

**IMPLEMENTING PHYSICAL FITNESS STANDARDS AND TRAINING
IN LAW ENFORCEMENT**

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There is a type of hypocrisy in some police departments dealing with physical fitness. There are fitness qualifications that must be met before an officer is even considered for employment. During police academy training, there are fitness standards a recruit has to pass in order to graduate. After academy however, there rarely are any fitness standards to which an officer is held. The recruit is told how important physical health is and tested accordingly, but a veteran officer does not have to comply with any physical standards.

An officer is usually hired at a fit level, but over time the officer may become complacent as other things in the officer's life begin to take precedence over personal health. It happens slowly and is not recognized until it has an adverse effect on the officer's daily life. With little incentive to correct the problem the officer continues declining in his fitness level because there is no need to make the tremendous effort to improve his health. The department fails to act or to recognize that the officer is slowly becoming less productive and less healthy which can increase risk of sick time, workman's compensation, and possibly safety risks to the officer and his coworkers. A casual look around a police department will reveal the officers who have reached the extremes of this decline in health and fitness levels.

The attention on public sector employee health is commonplace with businesses providing exercise areas and encouraging healthy lifestyles for employees. As reported on the WOAI AM radio website, some companies even go to the extent of charging smokers extra for health insurance in an effort to motivate employees to be healthier (Cornwell). Business owners have determined that healthy employees are more productive and more valuable to the company. Although health and fitness have always

been an important aspect of a police officer's duties, departments nationwide rarely have a plan to encourage fitness among its employees beyond the recruit officer. Police work is usually a relatively sedentary job that does not contribute to general physical fitness. So for an officer to maintain a high level of fitness, he has to exercise on his own. Some assert, regarding police fitness, that "police officers start their careers fresh out of the academy pretty fit. They return to levels of the general population and then below their average counterparts" (Hammerstrom, 2006). Some officers, like much of the public, do some physical activities on their own but unfortunately not the type of activities that contribute to aerobic fitness, a core component needed for the human body. A police officer will receive a tremendous amount of training, but rarely does an officer receive training that focuses on physical fitness, an area that affects the officer and his ability to do his job effectively every day.

A health requirement or standards and physical training should be viewed by the police administration as a necessity. But because of various obstacles, the standards are rarely set or enforced. My goal is to establish:

- a vital need for physical fitness standards and training in a police agency,
- the consequences of standards not set and enforced, and training not given,
- a recommendation for minimum standards and training,
- the overall fitness of police employees and implementations of an ongoing fitness program,
- considerations for a fitness policy.

The Need for Physical Fitness Standards and Training

On almost a daily basis, the news media reports on the decline of health and the growing problem of obesity in the United States population. The medical community seems to feel declining health and obesity in America are epidemic problems (Siong, 2006). Obviously, law enforcement agencies draw from the general population for their employees and there is a danger that soon fewer candidates will be able to meet the physical fitness qualifications for employment. There is little doubt that candidates, who seriously desire to work in law enforcement, will know that physical fitness is a crucial part of the job. These candidates will take the necessary steps to ensure they are physically fit as they prepare to apply for a position in law enforcement. It could be argued that since there are fitness standards in most police departments for applicants, this should not be a problem. The unhealthy or obese candidate would not be hired in the beginning of the hiring process since that candidate would be removed from the list of employable persons. However, if the general population's health is on the decline, this will leave police departments with a smaller pool of potential candidates from an already declining number of employable persons. Another question arises. Once a relatively healthy person is hired as a police officer, what will keep that person healthy as the general population continues to have declining health? He is, after all, encouraged to "super size" his fast food meal like everyone else. Not only does he struggle to find time to eat healthy and ends up eating more processed foods, he also has a hard time making time to exercise in a fast paced world like the rest of the population. Most officers end up working long or odd hours, working less than desirable shifts, opting for overtime to increase their bring home pay, or choosing to work part time jobs to supplement their

income. All of these factors will decrease the chance that the officers will have the desire to engage in an exercise program, not realizing that an exercise program would better equip them to participate in extra duty hours, strange hours, and shift work.

In my experience as a police officer, I personally have seen how easy it is to slip into an unhealthy lifestyle. Not only have I recently realized how little aerobic fitness some officers have but I also have come to realize that after a simple plan is provided and followed, an officer's aerobic fitness can improve dramatically.

