



Body Worn Camera Post Pilot Project Report



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Executive Summary

The purpose of this post pilot BWC report is to review the 4-month body worn camera (BWC) and digital evidence management (DEM) project undertaken by members of the St. Thomas City Police Service.

The community survey had a very good return rate with 415 community members participating. Of the 415 responses, 96% were either supportive or highly supportive of police wearing BWC. Again, the comments are telling in that the overwhelming majority of the community want our members wearing BWC for officer and community safety.

The overall experience with Axon has been terrific and impressive. Axon were always available to assist with any issues we experienced as well as provided informative web training. They were truly interested in our pilot project and did everything they could to ensure the introduction to BWC and DEM was relatively easy. The implementation of BWC came with some apprehension (like anything new of this magnitude) and unease but the result was that it was really a non-issue. For the most part, everything was smooth and the overall pilot project was positive.

It should be noted that Axon appears focused on efficiencies in policing and that BWC are one-step towards creating current and future efficiencies – Axon does not appear to be settle for the status quo and is continually looking for ways to use technology to advance policing, engage the community and create efficiencies in front line police work.

During this pilot project, we did not experience any moments where the BWCs were used to address a citizen's complaint, an OIPRD or SIU investigation or any internal investigation. This may have been because of simply having the BWCs on during the pilot project. Although this did not happen, it is known that BWC footage has been used for this purpose in other police services that has undoubtedly saved considerable costs and time in addressing these concerns. The monetary cost of lawsuits or lawyer's fees alone could possibly be prevented with BCW footage.

We believe BWCs are the future of policing and will become a normal piece of police equipment, with this technology will come issues however, We also believe that STPS is positioned very well to meet these issues head on, with transparency and accountability. It is time to lead the police partners in the world of BWC.

Prelude

This Body Worn Camera (BWC) Post Pilot Project Report will focus primarily on BWC; however, it is impossible to discuss the BWC without covering other aspects of the Axon Digital Evidence Management (DEM) suite. BWCs are only one offering from Axon. Axon uses Evidence.com as their digital evidence Management platform that includes BWC video evidence.

The two main features not directly related to BWC, offered through Axon that we used during this pilot project were Axon Citizen and Axon Capture (video, audio, pictures). Auto transcription was also a tool available and used in Evidence.com.

Although we will remain focused on the BWC pilot project, there will be references throughout the report to Axon and Evidence.com

Introduction

On 17 June 2020, the PSB approved a motion to explore the use of BWC's through Axon. This led to an exploration and research, which included initially a 3-month pilot project (eventually extended to 4 months).

The research included reading many articles, forums and white papers from North America and beyond. In Canada, BWC are still relatively new, however they are being used extensively in the United States, Australia, United Kingdom, Netherlands and China for many years.

From there, we contacted and worked with police in Kentville, Nova Scotia and Calgary Police (currently using BWC), Akwasasne and Guelph Police (currently in BWC pilot projects), and Toronto Police (recently completed BWC pilot project).

On 19 June 2020, STPS Administration met remotely with Axon to discuss a trial BWC package and on 20 June 2020, we received the field trial agreement for the 3-month pilot project and 12 BWC.

A very detailed BWC pilot project policy was created with the intention of being able to simply modify the pilot project policy if we decided to pursue the purchase and use of the BWCs in the future.

In the months of July, August, and September we had several meetings with Axon and other agencies. We also attended Axon webinars and other police agencies to research their BWC deployment.

During September, we sent out a community survey. We also later sent out a BWC post-pilot project survey, there would be more to follow on all the surveys later in this report.

We also conducted four Zoom training sessions with Axon, which have all been recorded and saved for future use. We had 17 members trained with administrative authorities, 35 members trained with supervisor / user authorities as well as held a training session on redaction. In addition to this training, we trained and provided all of the Staff Sergeants with a Power Point presentation that we created to share with their members. Platoon Staff Sergeants delivered this Power Point training, which included review of the BWC pilot project policy, to all of their members coinciding with the launch of the BWC pilot project.

