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San Francisco Chief Clears The Air On Camera Ban

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California - After footage captured by a helmet-mounted camera showed San Francisco firefighters running over and killing a victim of a July plane crash, the department announced a ban on such cameras at fire scenes. But the move was just a reinforcement of an existing policy that already prohibited their use, according the Chief Joanne Hayes-White.

"[The move] was part of overall restriction on any recording devices in the workplace that was issued in July 2009," she said, adding that she is working on including specific language related to helmet cameras.

Video from Bttn. Chief Mark Johnson's helmet camera showed a fire truck running over 16-year-old Ye Meng Yuan, who was on the ground following the crash. Johnson had not been told of Yuan's whereabouts or condition while directing the truck, according to the Associated Press. The discovery of the footage led Hayes-White to reiterate the ban on cameras as stated in a 2009 department order.

San Francisco firefighters were part of the response to the Asiana Airlines Flight 214 plane crash on July 6. The Boeing 777's landing gear slammed into a seawall around the airport, leading to a fire, the ejection of flight attendants and a passenger evacuation. Approximately 307 passengers and crew walked away from the crash with minor wounds and two died, which included Yuan.

The chief cited patient privacy as part of the ban on cameras on at an incident. She said as public servants, it is up to each firefighter to be vigilant about protecting privacy rights of members and the public.

As a healthcare provider of first-responder EMS, the San Francisco Fire Department also is bound by the Federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) (45 CFR §164) and similar state law, the California Confidentiality of Medical Information Act (CoMIA) (California Civil Code §56.20).

"Healthcare providers are obligated to protect patient privacy, safeguard patient information, and use and disclose patient information appropriately," Hayes-White said. "Although modern technology is embraced by this department, there are times when it can be a violation of an individual's privacy."

Haynes-White said the San Francisco Fire Department is still reviewing its policy regarding recording devices in the workplace and is seeking input from other departments related to the important topic.

Written by Mary Rose Roberts

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