Another health concern for police officers is mental health issues such as depression. Many mental health problems could be helped or prevented with fitness standards and training. Police officers are at risk for experiencing stress and depression and little is done in police agencies to deal with stress and depression until they have manifested in some adverse way. Fitness standards and training that have officers committed to an ongoing exercise program can help in preventing stress and depression. In an article in Runner's World concerning depression, Christopher McDougall (2006) comments on a study at Duke University involving run-therapy and depression. He stated, "not only was exercise just as effective as drugs in the short term, it was substantially more effective in the long term" (p. 73).

It appears that the health of the general public is on the decline, and it seems that the health of police officers will correspond with that of the public. So there is a choice to be made. A police agency can sit back and hope the employees will somehow maintain their own health, or the police agency can take some action to try to protect the investment it has made in its employees.

Consequences of Standards Not Set and Enforced and Training Not Given

If a police agency chooses, as stated above, to leave it up to the employee to maintain a certain level of health, there will be consequences to that decision. Most departments do not have any set standards for physical fitness after an officer is hired and graduates the academy (Hammerstrom, 2006).

One consequence to a lack of physical fitness training or standards provided by a department can be legal liability on the part of a police agency. An agency, that does not have fitness standards at the time an officer is first hired, is in danger of being sued for hiring an officer who is not fit for duty. Likewise, an agency that keeps an unfit officer is in danger of being sued for allowing an officer to do a job he is not fit to do. As stated by the Cooper Institute on the Physical Fitness Norms for Law Enforcement website, “an agency can risk litigation by not having tests, standards and programs”. The institute goes on to express that an agency, that does not address the fitness requirements and needs of officers, is susceptible to litigation in the area of negligent hiring, negligent training, negligent supervision, and negligent retention (Cooper Institute, 2006a).

In an interview with Jay Smith, founder of Integrated Fitness Systems, about police fitness he states:

Agencies are afraid they could be held liable for injuries sustained from working out, or be sued for discrimination if they use fitness standards for retention or promotion, but what the administration fails to see is that the department could also be found negligent for keeping an officer or firefighter around who cannot adequately do his or her job. An employer is bound to ensure that their workforce can perform critical and occupational tasks. They are just as liable (Hammerstrom, 2006).

There is already court precedent in the area of retaining an officer who is not fit for duty. In Parker vs. Washington D.C., an officer returned to duty after being released

from light duty following an arm injury. There was no physical training during his light duty assignment or when he returned to full duty. While attempting to make a warrant arrest on a suspect, a physical confrontation ensued, and it ended with the officer shooting and killing the suspect. The department was sued for inadequate training of the officer and the officer's inability to perform his job. The price tag for this inadequate training was just over \$400,000.00

There are other costly consequences to a lack of physical training or standards. A physically unfit officer is more likely to cost the department in injury leave, sick time, and early retirement. A fit officer is much less likely to be injured and is better able to deal with the physical demands that occur in police work. It is common knowledge that the more exercise a person gets, the healthier that person will be. A healthier person will use less sick time, receive fewer injuries, and be able to work longer. Therefore, he will show up more, reducing the time spent on paid leave when another officer would be required to replace him. An officer, who is on light duty, workman's compensation, sick leave, or retires early due to an unhealthy lifestyle, is no benefit to a police department while not on duty. An unfit officer is also a danger to his coworkers, thereby, risking their safety because the unfit officer is less likely to be able to assist if the need arises.

Since a lack of standards and training in the area of physical fitness can be so costly, why do police departments not set standards and provide training in this area? The standards would not be hard to set since there are some departments at the federal, state, and local levels that have already done so. There have been court challenges to physical fitness standards in police departments but a fitness policy that is well written and applied fairly will pass legal scrutiny. The training would not be that costly when compared to

other training that is provided to officers. The concept of getting or staying healthy is not that complicated and could easily be instructed within the police department with properly trained officers. My personal feeling is that most first line officers want physical training and the ability to perform their job better. There are many reasons police administrators fail to create standards and training for fitness. Regardless of what the reasons may be, fitness standards and training are necessary and outweigh the reasons for not setting the standards.

Recommended Standards and Training

A police department cannot arbitrarily set standards for physical fitness. Some research will have to be done first. Similarly, a police department cannot begin to put officers through physical fitness training without some planning. Both standards and training need to be carefully planned, given the fact that there are many employees in varying degrees of fitness and abilities. It is beyond my current skill to organize standards and set out a training program since I have not received any education in this area. The only experience I have is personal experience, personal training, and personal accomplishments that might not apply to others because they may be too demanding for some and too easy for others. Instead, I will describe established training and standards that have been thoroughly researched and tested by others.

