



## Policy Briefing Memo

**Date:** August 28, 2025

**To:** Councilmember Alexis Mercedes Rinck

**From:** Director Derrick Wheeler-Smith, Dr. Hajer Al-Faham, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>

**Subject:** Council Bill (CB) 121052 and Council Bill (CB) 121053

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this memo is to review the core provisions of Council Bill 121052 and Council Bill 121053 for the effectiveness of proposed surveillance technologies and the implications for civil rights, civil liberties, and equity. The Seattle Office for Civil Rights (SOCR) safeguards civil rights and promotes equal opportunity by enforcing anti-discrimination laws, leading civil rights research and policy development, and advancing civic engagement and equity across the City of Seattle.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Council Bill [121052](#) and Council Bill [121053](#) propose expanding the Seattle Police Department's (SPD) piloted use of Closed-Circuit Television Camera Systems (CCTV) and Real-Time Crime Center (RTCC) surveillance technologies.<sup>2</sup> CB 121052 would expand SPD's placement of CCTV cameras into new areas of the city, while CB 121053 would authorize the integration of footage from the Seattle Department of Transportation's (SDOT) traffic monitoring cameras into SPD's RTCC.<sup>3</sup> SOCR [previously analyzed](#) the proposed pilots of these technologies in 2024. The pilots were authorized by CB 120844 and CB 120845 in 2024, and any expansion of these pilots is subject to the requirements of Seattle's Surveillance Ordinance [125376](#). This ordinance states that surveillance technologies should be carefully evaluated to balance potential criminal legal system benefits with strong protections for civil rights and liberties and safeguards against disparate impacts on racially and socioeconomically marginalized communities.<sup>4</sup>

Based on our analysis of scientific research evidence and the broader implications for civil rights, civil liberties, and equity, SOCR advises against the adoption of CB 121052 and CB 121053. Research has not demonstrated that surveillance technologies reduce "persistent felony crimes," "serious and violent crimes," or "gun violence and human trafficking." The categories of crime these tools are said to address are described inconsistently and ambiguously in the proposed bills, 2025 Executive Overviews, and the 2025 Surveillance Impact Reports (SIRs).<sup>5</sup> In contrast, a significant literature in law as well as the social and behavioral sciences shows that surveillance technologies can discourage civic engagement, weaken constitutional protections, and reinforce inequitable

<sup>1</sup> Excellent research support was provided by Jaclyn Tsiang, Damon Agnos, and Daisy Jaimez.

<sup>2</sup> CCTV consists of cameras placed in public to both record and provide a constant live feed to SPD. RTCC is software that enables SPD to collect all its information streams (e.g. CCTV feeds, dispatch and officer location info, 911 calls, Automated License Plate Reader data, records management systems) into one program.

<sup>3</sup> The [2024 legislation](#) limited the deployment of CCTV cameras to locations in the [Crime Prevention Technology pilot project](#): Aurora Avenue North, downtown in areas along and adjacent to the Third Avenue corridor, and the Chinatown International District. The three proposed locations where CCTV cameras will be added under the [2025 legislation](#) are the Stadium District, the area around Garfield High School, and the Capitol Hill Nightlife District. While the [2024 legislation](#) approved the integration of the CCTV cameras data into SPD's RTCC, the proposed [2025 legislation](#) seeks approval to integrate surveillance data from [SDOT's traffic management cameras](#).

<sup>4</sup> To help encourage transparency and accountability, this ordinance not only requires Seattle City Council oversight but also the preparation of a Surveillance Impact Report (SIR) by any city department seeking to acquire and deploy surveillance technology. The full set of expectations established for an SIR are outlined in [Ordinance 125376](#).

