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**Physical Readiness Assessments  
In Law Enforcement**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Law enforcement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is faced with many challenges. One of the most important challenges will be maintaining a healthy and fit workforce. Law enforcement officers typically require a higher level of fitness than the average citizen in order to perform their job duties effectively.

This paper will show, based on research obtained through various sources, that police officers should be encouraged and given the resources to prepare for and perform annual physical readiness assessments. The status quo is unacceptable and detrimental for the law enforcement community. The stereotypical donut-eating, obese police officer is, unfortunately, still around. It is imperative that police administrators address this problem.

This paper will show that regular exercise and proper diet will save the employer money and produce a happier and healthier employee. The citizen's opinion of police officers in general will drastically improve. Offenders have even made their decision as to whether or not to assault a police officer based on the officer's physical appearance (Quigley, 2008). Opposition to the notion of required fitness standards tend to center around the idea that police can perform their duties just fine. Other opponents' state officers are obese because of genetics and not poor choices. This paper will provide information to the contrary.

At the end of the day, a fit officer is a motivated officer. A fit officer will miss less work and save their employer costs in the long term (Quigley, 2008). Working together and creating a culture within the agency that supports fitness and wellness will make a positive difference in the long term.

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to support the importance for annual physical readiness assessment programs in law enforcement. Annual physical readiness assessments are imperative. This paper will show that fit officers live longer, save their agency money, and perform their duties more efficiently.

It is no secret that a majority of the people in the United States are obese. Obesity in America has become a household epidemic. Police officers, unfortunately, are not immune to obesity. Fast food restaurants are located on every corner in every major city in the United States. People are programmed to be in such a rush that they neglect the one thing that is vital for survival: their health.

Not all law enforcement agencies have physically unfit officers; however, a puzzling number have failed to establish or enforce physical readiness standards (Moore, 2006). While annual firearms qualification is required and officers are required to be certified with non-lethal and less lethal systems, this mandated training or qualifying is not as valuable if the officer is unfit, cannot run for a short distance, or stay in the fight without gasping for air or passing out.

Police officers should be encouraged and given the resources to prepare for and perform annual physical readiness assessments. Research for this paper will be taken from journals and periodical articles. The current status quo is unacceptable, and it is costing agencies tremendously in the short term.

According to the article from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ("Obesity and genetics,"2010), "obesity results when body fat accumulates over time as a result of a chronic energy imbalance (calories consumed exceed calories expended)"

(para 1). The Merriam-Webster dictionary ("Overweight," n.d.) defines overweight as "weight over and above what is required or allowed and excessive or burdensome weight" (para. 1). In most cases; however, obesity and overweight issues are controllable with regular exercise and proper nutrition.

## **POSITION**

Regular physical fitness and exercise equal a better quality of life. Physically fit officers produce lower incidents of missed work, illness, and injury. One study indicated "that sedentary people have twice the risk of coronary artery disease than active people as well as a higher risk of stroke, colon cancer, and back injury" (Quigley, 2008, para. 1). Exercising on a regular basis tends to lower the risk and assists with maintaining one's weight. Typically, weight training and strength training assists with muscle building and flexibility. Quigley (2008) stated, "consistent physical activity has also been shown to reduce blood pressure, blood lipids, and glucose tolerance thus helping to prevent hypertension, heart disease and diabetes" (para 2). If an officer chooses to be fit and maintain a high level of fitness, then the overall cost to the city for missed work, disabilities, and work related injuries decreases.

Police officers, for the most part, are ignoring the fact that they are physically unhealthy and are not willing to do something about it. Officers who are not fit make them "prone to on-duty injuries and illnesses, increases their exposure to liability and engenders a loss of respect from the community based on their appearance (Quigley, 2008, para. 3). There are studies suggesting that officers who are fit and physically appear fit are less likely to be attacked by a suspect. Convicted offenders have answered the question as to why they chose to assault or even kill one officer over the

over. The answer was simply that the officer, by physical appearance, appeared to be in shape and appeared to be more of a challenge or a threat. According to Quigley (2008), “officers need to be mindful of the image they convey and recognize that their appearance and demeanor in uniform is a primary factor in how others will perceive them” (para. 11).

