Testimony of the City of Columbus in support of H.B. 425

Before the Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee

November 28, 2018

Chairman Coley, Vice Chair Uecker, Ranking Member Schiavoni, Members of the Government Oversight and Reform Committee, thank you for allowing me to provide proponent testimony on House Bill 425. My name is George Speaks, Deputy Director for Public Safety with the City of Columbus. Columbus has deployed over 1,200 body worn cameras which last month resulted in the creation of 65,276 videos. The deployment was a major initiative of Mayor Ginther who committed approximately $5,225,000 in funding and helped to convene the City of Columbus Body Camera Committee.

This Committee was comprised of community leaders representing of a broad range of talents, experience, and expertise. For seven months the committee thoughtfully and thoroughly analyzed a wide variety of voluminous written materials including body camera legislation from across the nation, video footage, and law enforcement policies.

Expert testimony was taken and input given from representatives from the Ohio Attorney General’s Office, Columbus City Attorney’s Office, Police Officers, Technology Experts, criminal defense attorneys, the Ohio Newspaper Association, law professors, the American Civil Liberties Union, County Prosecutor’s Office, BWC vendors and the public. These meetings were open and attended by members of the public and press and some meetings were televised.

The work of the committee resulted in an implementation plan for body worn cameras; resulted in a policy for our officers to adhere to; and resulted in privacy recommendations which were presented to Representatives Antani and Craig.

Representatives Antani and Craig did a tremendous job of gaining additional input from across the State of Ohio and they have promulgated what I believe is the most comprehensive and best legislation in the country dealing with public records and body cameras footage.

This bi-partisan legislation deftly balances two often times competing values—transparency versus privacy. Voluminous studies from the United States and Europe coupled with our own experience in Ohio’s capitol city, demonstrate that video footage increases law enforcement transparency, accountability (from both the officer and the public), and that the video aids in the prosecution of criminal offenses.

On the other hand, body camera footage is certain to capture some of the most difficult moments in an individual’s life, and Ohio’s open public records laws currently permits wide dissemination. This dissemination is not so much through the main stream media but through social media as evinced by the hundreds of YOUTUBE channels that post body camera footage. Footage that captures the worst or most embarrassing moments of a person’s life. Footage that is not only an invasion of privacy but that also may pose as a harmful threat to the safety of a witness of a crime or video footage that will harm a victim of crime, especially those who are the victims of sex crimes, domestic violence or stalking.

The legislation proposed today artfully balances the sometimes competing values of transparency and privacy. On behalf of the City of Columbus and the largest public safety force in the state of Ohio we again thank Representatives Antani and Craig and we wholeheartedly endorse the proposed legislation. Thank you.