<sup>5</sup> For CB 121052, SPD submitted the following supporting materials: [2025 SIR Executive Overview for CCTV](#) and [2025 SIR for CCTV](#). For CB 121053, SPD submitted the following supporting materials: [2025 SIR Executive Overview for RTCC](#) and [2025 SIR for RTCC](#).

patterns of policing, monitoring, and enforcement.<sup>6</sup> These harms disproportionately affect communities that are Black, Indigenous, People of Color, low-income, disabled, and 2SLGBTQ+.<sup>7</sup> SOCR's concerns are heightened by the national context, where local surveillance infrastructures that were originally justified in the name of safety, are leveraged by federal agencies in ways that undermine local autonomy, civil rights and liberties, and equity.<sup>8</sup>

Rather than expanding unproven surveillance technologies, SOCR recommends a five-part strategy that includes investing in community-based alternatives and service providers to work alongside SPD and mitigate capacity challenges; robust community engagement that includes revitalizing the Seattle [Community Surveillance Working Group](#) (CSWG) to support public awareness of the risks, costs, and scope of surveillance technologies; narrowing CCTV usage and data retention to specified felony crimes; collaborative oversight and evaluation by SOCR and scholars without conflicts of interest; and mandating that pilots are defined by clear goals, terminology, and measurable outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

## RESEARCH FINDINGS: SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY & EFFICACY

As described by SPD in the Executive Overviews and SIRs, the purpose of investing in CCTV and RTCC technologies is to offset police operational issues (e.g., limited staff capacity) and enhance police effectiveness (e.g., reduction in 911 calls, improved police response times, crime clearance rates, community satisfaction) by reducing the interchangeably referenced “persistent felony crimes,” “serious and violent crimes,” and/or “gun violence and human trafficking.”<sup>10</sup> While the materials submitted by SPD state that efforts to prevent serious felony crimes have been unsuccessful, SPD's dashboard indicates violent crime citywide has dropped by 17% in 2025 compared to 2022, shootings are down 36%, and homicides are down 48%.<sup>11</sup> SPD's dashboard also indicates violent crime in the three areas identified for CCTV expansion has declined by 21% since 2022, calling into question the necessity of expanding surveillance.<sup>12</sup>

Reliance on surveillance technologies, in particular CCTV, warrants careful evaluation. While CCTV collects and generates large volumes of data, this data cannot be equated with improvements in staffing capacity, community trust, or public safety.<sup>13</sup> SPD identifies staffing capacity shortages as the central operational issue for safety and police effectiveness. However, surveillance technologies will not resolve this issue. As recently as 2020, SPD acknowledged that “up to 45% of SPD patrol service hours do not require an officer” and that there are “multiple

<sup>6</sup> [Michener 2013](#), [Shamas and Arastu 2013](#), [Friedman and Ponomarenko 2015](#), [Harcourt 2015](#), [Joh 2017](#), [Brayne 2017](#), [Soss and Weaver 2017](#), [Eubanks 2018](#), [Arnett 2020](#), [Moy 2021](#).

<sup>7</sup> [Michener and Ford 2023](#) (racism, surveillance, and racialized policing), [Gaynor and Blessett 2021](#) and [Girardi 2021](#) (policing and 2SLGBTQ+ communities), [Morgan 2021](#) and [Thompson 2021](#) (disabled communities and policing).

<sup>8</sup> Examples are numerous and include President Trump's [deployment of National Guard troops to Los Angeles](#) as well as his previous [deployment of Department of Homeland Security agents](#) to interrogate Portland #BlackLivesMatter protesters.

<sup>9</sup> On the CSWG's website, it appears that the last meeting occurred in [April 2025](#). The [Surveillance Ordinance](#) tasks the CSWG with providing a privacy and civil liberties impact assessment for each SIR that reviews any impacts on civil rights and liberties as well as disparate consequences for communities of color and marginalized communities. The CSWG authored a thorough assessment for the initial 2024 SIR on the CCTV and RTCC technologies. See [Seattle Municipal Code 14.18.080](#) and [this article by René J. Peters Jr.](#), who served on the CSWG. As for the recommendation to partner with scholars, some of the most respected researchers include Dr. Ruha Benjamin, Ph.D., Tracey L. Meares, J.D., Dr. Joe Soss, Ph.D., Dr. Vesla Weaver, Ph.D., Dr. Amy Lerman, Ph.D., Dr. Spencer Piston, Ph.D., Dr. Monica C. Bell, Ph.D./J.D.

<sup>10</sup> For CB 121052, SPD submitted the following supporting materials: [2025 SIR Executive Overview for CCTV](#) and [2025 SIR for CCTV](#). For CB 121053, SPD submitted the following supporting materials: [2025 SIR Executive Overview for RTCC](#) and [2025 SIR for RTCC](#).