For established research in this area I would recommend using The Cooper Institute (www.cooperinst.org) in Dallas, Texas, for training employees as instructors and for setting department standards. In addition, I would recommend that a department refer to other departments' policies for reference when writing its own policy regarding officer

fitness. What you will find when reviewing other departments' policies is that some will base their standards and training on The Cooper Institute's recommendations.

The Cooper Institute, as stated on their website, is an organization that conducts research in epidemiology, exercise physiology, behavior change, hypertension, children's health issues, obesity, nutrition, aging and other health issues and has been doing research since 1970. Papers from The Cooper Institute are among the most frequently cited references in the scientific literature on topics related to physical fitness, physical activity, and health (Cooper Institute, 2006b). It can assist police departments with law enforcement specific training that will enable an employee to evaluate individual physical fitness, to help individual officers with specific training needs and plans, to instruct employees in the areas of physical fitness and nutrition, to assist with setting specific department wide training, and to aid with writing legally defensible policy. Among the many training courses it provides for various employment fields is a certification course for Law Enforcement Fitness Specialist. Also, there are many other courses that are beneficial to a law enforcement instructor. Plus, The Cooper Institute focuses on programs that are scientifically valid and defensible in court.

The testing, programs, and standards taught by The Cooper Institute focus on the following areas of fitness: aerobic capacity, anaerobic power, muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, and body composition (Cooper Institute, 2006a). It is vitally important that all of these areas be considered during department training and when setting standards. The importance of aerobic capacity and muscular endurance are ignored if a person focuses only on muscular strength in a personal exercise program. This is a common error among police officers. In an exercise program focusing on

muscular strength, a person's flexibility and body composition as well as endurance are often ignored. Having above average muscular strength is a good goal, but by ignoring other areas of fitness, the officer could be in danger in the event of an emergency that would require flexibility or endurance. If an officer, who focuses only on muscular strength, has to physically fight a suspect for more than two minutes; the officer's strength is going to fail due to a lack of endurance and aerobic ability. A certified instructor would be able to provide instruction and training plans that would explain why total fitness is important and to show an officer how to properly improve his overall fitness. It is important to note that all of the areas listed above build on one another. A strength plan will assist and set a base for aerobic activities. Aerobic activities will support and set a base for strength training. It is important that an employee not only be tested in all of these areas but also properly shown how to train to improve or maintain all of these areas.

The above areas of fitness can be tested using simple testing methods which any police officer should be able to complete with little difficulty. According to The Cooper Institute, the officer should be tested with a 1.5 mile run, a 300 meter run, a vertical jump, one maximum ability bench press or maximum set of push ups, and one minute sit ups (Cooper Institute, 2006c). From these tests, the officer is analyzed and rated in one of six categories ranging from superior to very poor, and a prescription for improvement is given. For example, an officer who is able to run 1.5 miles between 13 minutes and 13 seconds and 14 minutes and 15 seconds would be ranked as "good". In my experience, most officers would not fall into this category unless they are involved in some type of aerobic activity on a regular basis. Sedentary officers, who have gradually become

complacent about physical exercise, whether working at a desk or in the patrol division, will not achieve this category and probably will not realize that they have become as out of shape as they are. Officers who do poorly in this area might argue that they would never realistically be required to run 1.5 miles in their job. This is where training would be effective. Assuming no police officer would be required to run 1.5 miles while working, an assumption that I am not willing to make, the instructor would be able to show how aerobic endurance affects other areas of health, and how this particular test judges that. For police officers to receive a superior rating in sit ups done in one minute, they would have to complete 44 sit ups. To get a good rating, it would be required to do 31 to 35 sit ups in one minute. Many officers, who have not paid attention to their health, would be surprised that they could not do this. A properly implemented training program would no doubt help the officers improve.

Improving Fitness and Implementation of a Fitness Program

Once an agency has a qualified fitness instructor and an administration that is willing to establish ongoing standards and training, there will no doubt be some opposition to the program from some employees. The opposition may come from several different types of employees for different reasons, but for the most part, it should be widely received as a positive step in any department. It will be important to carefully consider how a program is going to be initiated so the opposition can be kept to a minimum and nervous employees can be put at ease.

