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Defund WPD Statement On Worcester City Council Body Camera Vote

Tonight the City Council voted to move forward with a body camera program for the Worcester Police Department that will lead to another substantial increase to the police budget. The money for this program will come at the expense of underfunded social services. Once again, Councilors have prioritized reactive policing over proactive community safety.

In cities around the country, body camera programs have not had a significant effect on police conduct or community relations, a conclusion supported by the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy, the Washington, D.C. government, the National Institute of Justice, the American Society for Criminology, Police Quarterly, and other reputable sources. The report on the body camera pilot program written by the WPD provided the City Council with similar findings.

The WPD estimates that a body camera program will cost taxpayers a minimum of \$4.4 million in its first year and \$9 million to \$11 million over the next five years. As noted in the report by one WPD officer, a “majority” of police calls involve a community member having a mental health crisis. Ironically, the body camera program’s \$4.4 million start-up cost is more than the entirety of the Fiscal Year 2021 budget for the city’s Department of Health and Human Services.

For body camera programs to have even a minimal effect on police behavior, participating police departments require a culture of transparency and a reliable internal system for accountability. Stretching back decades, the City and WPD have shrouded police misconduct in secrecy, violating both state open records laws and public trust in the process. The City of Worcester is currently fighting a records request from the Worcester Telegram & Gazette seeking the complaint histories of 17 local police officers. Even during the body camera pilot program, the WPD only released three videos displaying officers' use of force, though officers' body-worn cameras recorded 24 such incidents.

Rather than engaging with the demands of the Defund movement, and subsequently the Movement 4 Black Lives, the City Council has taken steps to placate their constituents with the body camera program -- an expensive, reformist measure with a history of mixed results. More importantly to Defund WPD’s mission, these cameras do not address policing’s systemic racism and the over-criminalization of Black, Brown and economically disadvantaged communities. It is clear that city councilors are concerned less with dealing with the root causes of crime than with maintaining the violent, inherently oppressive status quo.

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