

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

**Mandatory Physical Fitness Examinations
for Law Enforcement Professionals**

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ABSTRACT

With increasing concerns regarding a police officer's health and the high stress level associated with the occupation of policing, mandatory fitness programs implemented correctly will assist in addressing this issue. Mandatory fitness programs for law enforcement officers is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because, in most agencies, there are no physical fitness criteria or annual fitness testing for the officers. Some departments conduct a pre-hire physical test and then never do preventive testing. With the numerous health benefits an officer may experience when subject to routine mandatory fitness testing, having such tests will also increase the perception of the department by its citizens. The position of the researcher is that law enforcement agencies should provide a fitness criteria and an annual fitness test for law enforcement officers.

The types of information used to support the researcher's position included a review of articles, Internet sites, periodicals, and journals. The recommendation drawn from this position paper is to require all police departments to implement mandatory physical fitness program using a combination of job tasks and The Cooper Institute Law Enforcement fitness testing. The correct implementation of such testing will determine a police officer's fitness level as related to job task assignments, thus reducing the level of liability for the agency.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research paper is to present the necessity of mandatory physical fitness testing in law enforcement. Mandatory physical fitness examinations for law enforcement professionals is a contemporary issue that is relevant today due to police officers being a part of today's society. With this indisputable fact, it is fair to suggest that a large section of police officers struggle with the negative aspect of obesity that plagues today's society in the United States. According to Biagioli (2007), obesity in society has been labeled a pandemic that affects people all over the world. One billion people in the world are considered to be overweight, and 300 million individuals have been clinically classified as obese.

This research will show that in order to maintain healthy officers, agencies should require mandatory fitness programs. A volunteer or at will fitness program longer suffices to maintain and insure officer wellness. As shown in this paper, prior research has proven, officers will not utilize the programs unless mandated by police administrators. The information for this position paper will be drawn from periodicals, text books, Internet sites, articles, and sample policy. The intended audience for this research is the administration of the Bridgeport Police Department, city administrator, and city council in order to initiate the process of implementing a mandatory fitness program. This research concludes that all law enforcement agencies should consider implementing a mandatory fitness program to ensure officer safety and well being.

POSITION

The increase in the number of subjects that are obese is a trend that is plaguing the population of the United States and of the entire world. According to Biagioli (2007),

obesity in society has been labeled a pandemic that affects people all over the world. One billion people in the world are considered to be overweight, and 300 million individuals have been clinically classified as obese. Obesity detrimentally affects an individual's quality of life, health, and psychological well being. According to Biagioli (2007), obesity is also referred to as a comorbidity, which relates to the fact that obesity is linked to other diseases, such as heart attack, congestive heart failure, sudden cardiac death, angina or chest pain, and abnormal heart rhythm.

According to Bryant (2003), the former US Surgeon General Richard Carmona's found that there are 53 stressors that can be connected to police work. He stated that officers were four times more at risk for health related complications than the general public due to the stress of the profession. Carmona indicated the following risks: heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes. Carmona's research also claimed that officers have an above average risk for heart attacks, obesity, arthritis, ulcers, and cancer, and it is not uncommon for them to be depressed or have thoughts of suicide.

In a study of nearly 400 officers over period of 10 years, by the University of Buffalo researcher John Violanti, police officers showed an increase in the in level of stress and health issues. An examination of lifestyle factors typically associated with atherosclerosis, including a lack of exercise, smoking, diet, etc were part of the comparison between law enforcement officers and citizens. Violanti indicated that the increases of health problems are associated with the stressors of police work. The police profession exposes officers to undue stress on a daily basis. Officers are often required to complete varied task physically and mentally. This complex cycle lead to elevated health risks (as cited in University at Buffalo, 2009).

According to the University of Buffalo (2009), these lifestyle factors were statistically controlled for in the analysis, which led to the conclusion that it is not the usual heart-disease-related risk factors that increase the risk in police officers, it is something else. Due to the very nature of policing, officers are often sedentary, and the combination of increase stress and poor diet often can be fatal. Violanti found that the stressed induced hormone cortisol, was elevated in police officers compared to citizens. Due to a consistent high level of cortisol, which is associated with a less arterial elasticity, this becomes a risk factor for heart disease (University of Buffalo, 2009).

In Bryant (2003), he discussed Carmona's (2003) study, which indicated that obesity directly affects an officer's ability to defend the public and back-up a partner. Carmona also indicated that the police officer's job and job hazards, provides an increased likelihood for the development for obesity. Police officers encounter large amounts of stress during the execution of their jobs. Stress also increases the accumulation of body fat in the area of the waist and mid-sections of police officers. Medical research has established that this type of fat is triggered by hormonal changes and alterations in the nervous system that are created by this job related stress. Bryant (2003) stated that "physical conditioning is crucial in public safety jobs because physical and emotional stress is unavoidable" (para. 4). In addition to the dangerous nature of the job to police officers, departments should support and administer physical fitness standards to mitigate the liability issues resulting from a police officer suffering a possible catastrophic health event. These catastrophic health events include: heart attacks, severe organ injuries, and knee injuries.

