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Nutrition Awareness Education for Police Agencies

A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College

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February 2015

ABSTRACT

Law enforcement is a very unique industry with very specific challenges. Among the various challenges is the ability for officers to maintain a healthy nutritional lifestyle. The fact that police work is unpredictable in nature and is commonly practiced around shift work oftentimes results in overtime shifts and odd hours of operations, all leading to a nutritional challenge on a daily basis for officers. Adding to the challenges imposed by the profession is the fact that several officers lack the nutritional knowledge needed to maintain a more nutritionally sound lifestyle. While several modern day police agencies have successfully implemented and maintained physical fitness programs, not much can be said for the implementation of nutritional awareness programs.

The implementation of nutritional programs may represent additional costs, but the long term benefits of the programs must be acknowledged by the agencies. The officers must also recognize the benefits associated with the adoption of a nutritional awareness program in an effort to motivate their participation. Some of the benefits associated with nutritional awareness programs are minimization of on-duty injuries, a more professional image of the police agency, lower costs associated with healthcare, and the ability to live longer, healthier lives for the officers. The long term benefits far exceed the initial costs for implementation of programs as well as the ability for officers to live longer, healthier, and more productive lives.

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INTRODUCTION

Some modern day police agencies have successfully implemented fitness programs, though this is not true for every agency. Some are strictly voluntary for officer participation, while others are mandatory for officers to partake. The implementation has been facilitated through the investment of time, money, and resources for maintenance of such programs. The investments have been made in purchasing equipment and furnishing gym facilities. Furthermore, some agencies have taken to this new modern way of thinking by hiring trainers. Other organizations have had some of their own personnel certified and dedicated to the task of training other officers. Agencies have gone through great leaps in an effort to implement and improve the physical fitness of its officers. Therefore, it is essential that police agencies implement a complete wellness program.

While so much effort has been invested in the physical fitness aspect of wellness programs for law enforcement agencies, a much lesser emphasis has been devoted to the implementation and maintenance of the nutritional aspect of such an initiative. However, as seen with commercial, popular fitness programs such as the P90X, Insanity, and Tap Out, more is needed than just the physical exertion. All of these offer maximum interval-type training through a series of circuit type exercises. The circuits are comprised of a variety of exercises put together to offer maximum levels of intense training with minimal downtime (breaks) in-between each exercise circuit. The concept behind such intensity is in an all-out effort to maximize weight reduction and increase levels of fitness. However, the programs are two phase, including step-by-step exercise videos in conjunction with a nutritional guide, which is necessary for complete success.

A daily guide with a strictly structured meal plan is included and highly recommended for optimal results. The fitness programs are backed by a money back guarantee, making the use of the nutritional phase as imperative to success, as the physical fitness aspect of the program. This is where many law enforcement agencies are missing the necessary piece to the puzzle in supporting full fitness for their officers.

The need for complete type wellness programs is imperative. Farmer (2004) stated, "Physical exercise and diet must be done together. Think of it is as a positive and a negative on a battery; if one end is not connected you have no power" (p. 34). Wellness Coordinator Pat Reilly, with the Orange County (Florida) Sheriff's Office, also stated, "diet and exercise go hand-in-hand and aims to get it down to an easy, enjoyable science" (Schreiber, 2008, p. 12). Agencies must invest equally into the nutritional factor of the fitness programs. Officers need to be trained on the nutritional value of the meal choices they make and the possible consequences of consuming foods that are not healthy. Just as officers are trained on the proper use of firearms and made to practice for proficiency in the event that they ever encounter a deadly force situation, they should be afforded the knowledge that will assist them in making wiser nutritional choices. Unique to law enforcement, as Chapola (2002) stated, "officers are at a disadvantage when it comes to eating right because job factors, such as overtime, shift work and rotating schedules, usually affect dietary patterns" (p. 91).

