or if it is released on some occasions but not others, then body cameras will not provide the kind of accountability we’ve all hoped for. It isn’t even clear from this policy that the Office of Police Monitor will be able to view the video, or if and when victims or family members will be able to get a copy of it.”

“The City is about to spend a lot of taxpayer money on this new technology,” said Carly Rose Jackson, Texans for Accountable Government. “This technology has the potential to provide an objective record to remove the uncertainty that destroys trust between police officers and members of the public. But right now, for example, it doesn’t even require notice to people that they are being video taped. We all want a safe and prosperous city, and to get that, we need a stronger body camera policy with community input.”

“The policy does not constrain the video to be used only in citizen interactions with specific police officers. This data should not be used for broader surveillance of the citizenry nor used with advanced recognition technologies,” said Jon Lebkowsky, EFF-Austin.

“The existence of public video showing how officers sometimes behave has changed the national dialog about policing and moved certain departments to real reforms. We don’t want body cameras on officers just to videotape things as they are,” said Mitchell. “We want more peaceable interactions with the public, and a stronger body camera policy with community input is part of the process that will produce that change.”