Officers are required to perform a variety physical activities, including roadway clearance, involving lifting, carrying, and dragging debris, and pushing a car. Officers are often required to perform victim extraction and rescue and sustained foot pursuits as well as several self initiated activities (Collingwood, 2004). Officers need to be held accountable for their fitness; therefore a standard must be met. The taxpayers that provide the economic funds for a police department to be in existence deserve a competent, professional and fit police officer. Sadly though, police officers statistically will not participate in a physical fitness program. According to Mroz (2008), there a few main reasons that inhibits police officers from being active in physical fitness. A contributing factor in this study is the lack of free time that police officers have to exercise, which is directly associated with their low pay rate. Police officers are seen as public servants and thought of as a job, not as a profession, by most citizens. This misinformed view of police officers leads to officers being paid less, which, in turn, leads to officers working an increase in overtime hours and off-duty jobs. This restricts and eliminates the available time that the police officer has at his disposal to actively be involved in a physical fitness program. A solution to this issue is police administrators valuing the fitness program to the extent of implementing a mandatory program and allowing officers to exercise while on the clock.

Fitness programs can increase organizational efficiency while simultaneously benefiting each officer (Pilant, 1995). However, as with most police officers, they will not engage in physical fitness unless they are required by the administration. Ness (1992) stated that voluntary programs just do not work. Police agencies should implement the mandatory physical fitness programs to hold officer's accountable and to

simply mandate physical fitness standards in order to verify the officer's fitness level. This leads to the contemporary issue that faces law enforcement agencies today, which is that physical fitness modality is best to be used by these agencies.

The mandatory fitness test allows for benchmarks to determine the physical condition of the individual police officer (Mroz, 2008). This is important, due the idea that the individual officer should have an opportunity to show marked improvement in the area of their physical fitness levels. Having a benchmark for individual officers and the officer's ability to exceed the mark will build confidence, which will reduce stress and improve morale. Intertwined with this issue is the issue that Collingwood (2004) refers to "How fit do officers need to be?" A police officer's job as previously described may be very physical at times. However, there are a lot of ways to avoid work requiring physical fitness if an officer is out of shape. Unfit officers who do get hurt tend to stay out longer and cost the department more than fit officers who get injured (Remsburg, 2006).

Police administrators should assess the physical demands of the various jobs in their agency and develop a standard fitness plan to meet those demands. According to Remsburg (2006), up to 20% of today's male law enforcement officers cannot perform physical tasks essential to the job, and up to 95% of the females randomly tested in studies cannot perform tasks. Some police agencies require pre-employment fitness test, however if the officer is hired no annual testing is done. Remsburg (2006) claimed that "In some areas, police academy physical demands have been lowered to graduate male and female recruits, and they are not tested again throughout their careers. An

agency has the fundamental responsibility to ensure the physical readiness of its work force” (para. 23).

The occupation of policing often leads to officers having to use force of some type in order to restrain and/or arrest suspects. Officers in poor health often receive injuries during such incidents. Officers in poor health often have an increase of use of force incidents compared to fit officers. According to (Remsberg, 2006), “use of force critical incident data showed that lack of fitness leads to injuries and failure to respond effectively on duty” (para. 9). This trend not only is a danger to the officer’s well being, but an increase in liability and expense for the agency. If an officer is lacking in fitness and is unable to assist other officers, he/she should not be able to work.

Physical fitness programs should challenge the officer in the following key areas. The officer should be challenged in cardiovascular endurance. This type of endurance is the “ability of the heart, lungs and blood vessels to deliver oxygen to working muscles and tissues, as well as the ability of those muscles and tissues to utilize that oxygen” (The Cooper Institute, 2009). According to The Cooper Institute, an excellent test to endurance is the 1.5 mile run. This test is job task specific, due to the number of foot chases officers are likely to endure and/or the officer’s ability to sustain combat with a suspect.

The second test should consist of some type of Anaerobic Exercise. Anaerobic is exercise is an activity in which oxygen is used up more quickly than the body is able to replenish. A good determinate of anaerobic power is a 300 meter sprint. This test is also job specific, due again to the foot chases the officers may be exposed to in their duties. The next test, is the muscular strength testing. Muscular strength test refers to

the muscles' ability to generate maximal strength for any muscle group, such as a maximum lift on a bench press or a pushup. Muscular endurance is the fourth test that was researched. This test refers to the muscles ability to sustain sub-maximal force, basically the length of time a police officer can lift, push, pull, or carry an item. The fifth test is flexibility. Flexibility is the ability to bend in multiple motions without injury. Stretching is a common exercise that measures an officer's flexibility. Smith and Tooker (2005) defined wellness as "those purposeful actions taken to attain and maintain optimal health and fitness" (para. 13). The researcher has included a validated fitness plan from The Cooper Institute in the appendix of this paper.

