Body-worn cameras are fast becoming the standard in modern law enforcement, and for good reason: They help serve the cause of justice. This month, after years of real-world testing and tactical refinement, the Riverside County Sheriff’s Department announced plans to use the cameras in all county patrol operations.

The department, which already has about 400 cameras in use, will phase in another 1,000 when funding is available to purchase the devices, staff is trained to use them and proper storage to capture the footage is in place. To help defray the cost, the Sheriff’s Department is seeking a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice.

The value of the cameras is clear after years of field testing in Riverside County. The Sheriff’s Department has tested various iterations of the devices since 2008, and began systematically assessing the cameras in early 2013. This March, in an extension of previous testing, the department launched a body-camera pilot program at its Jurupa Valley station.

From the start, the cameras proved popular. The pilot program allowed officers to “opt in” and voluntarily wear the devices. Of the 142 community service officers, deputies, corporals and sergeants assigned to patrol in Jurupa Valley, 139 requested and received the cameras – a voluntary participation rate of 98 percent.

And while the department initially invited only uniformed personnel to sample the devices, all 12 of the station’s detectives also wore cameras after asking the department to include them in the program.

The public has embraced the cameras as well. Residents recognize the value of two-way accountability provided by the video: If an interaction goes awry, officers and citizens alike must answer to the recording. And members of the community often show positive interest in and ask questions about the cameras, which are clearly visible on deputies’ uniforms.

Additional advantages and benefits of the cameras include:
• They promote transparency and accountability, two longstanding core values of the Sheriff’s Department.

• They promote and portray officer professionalism and enhance the credibility of law enforcement at a time when questions about officers’ actions in cities across the nation have recently headlined national news.

• They increase residents’ trust in law enforcement, enhance community policing and strengthen relationships between the public and the Sheriff’s Department.

• They put all parties on their best – or at least better – behavior and help de-escalate tense encounters, in turn enhancing both officer safety and public safety. During the recent testing phase, formal personnel complaints against sheriff’s deputies at the Jurupa Valley station dropped by 30 percent.

• They discourage frivolous lawsuits, which helps protect county taxpayers from often large and unnecessary costs.

• They offer one objective angle on the truth, and their footage can assist the district attorney’s office with determining whether or not to prosecute and case resolution. In a world where cameras, from cellphones to security systems to traffic cams, are virtually everywhere, an additional perspective from officers’ uniforms can only help get an accurate read on what happened.

Despite all of that upside, it bears noting that body cameras are no panacea. Clip-on cameras do not always capture an entire incident, get the best angle of a struggle, conclusively settle a dispute or show every relevant step in a chain of events. They don’t eliminate human error. And they cannot offer a bulwark against every spurious claim an aggrieved person might file.

The department has, however, taken a series of steps to maximize the cameras’ utility and effectiveness. During the Jurupa Valley testing program, managers received feedback from those voluntarily wearing the devices. This input helped the department work with the manufacturer to optimize the equipment; develop consistent, department-wide standard operating procedures for the devices; and assess issues related to data storage and retrieval. At the same time, the department exhaustively researched lessons learned from other law enforcement agencies to compare notes and gather best practices.
Given this groundwork – along with staff and public support, the clear benefits of the cameras and recent advances in camera technology – now is the time for the Sheriff’s Department to move forward with broader use of body-worn cameras.

There is no reason for Riverside County to wait in expanding this tangible public safety improvement.

*Stan Sniff is the sheriff of Riverside County.*