<sup>11</sup> Crime data was analyzed for January – August 2025 and compared against the same timeframe in 2022, when violent crime hit a 30-year peak. Data was pulled from [SPD's Crime Dashboard](#) on September 2nd, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> The three proposed locations where CCTV cameras will be added are the Stadium District (K2), the area around Garfield High School (G2) and the Capitol Hill Nightlife District (E3). Data on violent crime was pulled from SPD's Crime Dashboard and analyzed using geographic boundaries of the corresponding Seattle Police Beats.

<sup>13</sup> Researchers consistently find that the efficacy of these surveillance technologies is inconclusive: [Piza et al. 2019](#), [Taylor 2010](#), [Cameron et al. 2008](#), [King et al. 2008](#), [Farrington et al. 2007](#), [Gill and Spriggs 2005](#).

areas of service that would be better responded to by parties other than a sworn officer.”<sup>14</sup> Given this data, the most appropriate response to mitigating operational issues of staffing is to establish greater role clarity. Police should focus on duties aligned with their training while behavioral health specialists, social workers, and service providers should respond to issues related to health crises, displacement and homelessness, and poverty. Realigning responsibilities would directly strengthen SPD’s operational capacity and effectiveness.

Scientific and peer-reviewed research further underscore the limits of CCTV and RTCCs. The peer-reviewed literature in law, social science, and behavioral science does not support claims that these surveillance technologies reduce “persistent felony crimes,” “serious and violent crimes,” and/or “gun violence and human trafficking.”<sup>15</sup> The most persistent finding is that the evidence is, at best, inconclusive.<sup>16</sup> For example, criminologists evaluated 40 years of evidence and found that CCTV may reduce parking lot crime when this technology is supplemented by security guards, signage, and improvements in visibility by way of lighting.<sup>17</sup> Crucially, these scholars emphasize CCTV’s measurable impact is limited to vehicle and property crimes, with modest overall effects and no significant reduction in violent crime.

Further, the scientific and peer-reviewed evidence on RTCCs remains limited. Researchers note that “little is known about their efficacy,” and there are no nationally representative studies to date.<sup>18</sup> Of the limited peer-reviewed evaluations conducted, the findings suggest that effectiveness depends heavily on the presence of skilled analysts, efficient workflows, strong detective training, robust police-community trust and relationships, and strong forensic support staff.<sup>19</sup> In other words, RTCCs do not solve staffing capacity issues and may worsen these issues by adding new technical demands. Moreover, even when RTCCs function with this fleet of support, the benefits of the technology are retrospective: RTCCs may support investigations and case clearance, particularly for property crimes, but there is no established causal relationship between RTCCs and reduction in “persistent felony crimes,” “serious and violent crimes,” and/or “gun violence and human trafficking.”<sup>20</sup> Given the above, SOCR concludes that investing in role alignment and community relationships are more effective pathways to safety than expanding surveillance technologies that are resource-intensive, misaligned with SPD’s stated operational challenges, and not backed by evidence.

## **COSTS OF SURVEILLANCE: CIVIL LIBERTIES, RIGHTS, AND EQUITY**

A substantial body of scientific and peer-reviewed research documents the far-reaching costs of surveillance, particularly for civil rights, civil liberties, and equity. These costs include legal estrangement, diminished civic

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<sup>14</sup> The 2020 data is the most recent that we have been able to access, see [SPD Budget Change Decision Points](#).

<sup>15</sup> The effectiveness of these technologies must be demonstrated with rigorous experimental research methods that rule out confounding variables. In criminology specifically, randomized controlled experiments are the gold standard for evaluating the causal effects of criminal legal system technologies, programs, and practices. However, as [Piza et al. 2019](#) notes, “randomized controlled experiments are a rarity in the study of CCTV.”

<sup>16</sup> Researchers consistently find that the efficacy of these surveillance technologies is inconclusive: [Piza et al. 2019](#), [Taylor 2010](#), [Cameron et al. 2008](#), [King et al. 2008](#), [Farrington et al. 2007](#), [Gill and Spriggs 2005](#).