COUNTER POSITION

During the research for this paper, the negative views regarding mandatory physical fitness tests in law enforcement can be divided into three areas of concern: legal issues, budget, and test selection/validation. The first concern is legal issues. Lonsway (2003) said "the job of policing is widely assumed to require a great deal of physical prowess, and this is often used to keep women out of law enforcement jobs" (p. 238). During the last three decades, there has been a shift from law enforcement agencies having height and weight requirements to instituting mandatory physical fitness evaluations and tests. Both of these techniques, for the most part, have excluded women from being able to become police officers in larger percentages. The former technique was ruled as discriminatory under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which led to the advent of job related physical agility tests. Lonsway (2003) also indicated that the under-representation of female police officers is the catalyst for increased episodes of police brutality, complaints, and detrimentally affects the plight of

women regarding family violence. The acceptance of women in law enforcement mitigates the culpability that agencies and cities incur, due to the decreased incidence of litigation from law suits.

The second concern with the mandatory fitness programs is budget impact. During this time of economic recession and frequent budget reductions, any extra cost may be viewed as unnecessary. The mandatory programs would increase an agency budget by requiring the selection of an established fit plan; provide adequate time for the officer to workout and the possible medical cost/implications caused by injury. If an officer sustains an injury while performing a task on duty, the officer may receive assistance through worker's compensation, which would in turn have an adverse impact on the budget.

The test selection/validation is the last concern with the mandatory fitness program. The overall goal with each individual agency should be to validate job simulation and physical fitness. According to Collingwood (2004), "most law enforcement agencies administer either a physical fitness test or a job task simulation test" (para. 13). The physical aspect of testing is done by giving the National Law Enforcement Fitness Test, also known as the Cooper Test. The National Law Enforcement Fitness Test "consists of the mile and a half run, body composition, 300 meter run, vertical jump, bench press, sit and reach, push ups, and sit ups" (The Cooper Institute, 2009, para. 13). Collingwood (2004) stated that "job task simulation tests consist of physical tasks that law enforcement officer would typically perform. These tests would consist of climbing a fence, jumping a ditch, or dragging a dummy a certain distance" (para. 15).

All of the concerns can impact an agency's desire to implement a mandatory physical fitness program; however, these issues should not stop an agency from challenging and improving bettering their officer's health. Agencies should develop a fitness plan approved by such corporations as The Cooper Institute. The Cooper tests are "designed around the age and gender of the officer through careful studies. They give a sound assessment of the fitness levels of each officers based on the studies" (Remsberg, 2006, para. 7). Agencies must select a program that is job task specific and require all officers to participate regardless of age/gender. The purpose of fitness testing, as stated by The Cooper Institute, "is to discriminate who can effectively perform the essential physical job tasks versus those who cannot perform the tasks" (The Cooper Institute, 2009, para. 1).

Agencies routinely evaluate many areas, including size of the city, size of the agency for determining pay grades, budget, policy, and procedures. Agencies should research other agencies that adopted the mandatory programs to gain insight in their implementation. In doing so, agencies may save money and staffs time to develop a program. Agencies may explore fund raising for the program through local gyms and fitness clubs. The prices for gym memberships are relatively low, costing from \$20-\$70 per month on average. Some gyms may give discounts to law enforcement employees.

RECOMMENDATION

Law enforcement agencies should mandate physical standards and an annual fitness tests for all police officers. The benefits of the mandatory testing will insure the officer and the department appear professionally fit for duty. The community's negative perception of law enforcement and the "donut cop" have tainted the profession for

years. The community deserves a police officer who is fit for duty and can perform his tasks. Not until police agencies across the country come to the realization that the physical fitness of their police officers is paramount will the issue of deteriorating physical fitness be addressed. The reason that police administrations do not mandate physical fitness standards is due to the fact that a great deal of administrators are themselves unfit and possibly obese.

Law enforcement agencies across the nation dictate policies for all areas of police work. Police administrators develop and implement policies for use of force, weapons usage and maintenance, off-duty conduct, call for service execution, traffic stops, and uniform requirements. However, police administrators fail for the most part dictate and implement policies regarding officers and their physical fitness. It is essential for public safety employers to develop physical ability selection criteria that are designed to measure the critical tasks of the job (Peak, 1992). If a fitness program is implemented effectively, the agency and the officer will benefit exponentially.

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APPENDIX

PROCEDURE AND SEQUENCING OF PHYSICAL FITNESS TESTS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

The suggested test battery is as follows:

- Vertical Jump
- One Minute Sit Up
- 300 Meter Run
- Maximum Push Up or Bench Press
- 1.5 Mile Run

The procedure and order for testing is recommended as follows:

1. Warm up for 3 minutes, perform the Vertical Jump test and rest for 2 minutes.
2. Perform the One Minute Sit Up test and rest for 5 to 10 minutes.
3. Perform the 300 Meter Run, then rest for 5 to 10 minutes.
4. Perform the Maximum Push Up test, then rest for 5 to 15 minutes (or 5 to 10 minutes for Bench Press).
5. Do cardio-warm up for 2 to 3 minutes, then perform the 1.5 Mile Run and cardio-cool down for 5 minutes.