



# Atlanta Citizen Review Board Body-Worn Camera Focus Group Report

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**Focus Group held November 20, 2014  
Focus Group Facilitator: Charles Curry**



## Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
Background of Project: .....	4
Introduction .....	4
Desired Outcomes of the Focus Group .....	4
Participant Demographics .....	5
Participant Perspectives .....	5
Topic Outcome 1: To understand what perceived benefits are most important to the group. ....	5
Topic Outcome 2: To understand what concerns are most important to the group.....	5
Topic Outcome 3: To understand the expectations citizens have for BWCs.....	6
Topic Outcome 4: To understand policies citizens would like to have input on the development of APD BWC policy.....	6
Topic Outcome 5: To understand the level of the privacy concerns related to BWCs...6	
Topic Outcome 6: To understand how important have external involvement in BWCs is to the group.....	7
Topic Outcome 7: To understand the importance of citizen access to the recordings .7	
Topic Outcome 8: To understand citizens desire to be involved in the BWC policy writing .....	7
Discussion Excerpts .....	8
Support for BWCs .....	8
Recommended Actions .....	9
Appendix A.....	10

## Executive Summary

Atlanta Citizen Review Board (ACRB) in its current form was established by an Atlanta City Council ordinance following the tragic shooting death of Kathryn Johnston, a 92-year-old innocent victim of corrupt Atlanta undercover police. ACRB has subpoena power and legislative authority to investigate citizen allegations of misconduct by sworn officers of the Atlanta Police Department (APD) and Atlanta Corrections Department (ACD). Its greatest function is giving citizens a chance to be heard by fellow citizens who are trained investigators. Sustained allegations by ACRB are formally reported to the Chiefs of Police and Corrections for recommended disciplinary action.

Due to the expected use of body worn cameras (BWC) by APD, ACRB developed the first-ever study of BWCs by a City of Atlanta agency. The Atlanta Citizen Review Board Study on Body-Worn Cameras (BWCs) & Discussion of Concerns and Recommendations on BWCs for Atlanta Police Officers 2014 Report researched scores of reports, articles and government documents and discussed BWCs with jurisdictions already using the cameras.

The study concluded that BWC recordings, if properly implemented, managed and made fully and quickly available to ACRB, should make it easier for ACRB to make decisions about alleged police misconduct with stronger evidence and improve the level of trust between police and civilians. However, it also notes that training, enforcement, right to privacy issues, access to and the management of recordings are among a host of policy considerations that must be thoroughly examined and resolved before BWCs are approved by the Council and used by APD.

Results of a subsequent BWC Focus Group, conducted on November 20, 2014, yielded similar results. The key findings of the focus group were:

### Key Findings

1. BWCs are needed and wanted.
2. Citizens should have access to BWC recordings.
3. Officers should not have access to the recordings.
4. External auditing of BWC program is important to building trust of the program.
5. To ensure a citizen's right to privacy, an officer's BWC system should indicate in some way that it is recording.
6. Officers' ability to start and stop recordings is a major concern.
7. Citizens expect swift, decisive and appropriate action by the APD against any officer who violates BWC departmental policy and as determined by an independent agency.
8. Violations recorded should be disciplined.
9. Citizens expect a BWC system for APD to be launched systematically.
10. Citizens want to be involved in developing the BWC policy and policy changes.

### Recommended Actions

- Implement a BWC Program that includes external auditing and intense training.
- Ensure that there is available access to the recordings, especially those individuals not involved in a criminal matter.
- To ensure a citizen's right to privacy, an officer's BWC system should indicate in some way that it is recording.
- BWC system should have the ability to redact images of citizens.
- Enforce APD policies swiftly, decisively and appropriately.
- Involve an external entity to monitor and audit the BWC program to ensure compliance.
- Involve citizens in the on-going discussion and implementation of any BWC program.

# Body-Worn Camera Citizen Focus Group Report

## Background of Project:

The Atlanta Citizen Review Board (ACRB) conducted a study of Body-Worn Cameras (BWC) to ensure that the public is aware of the benefits and challenges of the BWCs. The report was released on October 2, 2014. Copies of the report were provided to the Mayor of Atlanta, Members of the Atlanta City Council, and the Chiefs of Atlanta Police Department and Atlanta Corrections Department. A presentation of the BWC Study was made during the October 9, 2014 ACRB meeting. The ACRB received public comment on BWCs during the September and October board meetings. On November 20, 2014, the ACRB conducted a focus group on BWCs. The focus group was comprised of 11 residents of Atlanta and surrounding areas.

## Introduction

The focus group was conducted as part of the ACRB's continuing effort to ensure that the public is informed of the BWC issues and has the opportunity to provide input about their concerns and hopes as they learn about BWCs. Participants were selected through solicitation via Facebook and community contacts. The focus group session was recorded and transcribed. The participants provided information during group discussion in a question and answer format. Several scenarios were presented to the group for responses. The participants were encouraged to explain their answers. There were several points during the discussion where there was notable disagreement – privacy and enforcement. On the majority of the topics, the participants shared many of the same thoughts. The group also supported many of the ACRB's contentions raised in the ACRB study on BWCs. This report was written based on the transcript, staff observations, and notes made during the focus group.