<sup>17</sup> SPD’s 2025 SIR for CCTV also cites [this study](#) but neglects to present its findings in the same qualified manner as the authors. For example, the authors state “of particular salience is the continued need for CCTV to be narrowly targeted on vehicle crimes and property crimes” and they specify that the “16% reduction in crime” is statistically significant but modest overall because this finding was driven by a “51% reduction in crime in the car park schemes with CCTV in other settings have small and non-significant effects on crime.” It is noteworthy that this research article examines CCTV globally and this further suggests the tenuous link between the installation of surveillance technologies and the deterrence of crime. As the authors write in their analysis of the data, “CCTV was associated with significant reductions in vehicle crime and property crime in general, with no significant effects observed for violent crime.”

<sup>18</sup> [Arietti 2024](#).

<sup>19</sup> [Przeszlowski et al. 2023](#), [Hollywood et al. 2019](#), [Braga and Dusseault 2016](#), [Carter and Carter 2015](#), [Brunson and Wade 2019](#).

<sup>20</sup> [Arietti 2024](#) and [Przeszlowski et al. 2023](#) observe that use of surveillance technologies “may not be the most beneficial way forward for incidents involving violence” particularly against women or populations that tend to experience disproportionate gendered violence (e.g., murder, rape, and human trafficking).

engagement, adverse health, barriers to employment and suppressed wage growth, obstacles to accessing vital social services, disruption of family and community connections, and the erosion of fundamental civil rights and liberties.<sup>21</sup> Beyond these harms, surveillance deployed by police communicates powerful societal messages, teaching “lessons on who is a citizen deserving of fairness and justice and who constitutes a group of dangerous *others* deserving of severe punishment, monitoring, and virtual branding.”<sup>22</sup>

For communities who are overrepresented in police stops, arrests, and use-of-force incidents, living under conditions of surveillance technology intensifies the stigma and harms of criminalization.<sup>23</sup> Consider, for example, the proposed addition of CCTV around Garfield High School. These cameras may send a clear signal to young people in the area, particularly given SPD’s documented racial disparities in use-of-force against Black youth, that they are suspects rather than community members.<sup>24</sup> SOCR is similarly concerned about the potential of surveillance technologies to discourage individuals who are low-income, unhoused, or disabled from seeking essential services. Moreover, the harms extend beyond individuals as entire neighborhoods will be marked as dangerous zones that need to be policed and surveilled closely.<sup>25</sup> It is worth considering the impact this will have on 2SLGBTQ+ communities in Capitol Hill, who are already contending with heightened exclusion locally and nationally.<sup>26</sup> The stigma produced by expanded surveillance technologies will compound economic disinvestment, reinforce segregation, and increase distrust between communities and local government.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to weighing racial and socioeconomic inequities, it is important to consider how these technologies will affect civil rights and liberties. CCTV and RTCC technologies are not neutral instruments, as they carry direct consequences for equal protection, privacy, and the freedoms of speech and association. When these surveillance systems are disproportionately deployed in neighborhoods where communities who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color, low-income, disabled, and 2SLGBTQ+ live, work, and gather, the result is a policy feedback loop that stigmatizes these communities as “concentrated crime” areas.<sup>28</sup> This outcome, in which racially and socioeconomically marginalized communities are subject to far greater surveillance than predominately White or affluent communities, raises serious civil rights and liberties concerns.

Specifically, the disparate monitoring and surveillance of some people but not others may constitute a violation of equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. CCTV and RTCC infrastructure also risk undermining privacy rights protected by the Fourth Amendment and/or Article 1, Section 7 of the Washington Constitution, as

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<sup>21</sup> [Bell 2017](#) (legal estrangement), [Michener 2013](#) (diminished civic engagement), [Theall et al. 2022](#) and [Sewell et al. 2016](#) (adverse health effects), [Asad 2023](#) (barriers to employment and suppressed earnings), [Madden et al. 2017](#) (obstacles to accessing vital social services), [Roberts 2012](#) (disruption of family and community connections), [Shamas and Arastu 2013](#) (erosion of fundamental civil rights and liberties). Additionally, legal scholars have identified four specific ways that surveillance technologies exacerbate inequity: it perpetuates and obscures inequities in policing, relocates disparities from other domains to law enforcement, amplifies the harms of inequitable policing, and undermines efforts to monitor and address these injustices. [Friedman and Ponomarenko 2015](#), [Harcourt 2015](#), [Joh 2017](#), [Eubanks 2018](#), [Moy 2021](#).