Law enforcement organizations need to invest in training their officers need to provide them with the necessary resources to facilitate the process of making wiser, better, more health conscious foods and nutritional choices. Officers would be better suited by knowing the consequences of consuming healthy foods over non-healthy

ones. By realizing the value and effect that certain nutrients found in fats, proteins, and carbohydrates, have on their health, an individual may be more prone to make healthier choices and/or limit themselves of the unhealthy products they are used to consuming on a daily basis. Empowering the officers with such knowledge will afford them the tools necessary to maintain a healthier lifestyle.

There are various options available to training officers on nutritional values. Some agencies have opted to hire nutritionists or dieticians, such as in the case of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). According to Schreiber (2008), "The LAPD wanted so much to improve the health of their officers, that they took money previously allotted to hire a staff psychologist and hired a full-time, on-site dietician instead" (p. 10). The LAPD conducted trainings on nutrition during new officer academies. The program was then extended to other areas, such as roll call trainings, division meetings, and other such gatherings. The program was implemented in an effort to have a more structured form of addressing weight and health issues among the organization. Making officers aware and giving them insight on the benefits of maintaining a healthy lifestyle can be beneficial to both the officer and a department. Officers are evaluated on an individual basis and diets can be custom tailored for them based on their individual needs. More importantly nutritionists or dieticians can educate the officers on the values of certain foods and nutrients.

Educating officers in nutritional awareness would prove vital to an improved nutritious lifestyle. Officers should be aware of the proper methods to calculate and maintain calorie counts. They should be in check with their Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR) and know how to calculate their maximum heart rate, which is vital information

when figuring out how many calories they are able to consume without it having a negative effect on them. It is vital to the health and wellbeing of the officers that such nutritional initiatives be undertaken.

POSITION

It is necessary to the health and well-being of the officers that they receive nutrition awareness education. Officers must be able to recognize the effects of nutrients to their overall health. Officers need to understand how calories, protein, carbohydrates, and fat affect their bodies. Understanding such a process will assist officers in making better nutritional choices. Vonk (2009) emphasized that, “most police officers do care about their health, fitness levels, and weight. Most, however, have no idea how much they actually eat in a day, and weight gain in the form of body fat slowly shows up over the years” (p. 10).

In incorporating the nutritional aspect of a wellness program, officers can be guided by an in house nutritionist if the agency chooses to take on that type of approach, as modeled by the LAPD (Shreiber, 2008). A nutritionist will ideally concern themselves in assessing clients, creating a plan of action, and equally important in monitoring the progress of individuals. They can be the guiding force in leading officers to a healthier lifestyle by individually assessing them, providing them with a variety of meal plans, giving them options depending on the individual’s needs and, continually making themselves available to answer any questions or concerns.

Another position to underscore in the need for nutritional awareness among police agencies is the fact that, “proper nutrition has been found to greatly reduce the risks of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, gallstones, and even some

forms of cancers like prostate, breast, and colorectal” (Chapola, 2002, p. 91).

According to one fitness article, “maintaining a healthy and productive workforce is essential for employers in public and private sectors. Poor nutrition and obesity contribute to chronic diseases and influence health care costs and productivity,” (“New obesity,” 2010). Proper nutrition will lead to a healthier weight composition and lifestyle. Healthy eating habits are essential to officers and everyone in general because “by eating right and staying physically active, most officers can attain a proper body composition and avoid many of the problems associated with being overweight (Chapola, 2002, p. 90).

The law enforcement community as a group has been found to be in higher risk of contracting certain health problems including cardiovascular issues. Additionally, it has also been found that law enforcement officers run a higher risk of mortality due to some cancers. The higher risks may be attributable to the higher incidence of stress the profession places on the individual. Another contributing factor is due to a lifestyle in which poor nutrition and health is the norm (Chapola, 2002).

A nutritious diet will not only result in a more appropriate body weight, it will also promote a diminished risk of contracting certain diseases associated to weight issues. While genetics plays a predicting role in some diseases, diet can play a pivotal role reducing the incidence of certain illnesses (Danielson, 2006). Diabetes, for example, is one disease that can be greatly reduced if individuals make healthy food choices, “by simply controlling portion sizes and reading food labels, hence, the necessity for nutritional guidance,” (“Choose,” 2012, para. 3).

