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N.J. cops must wear body cameras under new laws Gov. Murphy just signed

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Gov. Phil Murphy signed two bills into law Tuesday mandating that all New Jersey cops wear body cameras and regulating when they should be turned on.

The two proposals take effect in seven months, although they are partially dependent on funding.

“This is a big step in the right direction,” Murphy said during a virtual bill signing ceremony.

The governor also issued Executive Order 201, which creates a 14-person committee to advise officials on what body camera technology is best.

The value of body cameras is one area of agreement between law enforcement leaders and reformers, since video can both clear officers and prove misconduct. However, most police departments in the state still do not have them.

The laws will go “a long way” in “bridging the gap of trust and confidence that exists in our Black and brown communities,” said state Sen. Shirley Turner, D-Mercer, who first introduced the proposal in 2014 after Michael Brown was killed by a Ferguson, Missouri officer.

Body cameras could save taxpayers money in the long run, she said, by reducing the number of excessive force lawsuits.

Murphy originally vetoed both bills, saying lawmakers needed to budget more money and create more privacy protections for people caught on camera. A bill setting aside at least \$58 million to cover equipment and storage costs passed two committees after receiving support from legislative leaders, but it has not yet passed the full Legislature.

The first bill Murphy signed Tuesday (S1163) generally requires all cops wear body cameras, although officers working undercover, meeting with confidential informants or at desk jobs are exempt.

The second bill, (A4312) which focuses on specific rules for using the body cameras, was amended after Murphy’s veto.

Residents should generally be notified when they’re being filmed, according to the law. They may ask an officer to turn off a camera under certain circumstances, such as during a medical emergency. Cops may also switch off cameras in schools, hospitals and houses of worship.

All footage should be kept for at least 180 days, but video of police force and arrests should be kept for at least three years. Outside companies storing the footage will be barred from viewing it.

Murphy was joined online by state lawmakers, officials and union leaders, several of whom referenced the “national reckoning” underway since George Floyd’s death over what just policing looks like.

“Body worn cameras can increase trooper professionalism, contribute to a decline in citizen complaints and use-of-force issues and (are) extremely helpful to troopers in writing more accurate reports,” said Wayne Blanchard, head of the New Jersey State Troopers Fraternal Organization.

The virtual format created new twists on tradition. Panelists applauded when Murphy signed each bill, but since most everyone was on mute they formed a silent montage of clapping hands. Murphy also announced who would eventually receive the pens used to sign the bills, but he said each needed to be sanitized first.

Until recently, the body camera debate in New Jersey had avoided prisons. While two state prisons are in the process of equipping officers with cameras, a lawmaker introduced a bill last week that would require them statewide.