## Desired Outcomes of the Focus Group

The discussion was designed to gather information from the participants with regard to the following outcomes:

1. To understand what perceived benefits are most important to the group.
2. To understand what concerns are most important to the group.
3. To understand the expectations citizens have for BWCs.
4. To understand policies citizens would like to have input in the development of APD BWC policy.
5. To understand the level of privacy concerns related to BWCs.
6. To understand how important it is to the group to have an external entity involved in BWCs.
7. To understand the importance of citizen access to the video.
8. To understand citizens' desire to be involved in the BWC policy discussion.

## Participant Demographics

Eleven participants took part in the focus group:

- 4 African American females; 5 African American males; 1 Latino male; 1 white male
- 7 residents of the City of Atlanta; 4 residents of Metro Atlanta
- Participants ranged from ages of late 20s to late 50s

See Appendix A for a brief description of the focus group participants.

## Participant Perspectives

### Topic Outcome 1: To understand what perceived benefits are most important to the group.

#### Summary

Participants believed that clarification of an incident, transparency, officer protection, leveling the field between citizen and officer during encounters, increased professionalism, reduced liability, behavior modification when recording is operating, and accountability are important benefits that the BWCs can provide. The participants talked extensively about the advantage of the cameras to provide more clarity to he-said/she-said situations. The group also recognized that the cameras would provide protection for both the citizen and officers.

### Topic Outcome 2: To understand what concerns are most important to the group.

#### Summary

The group supported the ACRB's identification of challenges. Participants found privacy<sup>1</sup>, officer access to recordings, officer control of the recordings, and enforcement of the policies related to BWCs as the main challenges. The group believed that officer access and discretion to record are important issues that need to be resolved. The sentiment of the group was to limit or eliminate officer discretion related to BWC recording. The participants had a lively discussion about enforcement of the APD policy with the use of BWCs. The group believed that enforcement of the policies is critical to the success of the BWCs. While one participant believed that officers should be given a little grace when it came to failing to record, the sentiment of the group reflected that there should be a clear expectation of officers that violation of a policy to record would be met with discipline, just as the expectation that criminals are met with violating the law. Several participants accepted that there might be different perceptions of recordings when the recordings are later reviewed. With regard to possible camera malfunction and alleged manipulative camera operation, participants want firm and specific enforcement policies in place and an independent investigation of alleged wrongdoing.

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<sup>1</sup> The group's privacy discussion is under Topic Outcome 5.

### **Topic Outcome 3: To understand the expectations citizens have for BWCs.**

#### **Summary**

The group's discussion on citizens' expectations regarding the use of body worn cameras centered on easing citizens' safety concerns when encountering officers; however, the group appeared to agree with a participant through affirmative head nods and comments that, despite expectations that cameras will improve officer behavior, officers determined to engage in misconduct will find a way to do it. The group recognized that the APD would have the responsibility to use the cameras not only for the benefit of the officers, but also for the benefit of citizens.

### **Topic Outcome 4: To understand policies citizens would like to have input on the development of APD BWC policy.**

#### **Summary**

The group discussed several issues that should be addressed in APD policy with regard to BWCs. One of the central issues was whether officers should have discretion to record. The group did not believe officers should have discretion on whether to record an incident (excluding lunch/bathroom breaks) and absolutely no one should have the ability to edit recordings. The group made a resounding "no" when the question about editing was posed. The participants also discussed how policy should address camera malfunctions (immediate replacement), failure to record (discipline), and camera placement (placement based on maximum ability to capture the encounter). A participant mentioned that the policy should take into account the safety of the officer as a central concern when balancing whether to record or not.

### **Topic Outcome 5: To understand the level of the privacy concerns related to BWCs.**

#### **Summary**

The group had a lively discussion related to privacy concerns. Generally, the participants thought that the privacy of citizens should be strongly considered in the development of a BWC program because of the access that the state law provides to citizens requesting government documents; however, because of the actions of officers, citizens should be willing to sacrifice some of their privacy to ensure that officers act according to policy.

Several participants felt that protecting citizen's privacy and control of their image must be considered. Other participants believed that because of the actions of police officers involving death of unarmed citizens the benefits of BWCs outweigh the privacy concern. One participant felt that citizens need to be willing to make sacrifices to privacy to stop police abuses. One of the suggestions that the group supported involved using technology to "scrub" or redact citizens' images who are not subject of the police encounter.

The focus group believed that there must be a serious in-depth discussion to balance citizens' privacy and the need to record to ensure that officers act accordingly to policy

and law. The focus group was sensitive to the concern that BWCs might also implicate an innocent victim of circumstances and jeopardize a career/reputation if a citizen is caught on a recording at the wrong place, wrong time. Another concern was that BWCs recordings could be a potential gateway to social media exposure and misperception. The group discussion was affirmation of BWC Study's expectation that citizen access to tapes of their image from APD will be highly contentious.

