

Policy and Practice Explainer

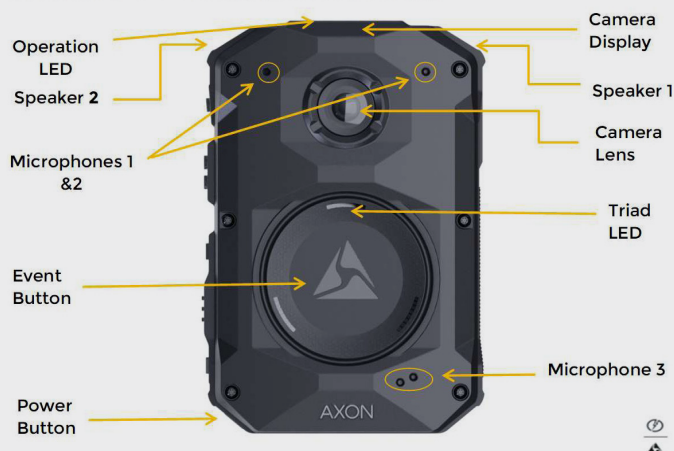
BODY WORN CAMERAS (BWCS)

→ Executive Summary

Body Worn Cameras (BWCs) are devices that are worn by police officers that record audio and video. BWCs are useful to both law enforcement and the public for preserving a record of officer-civilian interactions as they are often used to record evidence and statements. The Philadelphia Police Department (PPD) uses Axon cameras, which were chosen after conducting a pilot program beginning in 2014. That pilot program was expanded city wide between 2017 and 2018 and currently all 21 police districts are equipped with and trained on the use of BWCs. To date, PPD manages over 3900 BWCs that are worn by patrol officers as well as a number of specialized units including (but not limited to) officers assigned to the Counter Terrorism Operations, PPDs SWAT unit, Highway Patrol officers, and the Narcotics Strike Force units. Note: While most uniformed officers operate and maintain BWCs, there are a number of plain clothes officers that are not required to use BWC devices during the course of their duties.

→ How Body Worn Cameras Work

AXON BODY 4 OPERATING FUNCTIONS



When an officer begins their work shift, they are instructed to retrieve their assigned BWC device and turn it on which activates standby mode (the device is ready but does not retain audio/video until the officer activates the recording feature). Once in standby mode, the device is ready to record and the operation LED on top of the device will omit a green light. When an officer is ready to record an encounter, they double tap the event button at the center of the device to begin recording (the LED light will change from **GREEN** to **RED**). Officers press and hold the same button to end the recording.

NOTE: Ending the recording does not automatically turn the camera off.

Each time an officer records an interaction with their BWC, a video is saved to their digital evidence management database. The video that is preserved from that interaction will include footage from the time of activation until deactivation and will also include the 60 seconds before the recording button was activated, known as the buffering period. The buffering period does not record audio but will allow those viewing the video to observe the moments leading up to the activation of the recording function. This feature can be particularly useful when law enforcement agencies are tasked with analyzing footage during sudden or dangerous encounters in which officers have to act quickly. Reviewing the moments prior to activation can provide a more detailed understanding of the circumstances of the incident involving the recording officer. Officers can turn off their BWCs by using the On/Off Switch at the bottom of their device.

The newest model of the Axon BWCs includes a real time language translation function. Officers using this translation feature will be able to record the statements of non-English speaking civilians and have them translated to English in real time so that they can effectively communicate with the greater Philadelphia community who may require translation assistance. PPD has confirmed that this feature is actively being tested and authenticated through the proper channels to ensure accuracy and to confirm that the function is consistent with existing policies and procedures as well as applicable laws and regulations. The department has indicated that they intend to allow officers to use this tool in the near future.

—> Policies and Procedures

Currently, every uniformed patrol officer in each of the 21 police districts have BWCs and those patrol officers have been trained on how to operate these devices. Incoming Philadelphia Police recruits receive BWC training and are issued BWC devices before graduation from the Police Academy. PPD Supervisors are able to request additional BWC training for their district, unit, or individual officers if they believe it is necessary.

PPD Directive 4.21 *'Body Worn Cameras (BWC)'* is the policy that instructs officers on how they must operate their BWC devices. Per Directive 4.21 BWCs are to be activated prior to responding to all calls for service, during all law enforcement related encounters, and during all activities involving the general public including (but not limited to):

- Responding to in-progress crimes and priority one (1) assignments.
- Initiating any vehicle or foot pursuit.
- Conducting any vehicle or pedestrian investigation.
- Initiating a sight arrest or citation.
- Taking a statement or information from a victim or witness.
- Handling a disturbance or crisis related incident.
- Handling any protest or demonstration.
- Conducting a security check.
- Whenever confronted by any member of the general public that is or likely to become confrontational, antagonistic or hostile.
- Whenever handling a situation or incident that the officer, through their training and experience, believes should be visually preserved.

