

A Utah police department is thinking about getting rid of its body cameras. Residents — including the families of people shot by officers — are rallying against the idea.

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The first time Marvin Oliveros watched the video that shows officers fatally shooting his brother, it was on a small computer screen at the Salt Lake City police station.

His parents couldn't bear to come down there. His sister was with him, but before the bullets sounded, she walked out of the room. Oliveros sat through the entire recording alone and, when it was over, he cried.

His brother, [Cody Belgard](#), was 30 years old and did not have a gun when he was approached by officers after a confrontation on Nov. 9. But one of the worst parts for Oliveros is that when he saw the footage, Belgard [appeared to have his back turned](#) as he was struck. Of the hundreds of times he's watched it since then, he's focused on that.

"Now I watch it almost every day," Oliveros said of the shooting, which he keeps a copy of on his laptop.

"Without that video, anything could have been said about it. But this shows exactly what happened."

Oliveros joined a group of about 50 residents Wednesday night — including other family members of people shot by officers in Utah — to speak to the board of directors for Unified Police Department. It's one of the biggest police forces in the state. And it's [considering whether to discontinue its use of body cameras](#) because of the high cost.

"A big part of the evidence we're relying on in our case is the body cam footage," Oliveros told the nine members of the governing board who sat at the front of the room. It's what prosecutors are using to determine if the officer was legally justified to use deadly force against Belgard, which has not yet been determined. Or if Oliveros' brother was shot without reason.

"That makes it very valuable," Oliveros pleaded. "He's innocent."

The department [first met in February](#) to discuss possibly eliminating the cameras and tabled the issue so it could hear from the public. At the hourlong meeting Wednesday, 20 people lined up behind the microphone.

They shared testimonies of interactions with police that didn't go well. They argued that cost shouldn't be the main consideration. They wore shirts and buttons with the faces of Utahns killed by police in past years, including Belgard and [Darrien Hunt](#). And they talked about how the cameras create a sense of public trust.

Many who spoke were people of color — whose communities are statistically most likely to be affected by police brutality.

"Will we have a comment period for the handguns carried by police?" asked Cristobal Villegas.

Carlos Martinez added: "It's clear historically that our community has had a very divisive relationship with officers. Many of us see them as an occupying force."

After each person finished, the crowd snapped their fingers in support.

The back two rows of the auditorium at UPD's headquarters were filled with officers.

In 2017, the department outfitted 125 of its 410 officers with body cameras. The force was able to pay for that, in part, with the help of a grant that expires in three years.

It has already funded \$146,000 toward the costs. But UPD has had to pay an additional \$348,000 for the cameras and data storage. The board of directors, as it prepares a budget, is now weighing whether it should get cameras for every officer, continue covering that 30 percent or eliminate them altogether.

“No one is advocating for that last one, but it’s one of the options,” said board member Steve Prokopis. “The UPD board will not be making a decision tonight.”

Those who attended the meeting Wednesday held a rally outside before it started. As it rained lightly, they chanted “Body cams now!” The group, led by the advocacy organizations Utah Against Police Brutality and Black Lives Matter, is calling for all officers on the force to wear a body camera.

They say that would hold police agencies more accountable for their actions, safeguarding officers from fake allegations and residents from improper force. According to a report presented to the board of directors, that would cost more than \$450,000 per year.

“You can look at both the financial cost and human cost,” said Jason Groth, a justice coordinator for the ACLU of Utah. “And you’re saving costs by not spending days in court” to litigate cases of deadly force. Since UPD officers started using cameras, there have been more than 1,600 cases of use of force; 23 of those have resulted in complaints with seven involving body camera footage. All officers in those cases were cleared.

[Salt Lake County Sheriff Rosie Rivera](#), who oversees UPD, said she’d like to gather more data on how often the camera footage is reviewed, how much time officers spend downloading and if the department could get more grants to fund expansion. She is supportive of keeping the cameras but skeptical of the budget.

“We believe if more grants come through, we can go that route and help pay for body cameras in the future,” she said.

Gina Thayne, the aunt of [Dillon Taylor](#), who was unarmed when he was shot and killed by Salt Lake City police in 2014 (a case that was later ruled justified), said watching video of that has brought her comfort. She said it’s clear to her that her nephew wasn’t at fault.

Thayne asked the board of directors to consider body cameras to be a standard piece of equipment just as important as a bulletproof vest or a holster.

“The camera can’t lie,” she said. “Dillon was never able to have a voice and say what happened. But the footage is worth a million words.”

Before the meeting, Sen. Dan McCay, R-Riverton, posted a letter on Twitter asking that UPD keep its body cameras. He’s sponsored legislation in past years on the issue but stopped short of requiring police to keep footage. He said he would consider future bills to help departments with funding.

At the meeting, several residents suggested that the department ask the Legislature for more money. Others said UPD should shift around the dollars it has and reprioritize. One man said each officer should have to trade in a weapon for a body camera. Another said other departments in the state are able to use body cameras for less money.

A woman talked about her youngest brother, who has a mental illness, and how she worries about what will happen if he runs into police on a bad day. A retired teacher said that when she didn’t have money for supplies, she bought them herself; officers, she added, should “do whatever they have to do to get the money to do the job.”

As hard as it is to watch and regardless of the cost, Oliveros said he’s glad he has the video of when his brother was shot. At the end of the day, he suggested, “It’s evidence. It’s irrefutable.”