<sup>22</sup> [Soss and Weaver 2017](#).

<sup>23</sup> [Lerman and Weaver 2014](#), [Soss and Weaver 2017](#), [Gaynor 2018](#), [Boddie 2022](#).

<sup>24</sup> [The Science of Justice: Seattle Police Department](#) is a 2021 report on SPD use of force that identified the greatest racial disparities among young people ages 15 – 21. Of 563 incidents involving SPD use of force between 2014 – 2019, an overwhelming 59% of young people were Black American.

<sup>25</sup> Spatial analysis data indicates that the current and proposed CCTV cameras cover areas where Black, Indigenous, People of Color, low-income, disabled, and 2SLGBTQ+ communities tend to live, work, and congregate. These areas are in census tracts made up of populations who are on average 49% people of color, 26% making an income below 200% of the poverty level, and 17% living with a disability. See Seattle’s [Race and Social Equity Index](#). Additionally, the current and proposed camera locations are concentrated on arterial streets where vulnerable populations are more likely to be present because they rent, use transit, or lack private public space for rest and recreation.

<sup>26</sup> Examples of this exclusion include [a spate of executive orders targeting Trans people](#), book bans [targeting LGBTQ representation](#), bias incidents against [individuals](#) and [businesses/community spaces](#), [prohibitions on gender-affirming care](#), and, most recently, a US Senator [declaring that a CDC official should have been disqualified from government service because of his “lifestyle.”](#)

<sup>27</sup> [Capers 2011](#), [Justice and Meares 2014](#), [Soss and Weaver 2017](#).

<sup>28</sup> See [2025 SIR Executive Overview for CCTV](#) and [2025 SIR for CCTV](#).



these technologies systematically collect, store, and interconnect vast amounts of sensitive information about the everyday lives of people in Seattle.<sup>29</sup> Further, the knowledge that people’s activities are continuously monitored and tracked by law enforcement will have a chilling effect on the exercise of First Amendment rights to speech and association. It is crucial to underscore these concerns amid the broader national context of alarming federal overreach. Currently, the federal official appointed by the Trump Administration as the District of Columbia’s “emergency police commissioner” can access that city’s RTCC infrastructure for “federal purposes.”<sup>30</sup> Any proposal to rely on law or the judiciary to constrain federal authorities must also account for the Administration’s extraordinary success rate at the United States Supreme Court.<sup>31</sup> Cumulatively, these risks require careful assessment, oversight, and safeguards before further deployment of surveillance technologies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

CB 121052 and CB 121053 would significantly expand surveillance technologies that remain in pilot stages and pose serious civil rights, civil liberties, and equity implications. SOCR offers the following community-centered recommendations for promoting safety, transparency, racial and socioeconomic equity, and the protection of civil rights and liberties:

- Prioritize community-based alternatives and social service provision.
  - Evidence shows that investments in community organizations and relationships can reduce crime more effectively than unproven surveillance technologies.<sup>32</sup>
  - Cities like Nashville, Austin, and Denver have chosen to move away from similar surveillance technologies due to the risk of federal co-opting of data and the undercutting of essential civil rights and liberties.<sup>33</sup>
  - Invest in recruiting and retaining service providers, behavioral health specialists, and social workers to reduce reliance on police for non-criminal and crisis-related issues.<sup>34</sup> This will not only mitigate the root causes of harm but also support police operational capacity by allowing officers to focus on issues that align with their skills and training.<sup>35</sup>
- Institute pilots with conceptual clarity and precise provisions tied to measurable outcomes.
  - Pilots must be grounded in consistent and precise terminology to allow for fair evaluation. Currently, the terms in CB 121052 and CB 121053, the 2025 Executive Overviews, and the 2025 SIRs are used ambiguously and interchangeably. They range from “persistent felony crimes” to “serious and violent crimes” to “other persistent crimes” to “gun violence and human trafficking.” Without conceptual clarity, evaluation becomes arbitrary, and accountability is impossible.

<sup>29</sup> [United States Constitution](#) and [Article I, Section 7 of the Washington State Constitution](#).

<sup>30</sup> [Davidson 2025](#).