On 01 October 2020, we went live with our BWC pilot project deploying six BWCs at all times with the remaining six being charged for subsequent shift deployment.

We did ask that certain members be issued BWC on a regular basis when working. Our full time traffic officer, our full time foot patrol officer and our K9 officer were directed to wear BWC whenever working which left three BWCs for general patrol deployment.

As a part of this project, STPS reserved 10 cellular phones for front line use. The cell phones are shared (as are the BWC's) and used to pair up with BWC as well as to access the other features offered through Axon.

Statistics

It is estimated that we captured over 10,000 pieces of digital evidence / items during this pilot project. An exact number really cannot be determined because some of the categories created within Evidence.com have a 30-day retention period.

This means that some of the items already captured had been retained and automatically deleted within Evidence.com. Having said that, the only real items that would have been deleted are those with an assigned 12-week retention period. The only category with this retention is “Test Test Test” and that is what was used for testing and training purposes only. Any items with any significance will still be stored in Evidence.com with the earliest category (“Test Test Test” excluded) set to delete at 26 weeks and they are for Provincial Offence investigations.

It should be noted that it would be important moving forward to review the categories and their respective retention periods. This may need to be reviewed in consultation with the Crown’s office and LEARN guidelines to ensure important evidence is not inadvertently automatically deleted. There is a failsafe feature within Evidence.com that notifies the officer to whom the digital evidence is assigned, that it will be deleted within 30 days.

We can take a snapshot in time and at the time of authoring this report, we had 8,068 items stored in Evidence.com. Of those items, 6,330 are videos (the overwhelming majority of those being BWC videos), 353 audio items, 7 documents, 1,314 images, and 64 that are labelled as other.

To further break down the statistics, of the 8,068 items, 1,169 are for federal (criminal matters), 3,628 are general calls for service, 2,205 are currently under investigation, 237 for motor vehicle collisions, 25 are for municipal or by-law matters, and 1,342 are for provincial offence charges or investigations. You may have noticed that this does not add up to the total number of items in Evidence.com, the reason for that is that an item can be categorized as more than one thing – for example, a motor vehicle accident may also be a provincial offences charge. The retention for that particular matter will default to the first category assigned to that item.

This clearly shows the amount of use of the BWC and the DEM through Axon, it should also be recognized that this has all be achieved with only 12 BWCs (again only 6 deployed at any given time), it can and should expected that these numbers will at least double if all members were issued with BWCs.

Privacy

The privacy of the public and police has always been a perceived issue with respect to BWCs. To address the privacy of the public, we engaged with the Information and Privacy Commission (IPC).

In regards to the privacy of the police, it is a fair assumption by all police officers that whenever they are working they are being recorded. While on duty, the expectation of privacy is much less for police as it is for other professions and in some cases, officers welcome video. Having said that, there were some privacy issues raised by STPS members in both the pre and post surveys.

Overall, privacy did not appear to be an issue with either the public or the police.

There may still be some work to be done with IPC with respect to privacy of the public and the BWC’s.

Challenges

As expected we did run into a few challenges with the BWCs, specifically when we first launched the initiative. Some of the issues were around the infrastructure and technology, which were quickly resolved.

Some of the original issues included BWCs were not holding a long enough charge. Once we moved to separate dayshift and nightshift charging banks, this seemed to alleviate the issue. We may have to look at hard wiring the charging banks or if this problem persists, we could look at getting charging cords for the BWCs to charge them in the police vehicles.

There were initially a couple of network errors but that appeared to be the cameras being caught up with the most recent firmware and this was only an issue for the first couple of days.

Another challenge that we experienced was the categorizing of digital evidence. Officers must categorize all their BWC videos (all evidence within Evidence.com for that matter). This is best done immediately at the completion of the video and can be done on the departmental cell phones using a loaded Axon App. Categorizing can also be done later in the shift and can even be put off to a later date however, it is important to stay on top of the videos as to not get too far behind. As mentioned in the statistic section, the video needs to be categorized for retention purposes. Categorizing videos takes less than 2 minutes on the cell phone at the end of each recording.