### **Topic Outcome 6: To understand how important it is to have external involvement in BWCs.**

#### **Summary**

A unanimous “No” voice vote against sole police control of BWCs. Most respondents called for an independent external body overseeing the BWC system. The participants felt that because of the trust that the community is providing to the police department with BWCs external involvement in the BWC program is necessary. There was considerable discussion on whether the police department could be trusted to operate the BWC program without external involvement. The general sentiment of the group was that it is difficult to trust the police department to investigate itself.

The group appeared to unanimously agree that the trust of police departments is so low that external involvement in the BWC program is necessary. Most respondents called for an independent external body overseeing the BWC system.

### **Topic Outcome 7: To understand the importance of citizen access to the recordings**

#### **Summary**

The participants unanimously agreed that access to recordings is important to the community, especially to those who are captured on the recordings. One participant made note of the potential for the requested recordings to be delayed before the public could receive the recordings.

### **Topic Outcome 8: To understand citizens desire to be involved in the BWC policy writing**

#### **Summary**

The participants unanimously agreed that the police department should not be able to make unmonitored changes to the APD policy with regard to the BWCs. The group believed that, at times, the policies might need to be changed, but because of the constitutional protections that are not subject to change as quickly, BWC policies need to have external input to ensure that the policies always maintain the constitutional protections.

## Discussion Excerpts

### Summary

The group made several comments and had several discussions that involved areas of interest that warrant inclusion in this report. During those spirited discussions, the group noted the need for cameras because of frustrations over the loss of life and liberty, the importance of citizens to make complaints, and the impact of complaints. The participants wrestled with the past failures of police departments to enforce their policies and whether the BWCs will make a difference. Below are excerpts of the discussions.

### Comments

Below are several comments that were made during the focus group session that captures the depth of the discussion.

*I'm just trying to look at all different sides of this issue, but even when we vote, there's a possibility that what you stand for is not going to be represented, so I just wanted to make that point clear that even though, yes, I believe that having another set of eyes is critical, you know, having a citizen who is just an upstanding citizen or someone is not doing what they're supposed to do, and even when whoever we are, we still have the rights. We still have rights. You still have rights, and police officers do have rights.*

*"The reason this is coming about is because of what's occurring in our society where people are being killed for nothing."*

*"This [BWCs] is just a step towards leveling, I think, the playing field."*

*"I'm tired of officers being discharge for shooting people and still getting paid. You're discharged, discharged. You know, the chief, you're suspended without pay until we further look into your practices as the governing leader of this body, and then and it requires us being involved."*

*"We do have instances of policing and being videotaped, and nothing happening to those police officers that are clearly abusing their power."*

*"I understand what you're saying about the privacy that your face is now on a criminal app, you know, in the midst of being busted, but the truth of the matter is, if you are not guilty of that incident, that camera can also help you as well showing that you have nothing to do with it."*

## Support for BWCs

The group unanimously agreed that the APD should implement BWCs. Two participants stated that the implementation should include proper auditing and proper training.



## Recommended Actions

- Implement a BWC Program that includes external auditing and intense training.
- Ensure that there is available access to the recordings, especially those individuals not involved in a criminal matter.
- To ensure a citizen's right to privacy, an officer's BWC system should indicate in some way that it is recording.
- BWC system should have the ability to redact images of citizens.
- Enforce APD policies swiftly, decisively and appropriately.
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## Appendix A

Latino Male, originally from Los Angeles, California, residing in Douglasville with fifteen years of corporate America in sales, marketing, product management and product creation.

African American Female, residing in Stone Mountain and currently a Senior Project Manager in the IT Department at Georgia State University.

African American Male, a Miami native residing in Atlanta for nine years, a father of two, a former Florida police officer who has been working in television for the last twenty-four years

African American Male originally from Oklahoma City, a seven year resident of Fulton County.

African American Female, originally from Trenton, NJ, residing in Austell, an educator with two children.

African American Female, originally from Atlanta, residing in Decatur, GA, graduate of Clark Atlanta, employed as an information systems analyst and married for four years.

African American Female, originally from Gainesville, Georgia, residing in Fulton County, City of Atlanta, currently a student working on her Masters Degree in Human Services/Criminal Justice at Liberty University.

White Male., raised in Alpharetta, residing in Midtown, engineering graduate of Georgia Tech, worked as project manager before changing career paths.

African American Male, originally from California, residing in Vinings, graduate of Grambling State University and currently an engineering graduate student at Georgia Tech.

African American Male, originally from Chicago, residing in Atlanta, a licensed barber, stylist, and currently a member of Westside Cultural Arts Center.

African American Female, native of Atlanta, life-long resident of the Vine City neighbourhood where she raised three children, working to improve her community.

***ACRB extends its thanks and gratitude to all focus group participants.***



The Atlanta Citizen Review Board is a proud agency of the City of Atlanta.

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