

JUST CAUSE LAW COLLECTIVE

Effective Camera Work for Legal Observers

Camera and Battery Care: Turning your video camera off and removing the battery will keep your batteries going a lot longer than having the camera on standby or turned off with the battery still attached. Carry lens paper and clean your lens frequently.

Date/Time Stamping: Make sure to keep your video camera's date/time stamping function on at all times. Before you begin recording, check to make sure that the date and time are correct. If you are using audiotape or a video camera without date/time stamping, narrate the information at the beginning and end of logical segments: "It's now 9:30 a.m. on Monday, August 14, 2000...it's now 9:45 a.m. on Monday, August 14, 2000."

Lead Time: Allow one minute to run at the beginning of a new tape before you start recording. The tape at the very beginning and end of your cassette will have more imperfections, more sound and color irregularities. If you are near the end of your tape, and you like what you are recording, insert a new tape.

Frame and Establish: When you begin shooting each event, make sure to include street signs, building addresses and other landmarks, to prove your location. Take some shots of your partner, to show just where you were standing. Take shots of landmarks and pan from them, or zoom in, to the action. In addition to zooming in for details such as an officer's badge number, narrate the information onto audio as insurance. Videographers should also take a good, long shot—ten seconds or more—for each important scene. Being mobile is important, but you may want to make friends with a neighbor or storeowner whose second-story window is a terrific vantage point.

Discretion And Courtesy: There are some things you simply should not tape. Be clear about which actions and situations are meant for the record and which might better be left undocumented. Announce to everyone that you have a camera and would like to start taping. When in doubt, ask. Don't take it personally if people are suspicious or hostile.

Audio: Even in the absence of a decent shot, the audio portion of your videotape may provide the very evidence needed to win a case. Don't stop your video camera just because you can't see well enough.

Labeling: Label your tape cassettes or film cartridges while you're in the field. Include the names of both legal observers, indicating who was the cameraperson. Include the date, times and locations. Number each tape or cartridge consecutively.

(This section is excerpted and edited from an article by Whispered Media, whose website is: <http://www.whisperedmedia.org>. For a wealth of instructive material, see the Video Activist Network's resource list: <http://www.videoactivism.org/resources.html>.)