The program first and foremost should provide basic, introductory training for officers. This should include instruction on the policy standards, how to meet those

policy standards, nutrition, strength training, aerobic training, flexibility training, anaerobic training, and the benefits of physical fitness training.

A great deal of consideration will need to be placed on how employees will be motivated to train to meet and maintain the standards. Ways to create greater participation might be to implement a voluntary participation program, a voluntary participation program with rewards, a mandatory participation program with positive reinforcement or with negative reinforcement, and one with both methods of reinforcements.

Getting employees to change their lifestyle as it relates to health is not the same as getting employees to abide by other policies. One can easily make employees take certain procedural actions such as turning in paperwork at a designated time or wear a uniform in a specified manner, but changing their approach to their health is much different.

A successful approach would most likely come from a combination of all of the approaches above with a specific plan to achieve the department's health standards plan in a specific time frame. This will take dedication and commitment on behalf of the administration, since employee behavior will not be changed overnight. The plan could start with voluntary participation with tangible as well as intangible rewards in the early stage, combined with extensive training and follow ups to increase the chances of prolonged participation. The rewards could be a promise to fund a department fitness room upon successful achievement of fitness goals. If a department fitness room is not feasible, the department could agree to pay for, or enter into an agreement with a health facility of which the participants could use. Another incentive might be the ability for the participants to be allowed to work out a certain amount of time on duty. The rewards

must be of value and desired and could even be negotiated between the department and the group. Since the group most likely will be newer employees, who are in relatively good condition and others, who are personally motivated to make a personal change, the goals set should be obtainable but challenging.

After a specified time the participation will need to gradually move from voluntary participation to a type of mandatory participation. For a time, the mandatory participation should be established with only positive rewards. More employees will begin to meet the standards. Some will merely improve, while others will not improve at all. Eventually as time progresses, there should be a move towards a mandatory expectation that employees meet the minimum standards. If not, negative results will occur. Here, careful planning and consideration will need to be given to help motivate all employees with a balanced use of positive and negative rewards with special focus on motivation with positive rewards as described by Bennett and Hess (2004) as being “personal, immediate, and certain” (p. 348).

Considerations for a Fitness Policy

The policy written by the department will also need a great deal of consideration. Research will need to be done to ensure that it will be legally defensible in court because, if litigation occurs regarding physical fitness, it likely will focus on the policy and how it was implemented. Certified, well trained instructors will be able to do much of the research to assist the administration with the policy. Other law enforcement agencies should be contacted to consider their policies. An easy way to do this is through the International Association of Chiefs of Police’s website at www.iacpnet.com. This

website lists other departments' policies and provides an avenue for discussion with other departments on physical fitness policies. Assistance should also be sought from the department's legal representative to review the policy to be assured it can be defended in court. I have seen other department's policies that have cited The Cooper Institute or a state's police officer standards and training (P.O.S.T.) requirements and included specific criteria from those groups in their standards. This would force an attorney, who wishes to challenge a policy, to challenge The Cooper Institute's research or P.O.S.T. standards; something that easily could not be done if the department fairly followed the policy written.

How successful a department is at setting physical fitness standards and achieving a department wide improvement will depend on how it is presented to the employees, and how it is carried out. Law enforcement agencies have long been autocratic in their approach to what they want from their employees. Worldviews of incoming recruits are far different than they were only a few years ago, and a department can not achieve results from employees the way they could before. This should not be approached with an attitude of forcing officers to make a change; rather, it should be approached as a benefit for the employer and the employee. Both sides will reap benefits from a wellness program, and the public they serve will benefit as well. The employer will have healthier employees who use less sick time, injury leave, and who are able to perform their duties better, stay on the job longer, and will be respected more by the people they serve. The employees will benefit by being healthier, living longer, feeling better, and being better workers. Also, the public will benefit by having a department that is much better equipped to carry out a police function.

There may be a debate regarding whether our population is getting more or less healthy. Our life expectancy is rising, but as we get older, we keep reading that we exercise less and are becoming more overweight. The quality of life in those later years seems to be less than desirable at times. There is a real need to maintain, and in many cases, improve the health and fitness of every police officer regardless of their current fitness level. The formula for maintaining and improving health, both physical and mental, is there for us to apply, but it is important that more departments begin to implement a wellness program including training and minimum standards in an effective and motivating way to successfully benefit the public, the employees, and the employers.

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