Directive 4.21 also notes that once a BWC has been activated, it should remain activated until the event has concluded, except in the following circumstances:

- If the recording would capture gruesome images, or when private areas of the human body are exposed and there exists no legitimate law enforcement need to capture such images.
- When entering a religious institution, during services.
- When entering a hospital room or private patient area in a hospital.
- When a crime scene has been established and officers have been placed on post to safeguard the scene.

If an officer deactivates their BWC prior to the conclusion of the incident and none of the above circumstances apply, that officer is instructed to state, out loud, the reason for deactivation.

At the end of their shifts, officers are instructed to connect their BWC devices to designated mounting stations where their BWC footage is then saved to PPD's digital evidence management database. Officers are responsible for ensuring that each video is appropriately titled, labeled, and categorized. Retention periods for videos vary depending on how that recording is categorized. This makes it important for officers to accurately categorize their BWC videos to ensure that PPD has access to and can locate any audio/video evidence needed in a timely manner.

→ Public Access to BWC & FIOA Requests

In 2017, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed Act 22, an act that amended Titles 18 and 42 of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes. As a result of Act 22, requests for audio and video recordings from law enforcement are exempt from the Pennsylvania Right To Know Law, so they are no longer processed within the standard right to know request procedures.¹ To obtain PPD audio or video recordings, the requester must make a written request to PPD's Open Records Officer within **60 days of the recording**. The requester must submit the official Law Enforcement Recording Request Form [\[RIGHT TO KNOW REQUEST FORM\]](#) either in person or by mail and must pay the fees required as determined by PPD.²

Under Act 22, the agency may deny the request - in writing - if it determines that a recording contains:

- **Potential evidence in a criminal matter; or**
- **Information pertaining to an investigation or a matter in which a criminal charge has been filed; or**
- **Confidential information or victim information; and**
- **The reasonable redaction of the recording would not safeguard potential evidence.**

If a request is denied, the requester may appeal within 30 days of the date of denial to the Court of Common Pleas with jurisdiction over the matter (i.e., the court in the county where the recorded event took place).

Discretionary Release of Recordings

According to the Office of Open Records nothing in Act 22 precludes a law enforcement agency or a prosecuting attorney with jurisdiction from choosing to release an audio or video recording, with or without a written request.

The Office of Open Records notes that if the prosecuting attorney finds that a requested recording contains evidence in a criminal matter, potentially sensitive investigative information, confidential information or victim information and that a redaction of the recording will not safeguard the potential evidence or information, the law enforcement agency may only release the recording with the written permission of the prosecuting attorney.

Philadelphia's District Attorney's office works with PPD as a custodian of digital evidence captured from BWCs and assists in determining when BWC footage should be released by the department. As of this report, neither PPD nor Philadelphia's District Attorney's Office have an official policy regarding the proactive release of BWC recordings from the department.

NOTE: Although PPD Directive 4.16 'Public Affairs and Release of Information to the Public' details the department's release of information following an officer involved shooting, these procedures do not include requirements regarding the proactive release of audio or video footage related to that specific shooting incident.

—▶ Reviewing PPD’s Compliance With Their BWC Policy

After an intensive process of planning, research, and development the Auditing, Policy, and Research Division (APRD) met with PPD leadership in December of 2024, presented their BWC Audit Project plan, and began collecting evidence and analyzing data for the project. The BWC Audit Project aims to analyze a random sample of incidents from selected districts over a period of time to determine if the responding officers who handled those incidents operated their BWCs as required by the procedures outlined in Directive 4.21.

CPOC has completed Audits for the 24th, 18th, 15th, and 22nd districts to date. A major function of the project is the opportunity to share results with the leadership teams of the district being audited. CPOC met with the leadership teams of the 24th, 18th, 15th and 22nd districts following the completion of each audit and was able to share project results and participate in an open dialogue with the command staff to strategize ways to improve compliance with BWC policies and procedures.

CPOC is in the process of conducting an analysis of the project to determine and adequately address any areas for improvement that are identified. This analysis aims to ensure that the project remains effective in its goals to analyze PPDs BWC functions, collaborate with PPD personnel, and provide information to the residents of Philadelphia regarding this practice.

—▶ Questions?

CPOC’s mission is to oversee and investigate the conduct, policies, and practices of the Philadelphia Police Department (PPD). CPOC is always available to accept complaints of police misconduct or general feedback through our website, <http://www.phila.gov/CPOC>.

Please contact us online or by phone, at **(215) 685-0891** if you have any questions or concerns about body-worn cameras or any other policing-related topic.

ENDNOTES:

1. Pennsylvania Office of Open Records. *Requesting Police Recordings (Video & Audio) in Pennsylvania*. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Accessed April 10, 2026. <https://www.openrecords.pa.gov/RTKL/PoliceRecordings.cfm>
2. Philadelphia Police Department. Right to Know. City of Philadelphia. Accessed May 19, 2026. <https://www.phillypolice.com/right-to-know/>