A final position to establish is the fact that a nutritionally aware police agency will experience benefits unique to the outcomes of such awareness. Some of the benefits associated with a more nutritionally prone agency are a more professional public image, officers who are less likely to incur on-the-job injuries, and a decreased use of sick leave. Public image is greatly impacted by the benefits of a more proportional body image. A more proportional body structure has a more positive impact on physical appearance. A more presentable appearance is perceived more agreeably by the community and more widely accepted. Society is appearance conscious. Due to the nature of police work, society would have the expectation that an officer should appear more proportional and ready for duty. A more favorable image of the agency and its officers offers an invaluable benefit to the relationship between the agency and the community served. Hostetter (2007) stated, "society still expects their line level officers to show up on a call physically fit and capable of handling those situations that require not only brains to resolve issues, but also strength and stamina" (p. 16).

Proper fitness and nutrition maintains the muscles, joints, and the body as a whole better conditioned. Maintaining such a state implies that the body is more able to respond to, or engage in, more physically tasking actions with a lesser probability of injury. According to Cooper (2009), more conditioned officers hold an advantage over less conditioned officers because, as he stated, "they are less likely to suffer injury due to higher levels of strength, endurance, balance, and speed, but they have a higher likelihood of full recovery if they do get injured" (p. 33). Issues that interfere with the job, such as breathing, hindering speed, and inducing fatigue and joint problems are greatly

reduced. Workman's compensation claims are also reduced since, "healthier officers use less sick leave and return to work faster when injured on the street (Hoelzer, 2010, p. 61). Ultimately, a whole health program would benefit a law enforcement agency and its officers.

COUNTER POSITION

While there is a definitive cost associated with producing and maintaining a more nutritionally aware police agency, there are benefits that far exceed the initial investment. Some of the initial costs are incurred in the form of medical analyses or physicals associated with identifying the individual needs or weaknesses of an individual in an attempt to address their nutritional deficiencies. Other costs associated with such an initiative are incurred through department-wide training sessions. Officers have to be trained while on duty. One of the biggest investments into the initiative is the hiring of a nutritionist or dietician. This type of approach not only requires a "hiring" fee but a long term basis that can include a "maintenance" fee.

Different agencies have addressed the issue in differing ways. As previously stated, the LAPD took the stance by shifting monies from hiring a psychologist to hire a dietician, which may have seemed like a more urgent matter to deal with (Schreiber, 2008). A fit, more nutritionally aware police agency is going to spend less on expenses associated to healthcare. Moskowitz (1999) found that the Union Pacific Railroad had created a "multi-aspect wellness program to try and curve its 29 percent health claim in 1990. After implementing the program they noted a total of 24 percent in health claims. The curve in health claims translated into \$2 million dollars saved" (p. 43). Shell (2002) further found that health associated costs can be greatly reduced by changing lifestyle

choices in their employees. Many of the maladies associated with law enforcement personnel health is due to what is referred to as “modifiable risk factors.” Diseases such as heart conditions, cancer, and diabetes, which have been found to be affected by proper nutrition, can incur expenses in the billions of dollars per year. According to McKimmie (2004), “every dollar spent on fitness and wellness will return \$3 to \$8 in lower health-care claims” (p. S4). Even though the initial costs associated with implementation may prove challenging to some agencies, statistics and needs for such initiative speak for themselves.

A hindrance in implementing a whole wellness program is that some officers will be reluctant to adhere to or adopt the nutritional awareness trainings. It represents a lifestyle change. Officers may not like the “imposing” perception of the initiative and may pass up the opportunity to attend such a program. Applying the nutritional awareness knowledge to an individual’s life does impose a lifestyle change. The change, though, is in the greatest interest of the officers’ health and well-being. By educating the officers on some of the appalling statistics associated and unique to the law enforcement community, they may opt to voluntarily adopt the wellness initiative. Vonk (2009) indicated that, “officers need to know that the number one killer of law enforcement officers is cardiovascular disease” (p. 7). One would assume that an officer would be more likely to fall to a gunshot wound or other duty type incident, but as Shell (2002) found, “law enforcement has unique work demands and exposes the officers to 53 different stressors associated with heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, certain cancers, depression, and suicide” (p. 28).