<sup>31</sup> [Sheth and Whisnant 2025](#).

<sup>32</sup> [Ramey and Shrider 2014](#)’s research analyzing the City of Seattle’s Neighborhood Matching Fund identified significant reductions in violent crime as a result of the program. Other research has shown that the presence of libraries and the increase in library operating hours reduces crime rates (including homicides and aggravated assaults). [Neto et al. 2021](#).

<sup>33</sup> [Nashville](#) voted against implementing a similar Real-Time Crime Center in 2024, citing concerns about privacy and potential federal misuse of footage. In May and June 2025, [Austin](#) and [Denver](#) paused their automated license plate reader contracts amid immigration-related privacy concerns. [Other jurisdictions](#), including Oakland, CA, and Somerville, MA, have also passed similar ordinances.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Street (CAHOOTS), an alternative response program in Eugene, OR, that ran from 1989 to 2025, spurred similar pilot programs in other cities. [Bell 2021](#). Similarly, in 2020, the City of Albuquerque created the [Albuquerque Community Safety department](#) which includes “trained professionals such as social workers, housing and homelessness specialists, violence prevention and diversion program experts.”

<sup>35</sup> Continued investment in and more autonomy for Seattle’s Community Assisted Response and Engagement (CARE) department will further support the ability “[to safely assist community members](#) in need and free up scarce police resources for higher priority calls.”



- Continuation and/or expansion of any pilot should depend on data and evaluation.
- A concrete timeline and exit strategy must be in place to ensure technologies are discontinued if they fail to achieve defined goals.
- Limit CCTV use and data retention to protect civil rights and liberties.
  - Footage should be restricted to investigating serious violent offenses [as defined in the RCW](#).
  - Data retention should be capped at 7-14 days to protect the people of Seattle, especially those who are exceptionally vulnerable such as individuals seeking gender-affirming care, reproductive care, housing services and resources, or immigration support.<sup>36</sup>
  - Use of data should be transparently reported not only to the Office of Inspector General (OIG) and Office of Police Accountability (OPA) but also to SOCR, the CSWG, and the public.
- Ensure robust community engagement before, during, and after any surveillance adoption.
  - The technologies under consideration are complex, interconnected, and linked to other surveillance methods such as Automated License Plate Readers (ALPRs). The current City of Seattle publicly accessible materials on these technologies do not adequately explain the risks, costs, or potential scope.
  - The people of Seattle deserve clarity on what information can be recorded, how it may be aggregated, and the full range of possible uses. They also deserve clarity on how the City plans to protect data from federal overreach. This could include destruction of data when federal overreach appears likely.
  - Reports on data usage and access should be publicly accessible, written in plain language, and provided and updated monthly.<sup>37</sup>
  - While limited engagement occurred around gun violence prevention near the Garfield High School area, broader and more inclusive consultation is needed. This is especially true with residents, service providers, and others who frequent the areas affected.
  - Feedback should be gathered widely and assessed if additional surveillance changes the willingness of people to exercise their rights, access public places, and seek services and resources.
- Establish mandatory oversight and independent evaluation.
  - Any material updates should undergo the full Surveillance Impact Report Review process, including meaningful public awareness and engagement, application of the Racial Equity Toolkit, and review by the CSWG. Strengthening the CSWG and oversight generally by identifying best practices in other cities should also be explored.<sup>38</sup>
  - Pilot evaluations should be conducted by SOCR in collaboration with research scholars who have demonstrated expertise in technology, civil rights and liberties, and racial and socioeconomic equity.

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<sup>36</sup> The CSWG recommended limiting data retention of CCTV recordings to 14 days in their [Privacy and Civil Liberties Assessment on CCTV and RTCC](#). Given increased federal data seizures, SPD should consider limiting data retention even further.

<sup>37</sup> See the City of Seattle's Executive Order, "[Making Information Inclusive in Writing and Design](#)." Examples of data that should be made available include: a map of where cameras are located; how many active cameras, both public and privately owned, are registered, integrated, or connected to the RTCC; make and model information of all cameras; how many individuals have access to data; information on RTCC searches not connected to an investigation; and external requests for footage access.

<sup>38</sup> The Oakland Privacy Advisory Commission might provide a valuable example.