

Belmar's Vidmics are first in state

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COASTAL MONMOUTH BUREAU

BELMAR — For years, dashboard cameras in police cars have been invaluable tools of law enforcement. Now, in this popular beach town, the cameras are hidden on the officers themselves.

Police here say they are the first in New Jersey to acquire Vidmics, unveiled at an Atlantic City Police Security Expo in mid-June to promote new police technologies.

Vidmics look and function just like regular two-way shoulder radios that officers wear over their uniforms. But these radios include a small, nearly indistinguishable lens peering out at the world from the center. The officer can turn the camera on and off.

The device records sound and video and shoots still photographs. The images recorded include a time and date stamp, so what's recorded can be used in court.

The borough has two and plans to purchase two more, Police Chief Jack Hill said. Police plan to use the cameras on foot patrols.

"It assists the officer in performing at a higher professional level," Hill said. If officers are being recorded, they "will conduct themselves in a professional manner. We in law enforcement have to take advantage of new technology to lower our liability exposure and protect our citizens and our officers."

Explained Special Officer Andrew Ragati, "It's just like instant replay on a football game."

Each camera costs \$700, which includes the unit and software that downloads the data through a cable and USB port just like a digital camera, said Dick Cottrell, senior business development executive for Quality Communications in Lakewood. That firm represents EarHugger, the Utah-based manufacturer, in New Jersey.

First in N.J.

Cottrell said EarHugger owns the patent on the technology, and Belmar's is the first police department to acquire the product in the state and among the first in the United States. Previously, the cameras have only been used in trials among a select group of departments in Utah.

"On first blush, it sounded like a great idea, because of the limitation of the cameras in the car. While car cameras offer a great deal, they don't give the level of detail that this piece does," Cottrell said.

If the Vidmic is employed during motor-vehicle stops in which a driver is suspected of being intoxicated, for example, the officer will be able to record his or her interaction with the driver, and the driver's appearance and demeanor, Cottrell said.

For a department's self-interest, the cameras also will either vindicate or make liars out of those who file excessive-force complaints, Cottrell said.

Belmar's policy will be to retain video and audio recordings for at least 120 days.

"There is the obvious benefit in seaside resort towns where there's so much activity going on, up and down at the boardwalks, and we won't even mention the police department the Press has just done a huge expose on," Cottrell said.

An Asbury Park Press investigation last month found Seaside Park had paid \$1.5 million to settle five excessive-force lawsuits against police in the past two years without any admission of wrongdoing by the borough or the officers. The Press documented a total of 13 lawsuits filed by people who allege rough treatment during their arrests.

Ray Martyniuk, a spokesman for the New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police, said there's no doubt the technology will serve in evaluating the legitimacy of a complaint made against an officer.

"If Belmar is the first department in New Jersey, then they will also be a laboratory for how this technology will be used," Martyniuk said.

"Pictures don't lie"

"The camera doesn't lie, pictures don't lie," said Shaun McGrath, 24, of Sea Girt, who operates a daily surfing clinic on the Third Avenue beach called "Summertime Surf."

About three weeks ago, he said, a group of teenagers tried to steal one of his instructor's cars. The keys had been left in the car at the 18th Avenue beach. After police intervened, "I took their picture with my camera," McGrath said.

The teens were not charged, but McGrath said, "As far as accountability, it'll keep everybody honest.

"Obviously, there are some things that are open to interpretation, but that's what the courts are for," he said.

The still-photography option enables police to snap pictures of evidence or a minor crime scene, Cottrell said.

Regarding potential concerns that the devices smack of Big Brother — undue government surveillance of individuals — Hill said there should be no expectation of privacy in public, but he acknowledged the cameras would be used in response to residential calls.

"The courts have ruled you don't have to notify you're recording, as long as one party is knowledgeable. All it's doing is recording the actions of the people in public, not private," Hill said. "It's no different than taking any photo in public. We're not intruding on anyone else's privacy."