A reason often cited in opposition to implementing a wellness program is that eating a nutritionally sound diet would be almost impossible to accomplish or maintain given the rigorous, unexpected nature of police work. While law enforcement brings about unique circumstances and situations, officers can still manage with proper awareness. The unique circumstances actually translate to disadvantages for the officers. They come in the form of job factors that add challenges to proper nutrition, such as overtime, unexpected calls, shift work, and rotating shifts. These can cause the officers to make bad nutritional choices, skip meals, and lead them to excessive bad snacking. Making wise food choices is not always easy: "it is hard to eat right unless you are already a nutrition fanatic" (Sanow, 2009, p. 6).

However, the nutritional program implemented by the Los Angeles Police Department covered a phase where the hired dietician went along on patrols. The dietician, Rana Parker, found that "a lot of convenience stores now offer more than hot dogs under heat lamps and recommends energy bars and lean sandwiches to be a good pick" (Schreiber, 2008, p. 16). Officers are then taught which food choices to make while on the job regardless of the shift or call volume. Parker explained that "One thing I always tell them is, just like they prepare for their work day with their weapons and gear, be prepared for the fact that you might not know where your next meal is coming from" (Schreiber, 2008, p. 16). Officers are then encouraged to plan ahead and pack their patrol cars with healthy snacks and meals.

RECOMMENDATION

There is a definite need for a complete physical and nutritional wellness program in law enforcement. Being that the environment of law enforcement promotes an

increased risk of poor health and associated diseases, it is imperative that officers practice healthy nutrition among other strategies to assist in minimizing the incidence of such negative health impacts. Therefore, it is necessary that foods rich in health benefits be chosen and consumed among the law enforcement community. It is crucial that the law enforcement community embrace the facts that proper nutrition and fitness can lead to lowering the risks of a diminished health. Shell (2005) claimed that “One 40-year longitudinal study found that, appallingly, the life expectancy of a retired male police officer in the United States was 66 years” (p. 27). Presented with the statistics and an avenue to reverse or lower the risk of such diseases or health ailments, officers may opt to voluntarily take on the lifestyle change needed to a better nutritional based lifestyle.

Additionally, nutritional awareness can and will have a positive impact on the community's perception of the law enforcement agencies. A more-fit image of a police agency will result in better acceptance, respect, and faith in the agency. Society has always held officers to a higher standard, especially when they want the feeling of security that is expected when an officer is around. If a community deems an officer seemingly unfit for duty, this could project a negative view of a police agency.

Therefore, it is imperative that law enforcement agencies implement complete wellness programs.

It is common knowledge that police agencies throughout the nation operate on limited budget resources. It is also a well-known fact that health related costs have staggered through the years. The law enforcement community is not immune to the soaring health care costs. Specific to the law enforcement community is the fact that

“many of the maladies to which countless law enforcement personnel succumb refer to “modifiable risk factors”, which means that health conditions and related costs can be affected” (Shell, 2005, p. 28). Union Pacific was able to save 2 million dollars after implementing a wellness program, which resulted in the cutting of costs incurred through medical needs. Shell (2005) further emphasized that “up-front preparation in ensuring wellness in law enforcement academies and beyond can prove far less costly than not doing so. Lifelong wellness and fitness proves an investment now and in the future of American public safety personnel” (p. 29). Therefore, police agencies should implement complete wellness programs.

Nutritionally sound police officers will demonstrate higher levels of fitness, present a better image for the department, and bring about less use of sick and injury leave. Vonk (2009) asserted, “Since cardiovascular disease is the number one killer of law enforcement officers, making healthy nutrition choices and staying physically fit will add years and quality of life with your family, well beyond retirement and into your second career if you so choose” (p. 30). A healthy lifestyle goes way beyond body weight and appearance. It affects every individual daily and could be the difference between life and death for some. Fortunately, there are ways to combat this issue and informing individuals about simple ways to make substitutions in their meal intakes and how to balance their nutrition and physical activity can be the lifesaver many need.

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