

# Seattle Community Police Commission

Our City. Our Safety. Our Police. **Better Together.**

October 19, 2015

VIA EMAIL

Dear Councilmembers:

We write to urge the Council to specify a process whereby the decision whether to acquire police body-worn cameras will be made, and specific requirements that must be satisfied before the City commits to such an expenditure. Specifically, the CPC requests the Council to define the parameters of the stakeholder engagement process and suggest that SPD engage with the CPC, the Mayor's Office, the City Attorney's Office, other stakeholders, including the public and especially underrepresented communities, to identify an appropriate mechanism that will ensure the privacy, safety and dignity of community members will not be unduly compromised by a body-worn camera program. Only after the Council determines that this process was conducted in an inclusive and satisfactory manner, would it release the funds allowing the program to be implemented.

As you know, many CPC members have long supported using police-captured video footage for accountability purposes. Many of us have worked with Councilmember Harrell on this topic, and we collaborated with the SPD to develop the interim policy on body-worn cameras for the pilot program.

However, several times over the past year, the CPC has clearly stated that we do not believe Seattle should commit to a body-worn camera program until and unless difficult issues are resolved concerning public disclosure and the appropriate uses of footage captured with those cameras. We are not yet at that point.

Nationally, body-worn cameras are widely supported by the public because they are perceived as a simple, if partial, solution to police misconduct. But it is clear to us from many conversations with the constituencies we represent that support in our community will plummet when the public understands that, because of our law, virtually all footage must be disclosed in response to public records requests. The CPC received an illuminating briefing a year ago from the City Attorney's Office which changed some of our members' views of the wisdom of deploying body-worn cameras under this present Washington State public disclosure law. There are serious unintended consequences of disclosing video of police contacts with victims and witnesses, as well as suspects, in situations that have nothing to do with suspected police misconduct. From our perspective, the potential value of using body-worn cameras to increase police accountability is today largely offset by their negative impact on the safety, dignity and privacy of community members who have encounters with police officers.

We understand some City leaders plan to deal with these significant safety, dignity and privacy issues by adopting SPD policies which will limit the circumstances under which officers capture footage. We believe this approach may be problematic for a number of reasons and requires further discussion. For example,

accountability advocates generally oppose giving officers any discretion to turn cameras off. In contrast, other members of the public who may be amenable to allowing such officer discretion may not ultimately trust that the cameras *will be* turned off when they should. For the CPC, the latter scenario is a particular concern because there are communities who historically have been distrustful of the police and/or have been hesitant to access police services.

Given the high costs of implementing a body-worn camera program and the risks to public safety and trust involved, we believe it is imperative that the City, including the Council, the Mayor's Office, the City Attorney's Office, SPD and the CPC, reach agreement on an effective way to manage the critical competing interests in play. Through its budgetary authority, the Council should be the final arbiter in determining whether these interests have been balanced and all key issues addressed satisfactorily at which point it may choose to release funding for the program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rev. Harriett Walden".

Rev. Harriett Walden, Co-Chair  
Community Police Commission

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lisa Dugaard".

Lisa Dugaard, Co-Chair  
Community Police Commission

Cc:  
Mayor Ed Murray  
Chief Kathleen O'Toole  
Community Police Commission