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Before the New York State Assembly
Standing Committee on Consumer Affairs and Protection
Standing Committee on Governmental Operations
Standing Committee on Local Governments

Public Hearing on Automatic License Plate Reader Systems
Examining automatic license plate reader data collection and usage in New York State
Monday, November 9, 2026

Introduction

Chair Rozic, Chair McDonald, Chair Solages, and members of the Committees, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Our research finds that law enforcement leaders and the public agree on more than the current debate suggests. The safeguards that protect New Yorkers' data fall into three areas: clear rules on how the technology and its data are used, verification the public can trust, and measurement of what the technology delivers.

The National Policing Institute (NPI) is an independent, nonpartisan, and nonprofit research and advisory organization committed to addressing policing's most complex challenges through evidence-informed, innovative solutions. Since 1970, we have partnered with law enforcement agencies, leaders, and communities to advance policing through research, innovation, and agency support.

Law enforcement agencies have used automated license plate readers (ALPRs) for two decades to find stolen cars, missing people, and suspects in violent crimes. ALPRs are not limited to policing. Based on NPI's own observations and open-source reporting, other government entities, corporations and businesses, and private associations and groups also operate their own ALPRs and collect license plate data. These cameras and networks have become a source of additional information and can act as an extension of law enforcement-operated systems, yet they fall outside the rules that govern police use. The broader use of ALPRs is something that the Committees should be aware of, given their consumer protection focus.

In 2026, public concern about the security of ALPR technology and data, misuse, data sharing, and oversight led communities, law enforcement leaders, and elected leaders across the country to end, pause, or place further controls on their programs.

This testimony draws on two recently published NPI reports. The first is *What the Public Thinks About License Plate Readers*, an independent national survey of 1,435 U.S. adults conducted in September 2026. The second is *Safeguards First*, which reports on two NPI convenings in September 2026 with leaders from 21 law enforcement agencies, ranging from small towns to large cities, counties, and a state agency. NPI funded both studies independently.

What the public told us

The public is divided, and many people hold strong views. In our survey, 54.4% of respondents opposed law enforcement use of ALPRs in their community and 34.6% supported it. More than a third (34.0%) were strongly opposed, and 10.3% were strongly supportive.

Yet most people do not want these programs ended. Asked what their own agency should do, 60.4% said keep the program: 44.8% with new restrictions and 15.6% as it is. Only 33.2% said end it. In total, 78.0% want something about the status quo to change.

Use cases matter most. Acceptance depends on what the cameras are used for. 88.3% of respondents said it is acceptable to use ALPRs to find missing or abducted children, 83.6% to investigate violent crimes, and 81.0% to recover stolen vehicles. Acceptance falls to 26.4% for immigration enforcement, 25.8% for routine traffic or parking enforcement, 22.0% for general monitoring to prevent crime, and 17.7% for monitoring protests or political gatherings. That 70.6-point spread is nearly twice the gap between the most and least opposed political groups.

Immigration enforcement is the most divisive use we tested. Only 2.3% of very liberal respondents found it acceptable, compared with 69.2% of very conservative respondents. Concern about data reaching U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement differed by 71.6 points between very liberal and conservative respondents, the largest gap on any item in the survey.

Safeguards would move support. Asked to choose up to three safeguards that would most increase their confidence, respondents chose independent audits by an entity outside the department (41.8%), a documented case number and reason for every search (36.1%), and regular public reports on how the data were used (34.2%). 57.5% said their support would rise if their agency adopted the safeguards they chose.

The public wants short retention. Asked how long to keep plate data on vehicles not connected to a crime, respondents answered in days, not months. The single most common answer was that this data should not be collected at all (21.3%). Among those who chose a retention period, the most common was deletion within 24 hours (19.7%), followed by up to 30 days (about 17%) and up to 7 days (about 16%). In total, 53.2% chose 30 days or less. Support drops sharply after that: about 9% chose up to 90 days, about 8% up to one year, and 3.7% longer than a year. Support for retention of 30 days or less partly aligns with law enforcement views discussed later in this testimony.

Support for safeguards is not partisan. Opposition to ALPRs exceeds 40% in every political group large enough to report. Yet 14 of 16 demographic and political groups chose the same top three safeguards.

What law enforcement leaders told us about safeguards

Leaders are already adopting some of the safeguards the public asked for, and some that go further. Most of the leaders we heard from already require documentation of searches, and many publish usage data through dashboards or transparency portals. Our convenings of law enforcement leaders pointed to two kinds of safeguards: clear rules set in advance, and verification that the rules are followed.

Rules

Retention. Leaders and the public are closer on retention than the debate suggests. Most leaders said keeping data for 21 to 30 days meets investigative needs, and several with longer periods said they could shorten them without major impacts. They explained why they need that window. Many crimes are discovered late, reports can take a week or more to reach a detective, and leads sometimes surface 10 or more days into a case. Leaders resisted proposals as short as seven days or 48 hours. The leaders' 21-to-30-day window falls within what 53.2% of the public chose, although about a third of respondents preferred a week or less.

Leaders also offered middle-ground options. One is a short default period, with older data held in a secure archive searchable only with supervisor approval or a warrant. Another is greater reliance on forward-looking alerts for vehicles already of interest, rather than searches of past movements. Leaders noted that vendor defaults and legal requirements do not always align. In some states, public records rules may require keeping data longer than the vendor's default.

