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July 24, 2017

Col. Hugh Clements, Jr.  
Providence Police Department  
325 Washington Street  
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Chief Clements:

Over the past two years, as you know, the ACLU has corresponded with you on a number of occasions over the issue of your Police Department's body camera policy. In that correspondence, I have noted that while police body cameras have the ability to provide a helpful layer of transparency and accountability in police-community relations, the Department's policy fails to ensure that. Among other things, we have argued that the policy is not sufficiently precise in making sure that police encounters with civilians will be captured on tape from beginning to end.

Recent events elsewhere prompt this follow-up, as I believe they highlight the legitimacy of our previously expressed concerns about the Department's policy and the need for considering revisions to it.

Last week, as you undoubtedly know, in a tragic incident about which many questions remain, an Australian woman was killed by a Minneapolis police officer after she called the police for assistance. A major controversy of that tragedy involves the police officers' failure to have turned on their body cameras during this incident. We find this relevant because, under your Department's current policy, were a similar tragedy to occur here, your officers' cameras likely would not have been activated either.

For example, the Department policy requires the recording of incidents involving a reportable use of force and public interactions that become adversarial. But by definition, as the ACLU has previously argued:

these recordings can only occur after situations have escalated, and will therefore never capture the events leading up to the use of force or adversarial interaction. An officer will first have to respond to the issue, neutralize the situation, and then turn on the camera. As such, virtually none of the questions that arise from these sudden escalations can be answered by the body camera footage, rendering it essentially useless for what is arguably its most valuable function - bringing clarity to these fast, complicated interactions.

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The Minneapolis tragedy provides an opportune time for the Department to revisit its current policy and to strengthen it so that the accountability underlying the use of body cameras is fully realized. We hope you will take advantage of that opportunity and the lesson learned from that tragedy. Thank you again for considering our views, and I look forward to hearing back from you about it.

Sincerely,



Steven Brown  
Executive Director

cc: Providence City Council  
The Hon. Jorge Elorza  
Commissioner Steven Pare