Axon does have a relatively new feature that we did not explore in any detail but it is an Auto Tagging system that will automatically pair BWC videos with the RMS system. We did look into this briefly and in speaking with IT, it may be a very useful tool going forward however with the IT commitment to make this happen (very in depth working with IT and OPTIC) and the understanding that it may take a few months to set up this feature, we did not pursue this any further during the pilot project. As we understand it, the Auto Tagging feature will automatically identify, label and categorize each BWC video saving this step for the officer. This would be a nice to have feature but we cannot overlook the ease of categorizing the digital evidence even without Axon Tagging.

There is the option available for our local crown to use Axon during the pilot project but locally this was not accepted as MAG was going through the tendering process for DEM. It should be noted here that MAG has since selected Axon as their vendor of choice and moving forward our local crown will now have to get on board with Axon. Without using the BWC to its fullest potential in the justice system and the fact that court cases are typically heard many months after the alleged offence, we have not seen any BWC evidence in court and can only surmise that this evidence will greatly assist the prosecution in the future.

Another challenge that we experienced was running two very similar platforms that served similar purposes. What that means is that we have been using a pretty good system all along for our digital evidence (X drive) which consisted of internally shared drives and folders that our members have been able to store, view, retrieve and forward disclosure to our local crown. Axon offers the exact same features and during this pilot, some members shared video or photos using our current system (X drive) while others took advantage of file sharing through Evidence.com. Our disclosure to the local Crown's office remained with the X drive system for now as our local Crown's office chose not to participate with our pilot project using Evidence.com.

Our members were encouraged to use Evidence.com as often as possible and it seemed to become the normal way for viewing and sharing photos and videos internally. This was facilitated by a brief power point tutorial created and shared by our Digital Forensic Examiner on how best to share digital evidence using Evidence.com.

Successes

There may be some implicit bias on my part with the successes far outweighing the challenges. Here are some of the successes we experienced with the BWC and DEM.

Auto Transcription – this has had some mixed reviews but overall is a feature that is well liked by the officers. Auto transcription allows for BWC footage and audio statements to be automatically transcribed within Evidence.com. This has tremendous potential at saving officers time however, the criticism has been that the transcription needs to be accurately checked and that there are several errors with the transcription. I have personally tested this feature and concur that it is a great tool and a great start but does not entirely replace the need to review the content – it is however an excellent starting point.

Compatibility – Although this is mainly with respect to DEM and not really BWC, another positive feature with Evidence.com is that it appears to be compatible with most other media platforms. What that means is that we can import most other media files and they are compatible within Evidence.com. For example, video from the Elgin County Courthouse, our internal STPS video, our 911 calls, community NEST video (doorbell video) once downloaded into Evidence.com are all compatible allowing transcription and redaction if needed. It should also be noted that Evidence.com is compatible with video from the new downtown CCTV initiative.

Innovation – It has been very clear that Axon is not a company to be satisfied with status quo, in the short time of the pilot project, it appears Axon is continuing to explore and provide innovative features with respect to BWC. Of note, a feature currently under consideration with Axon is using “buzzwords” to assist with audits. What this will allow is for supervisors or managers to simply search keywords or phrases such as “Police don’t move”, commonly known as the police challenge and this will search all digital evidence files for this phrase to review the associated digital evidence file. This could improve the auditing portion of BWC and could make searching for specific digital evidence files much easier with limited information.

Another innovative tool that is being explored further by Axon is to add a notes section in Evidence.com to accompany digital evidence items. Although this initially may sound like more work for the officer, the intent of this feature is to reduce the amount of paperwork or notebook entries that officers are currently doing. We see this as having a lot of potential and time savings for officers, possibly in the long term even replacing officer notebooks either entirely or a vast majority of notes being done electronically instead of pen to paper.

