



HOW TEXAS CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT IMPROVED TRAINING & CUT COMPLAINTS WITH AXON BODY CAMERAS



/ THE CASE FOR CAMERAS IN FIRE & EMS

For Texas City Fire Chief David Zacherl, issuing body cameras wasn't top of mind for his Fire and EMS personnel before 2018. Then he had an eye-opening conversation with a local police official who had been issued a body camera.

Chief Zacherl said that the police official went from thinking "I'll never survive these cameras" to considering the cameras one of the best developments of his career. He told Zacherl that they helped reduce complaints, enhanced the quality of their evidence, and were unmatched training tools — able to put you into the mindset of an official on scene at an event.

After that conversation, Chief Zacherl was convinced: Fire and EMS could significantly benefit from adopting body cameras.

/ A NEW FRONTIER: ISSUING THE CAMERAS

He began exploring body camera options and quickly settled on Axon as a possible provider. This was not a project, Chief Zacherl said, where he wanted "to reinvent the wheel." His local police department was using Axon, and officials there were happy with their cameras, and the city's IT staff was already familiar with the technology, which would simplify the implementation.

At the time, Texas City Fire Department was one of a select few Fire and EMS agencies in the U.S. that had adopted body cameras — so they turned to city officials and other, similar Fire and EMS agencies for advice when crafting policy.

Their top focus was addressing any HIPAA-related concerns. Chief Zacherl said that Axon's robust cloud-based Axon Evidence system, with its suite of redaction tools, helped address stakeholder questions about respecting individuals' privacy.

Now, Texas City Fire Department has at least 15 cameras in service every day. The cameras are assigned to a fire truck or medic position and rotate by shift, much like the Department's radio equipment. The Department maintains spare cameras at each station, so personnel can swap out in the middle of a shift if it's ever necessary.

/ UNPRECEDENTED INSIGHTS & ACCESS

After initially trialing Axon Body 2 cameras, the Department now uses Axon Body 3 cameras with Axon Respond for Devices — letting them livestream and get real-time alerts from the field.

Assistant Chief Jesse Rubio saw the value of livestreaming immediately when he monitored his first call, where EMS officials effectively responded to a belligerent patient.

“To be able to watch that go down, I could come back to them and say, ‘You did a phenomenal job to keep the family calm,’” Assistant Chief Rubio said.

The body camera footage has also offered officials an unprecedented view into fire responses, allowing for better training.

Before, they had photographs. Now, ***“it’s like watching a movie or TV program,”*** Chief Zacherl said.

Assistant Chief Rubio said he will sometimes bring the crew in to review footage, which goes beyond what each responder saw individually, in order to start a conversation about what was effective - and what could be improved - during their response.

“Any footage is helpful at a fire scene, because you see so much more of what is going on,” Chief Zacherl said. And for EMS, having video of intubations is invaluable for training.

“[It’s] one thing to talk about certain things...it’s another to show them,” he said.

/ UNEXPECTED BENEFITS

Beyond the training benefits of body camera video, the Texas City Fire Department has also been able to more effectively respond to community questions and limit frivolous complaints.

Having body camera footage has helped officials find hearing aids, diamond rings, and other valuables for community members who report lost items.

“It’s the little things like that that are nice to be able to do for people that was kind of an unexpected benefit [of the cameras],” Chief Zacherl said, adding that almost all community feedback about the cameras has been positive.

In addition, any complaints are no longer “he-said-she-said” disputes. Before the cameras, officials would wait for involved individuals to come back on duty, write a report, and assemble all the relevant parties to review the complaint, conduct interviews, and try to determine what happened to ensure the conduct was appropriate and within agency policy and guidelines.

The process usually took several days, or weeks, depending on the individual firefighter’s schedule and personal leave factors. At the end of the investigation, the Department often ended up right where they had started, with a “he-said-she-said” account. No one usually felt like they had achieved any closure.

Now, they’ve instituted a PDF form for complaints, and tell those who intend to submit a complaint that they will review any relevant body camera videos of the incident — a measure that has already eliminated frivolous complaints, Chief Zacherl said.

Additionally, most complaints are resolved the same business day by simply reviewing the video evidence, saving a significant amount of time conducting an appropriate investigation. More importantly, the complainant usually has a much better understanding of what really happened.

“I think Axon has been great for us,” Chief Zacherl said, adding that his Department will try to stay on the cutting edge and look for other ways to take advantage of their investment by expanding their use of Respond and other Axon features.