Access and use. Leaders are limiting who inside the agency can search the data. Some route patrol requests through a real-time crime center. One agency cut the number of users who could search by nearly two-thirds, removing access for hundreds of people. Others have removed search access from senior command staff and from the people who conduct internal audits, so no one audits their own work. Some require a written statement of the facts behind each search, not only a drop-down reason code. Some treat misuse as a crime where state law allows and terminate employees who misuse the system. Leaders also described steps to reduce errors, such as auditing hot lists daily and requiring officers to confirm a hit before acting.

Sharing. Data that leaves an agency should remain subject to that agency's policies. Leaders are ending sharing with agencies that hold federal immigration enforcement agreements. Some share only within the state, or only under a written agreement for a specific case. Several reviewed the list of outside agencies with access after learning their data was shared without their knowledge.

Contracts. Leaders are using vendor contracts to address data ownership and to ban resale, along with sharing limits and vendor support obligations. Our report recommends setting retention periods based on evidence of investigative need rather than a vendor's default. When an agency switches vendors, it should explain why and make the relevant contract terms public.

Verification

Independent audits. Independent audits were the public's top choice, and leaders described a range of options. These run from internal audits with separated duties, to peer review by another agency, to review by a city auditor or inspector general, to a fully independent and experienced reviewing organization. More distance from the agency adds credibility but requires more coordination.

Whatever the choice, four elements matter:

1. An agreed definition of misuse.
2. Auditor access to complete search logs.
3. Findings published in summary form.

4. Discipline that remains with the appointing authority under existing personnel law.

Independent audits do not need to decide who misused the system. They need only to identify activity that merits further review, which the agency then investigates. Audits can also examine sharing practices and whether the agency follows its own policy.

Transparency. The public should be able to see what data is collected, how long it is kept, how it is used, and by whom. Leaders are posting contracts, sharing agreements, and camera information in one place, which also reduces the burden of public records requests. Some adjust camera placement when residents raise a specific concern.

A patchwork of rules

Leaders described a growing patchwork of rules. Neighboring cities are adopting different standards, and the state retention limits and proposals they mentioned ranged from minutes to 90 days. Some leaders said they would welcome statewide standards, so that agencies working the same cases follow the same rules.

What we know about effectiveness, and what we don't

Many things can produce public safety benefits. How they are implemented and used makes the most difference. ALPRs are no exception.

The research summarized in *Safeguards First* suggests ALPRs offer more investigative value than deterrent value. For investigations, large-scale deployment may improve clearance rates for auto theft and robbery under some conditions. A fixed reader network covering every entrance and exit to Atlantic City was associated with fewer shootings, motor vehicle thefts, and property crimes. A recent study of fixed ALPR deployment across 216 agencies found an 11% decline in motor vehicle theft and a 15.9% increase in arrest clearance.

The advanced, networked systems now under debate have not been rigorously evaluated, and vendor figures generally count activity rather than measure impact. Leaders told us the same is true inside their agencies. Most report plates read, searches run, and hits received. Few can consistently say across cases whether a plate read produced the lead, whether it shortened an investigation, or which cases would have gone unsolved without it. Researchers observed this gap in 2014, and leaders told us it remains largely true today.

This gap has costs. When programs ended or retention was cut, no one could measure what was lost. Without data on what the technology adds, decisions about it rest on anecdotes from both sides.

Closing the gap requires agencies to record the technology's role in each case, track alert accuracy, agree with elected officials on how success will be measured, and report results and audit findings on a regular schedule, including shortfalls.

Considerations for the Committees

Based on what the public and law enforcement leaders told us, we suggest consideration of three steps.

1. **Statewide standards, developed with input from law enforcement.** As the hearing notice observes, New York currently has no universal minimum standards for ALPR data use and sharing. Common rules on permitted uses, retention, access, sharing, and verification would replace a patchwork that leaders themselves find hard to manage. Agencies working the same cases would follow the same rules, and the public would know what to expect. Including law enforcement in drafting is critical and will help make the standards workable in practice.
2. **State funding that agencies can use for safeguards and for measuring results.** Safeguards cost money, including audits, access controls, and transparency tools. Measuring results also takes investment. Agencies often need new or revised data collection processes, changes to their records management systems, and the ability to analyze and report what they find. Allowing existing and new state funding streams to cover this work would make clear how the technology is used and what it delivers.
3. **Program evaluation.** Agency reporting shows how a tool is used and with what results. Evaluation tests whether it works for a given purpose. The networked systems now in wide use have not been rigorously evaluated. Supporting evaluation would give the Legislature, agencies, and the public evidence to weigh benefits against risks.

The public and the field are closer than the current debate suggests. Clear rules, verification the public can trust, and evidence of results can protect New Yorkers' data while preserving the uses most people support. We would be glad to serve as a resource to the Committees as they consider these questions.

About the National Policing Institute

NPI provides services to state and local governments, including law enforcement agencies. These services include research, assessment, program audits, and implementation support, often funded through grants and through contracts with agencies and private funders, including individual donors and contributors.

Both reports cited here are available at www.policinginstitute.org. The survey used a census-matched online sample weighted to national population estimates. Because the sample was drawn from an opt-in online panel, no conventional margin of error is reported.

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