This may also be a good area to briefly share what Axon Signal Sidearm is. Axon Signal Sidearm is an innovative way to ensure that all incidents where an officer’s pistol is removed from the holster is automatically recorded on BWC. It is a small device that attaches to an officer’s holster that signals to the BWC every time the pistol is drawn and automatically activates the BWC.

Crown Participation – As mentioned earlier, our local Crowns office could not take advantage of the pilot project for BWCs or for DEMs. It is truly unfortunate because it is here that we think we could have seen the full value of BWC evidence. Nonetheless, this was beyond our control and as mentioned earlier, Axon has recently been awarded the MAG contract as the digital evidence management platform for the entire province.

Our Federal Crown's office that prosecute our drug matters were very excited and willing to trial the Axon package. This is more related to DEMs and maybe be more because previously we did not have a secure and efficient way to provide e-disclosure to the federal crowns office (we do have a shared drive with our local crown's office that allowed for this sharing of disclosure). The federal crown was all set up with and trained with Axon, we are currently using Axon to share disclosure with the federal crown's office and moving forward this will also be the way to share disclosure with our local crown's office.

Success Story – In the big picture, it is a good thing that we did not experience any major incident, citizen's complaint, OIPRD or SIU matter during this pilot project but we did have an incident where the BWC footage was used to solve a criminal matter, which resulted in an arrest and criminal charges. Incident #ST20018630 was an incident of a stolen e-bike that prior to being reported stolen was stopped by officers wearing a BWC. Once the e-bike was reported stolen officers were able to review the footage and confirm the stolen e-bike was the one stopped earlier and was able to identify the male in possession of the stolen e-bike. Although relatively minor, it is an example of how the BWC assisted police and solve a property crime.

Community Survey

The community survey consisted of nine questions. There were 418 community responses. There was a very diverse response with respect to ages of those that completed the survey with a good balance between 18 to 65+ years. All 418 respondents claimed to be residents of the City of St. Thomas.

Prior to completing the community survey, approx. half were aware of the BWC pilot project and half were not aware. When asked, "Do you support the police wearing body worn cameras?" approximately 93% either supported (22%) it or highly supported (71%) police wearing BWC.

The community was asked to rank the importance of 10 considerations in whether or not STPS should implement a BWC program. The most important consideration by the community was the impact on officer safety followed by the impact on community safety (our community obviously values the safety of STPS members). The least important consideration was the privacy of the police. Interestingly, the community also rated the initial startup cost and year over year cost as a very low consideration – even lower than the privacy of the community.

59% felt that the BWCs would cause the police to treat individuals with respect and dignity whereas only 41% felt that the BWCs would cause individuals to treat the police with respect and dignity.

The last question of the community survey was open ended and asked for thoughts, feeling, concerns or any comment with respect to BWC. There were 285 general comments by the community with the vast majority expressing their support for the BWC.

Based on the overwhelming support for BWC by the public, we didn't feel there was a need to conduct a post-pilot survey. The community was very clear that they supported BWC and it was felt that there would be nothing further learned with a second survey only 4 months after the first community survey.

Conclusion

We have to look at and consider what is happening around the province, the country and the world for that matter. BWCs are here to stay and have been a standard piece of equipment in many other countries, it has now only recently taken hold in Canada and Ontario. This is evident in the RCMP, Toronto Police, Peel Regional Police, York Regional Police, etc...all moving towards BWCs. This does beg the question, why St. Thomas? We do not have a huge issue with public complaints and we do have a very professional, respectful and skilled workforce. The answer is simple; it is the future of policing.

The initial feeling of unease when wearing a BWC seems to have waned during the pilot project and it appears to be just a normal part of the equipment now. It will be incumbent upon us as leaders to continue to use the BWC for its intended purpose and to continually re-evaluate efficiencies that be realized with Axon and BWC's.

The time has come to embrace the BWC and continue to move policing in St. Thomas forward as leader not only in the community we serve but also in the bigger community of police services as a leader in body worn cameras.