Officers, in general, have a higher death rate as compared to society in general. Officers are more likely to die of a heart attack and cancer (Quigley, 2008). Officers, due to the stressors of the job, commit suicide at a higher rate than the citizens they protect (Quigley, 2008). The stressors include making split-second lifesaving decisions, being faced with unavoidable dangers, various and unusual work days, working long hours, and encountering people who are angry and uncooperative. According to Quigley (2008) “numerous states have adopted the heart and lung bill, allowing officers who develop cardiovascular disease to take an early retirement” (para. 5).

Stress not only causes major health problems, it also has been linked to the emotional well-being of officers. Suicide, divorce, and alcoholism are common within the law enforcement community. Officers experience divorce at higher levels due to job related emotional issues and time away from the family. Officers also work extra jobs to make up for low pay. According to Mroz (2008), there are three reasons officers are forced to work extra jobs because of low pay. The reasons Mroz (2008) stated were that police work is “still regarded as a public works job for which everyone should be eligible, a lack of unionization, particularly in the south, and society doesn’t value two of its most

important jobs-school teachers and public safety personnel as much as they say they do” (para. 15).

Health insurance premium costs are high. Encouraging a healthy and fit employee assists in lowering those insurance rates. Disease is costly, and unfit officers are more likely to suffer from heart attacks, obesity, and cancer. These diseases tend to be very pricey. One in-service heart attack is estimated to cost approximately \$400,000 to \$700,000 (Quigley, 2008). Health plan premiums could be lowered if law enforcement agencies would implement health and wellness programs. Unfit officers have a 40% to 70% higher absenteeism rate than fit officers. A study from North Carolina “reported a 25 percent increase in productivity through a variety of factors: reduced absenteeism, reduced turnover rate, reduced accidents, and reduced worker’s compensation claims” (Quigley, 2008, para. 13).

Wellness and good health are two indicators of a healthy lifestyle. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (“Wellness,” n.d.), wellness is defined as the “quality or state of being in good health especially as an actively sought goal” (para. 1). The Merriam-Webster dictionary (“Health,” n.d.) defines health as the “condition of being of sound in body, mind, or spirit; especially: freedom from physical disease or pain” (para. 1). Officers who see themselves as being fit tend to make better decisions and are more confident in their abilities to perform the job (Moore, 2006). Officers are also less likely to deploy an inaccurate level of force when dealing with a suspect (Moore, 2006). Officers’ productivity levels should increase as their fitness levels increase. Unfit and overweight officers may have the ability to bring a suspect down physically, but they may struggle more in a foot pursuit. Unfit officers may also find themselves watching a

suspect run off into the darkness and wonder “if they were in a better shape, perhaps they could have pursued the suspect and made the arrest.”

Law enforcement and the military have always paralleled each other with regards to their missions of protecting and serving. The military has, however, maintained a higher level of readiness. If soldiers, marines, seaman, and airmen could not maintain a high level of physical readiness, then they became a liability that reverberated throughout the entire organization (Moore, 2006). According to the Law Enforcement Technology Group, “the majority of police work is done with a pad, pencil, and radio until the lid comes off and hell breaks loose, at which time the officer may need the physical attributes of an athlete to survive” (Cooper Institute, 2011, p. 3).

By implementing and encouraging fitness readiness programs “agencies also reduce their liability by ensuring that officers are prepared to handle tasks while controlling the possible risks and their associated costs” (Quigley, 2008, para. 15). Liability lawsuits are a reality and not only attract an enormous amount of public scrutiny but impose fiscal problems on agencies. An example of one such liability case would be *Donald R. Parker v. District of Columbia* (1988). The D.C. Metropolitan Police Department (Repeat Offender Project) ROP sent two RPO officers to a house where Donald Parker might be located. Once at the residence, officers were met by Betty Parker. Ms. Parker then brought Mr. Parker to the door. The officers explained to Mr. Parker that he needed to return to station because of a warrant for armed robbery. Mr. Parker denied having anything to with the armed robbery. After some more conversation, Mr. Parker agreed to accompany the two officers back to the station. Before he left with the officers, Mr. Parker asked if he could change clothes. Officers



allowed Mr. Parker the opportunity to change clothes. Mr. Parker went to a room out of view of the officers, crawled through an open window, and escaped into the woods. The officers located Mr. Parker after he rear-ended their vehicle in a stolen vehicle. One of the officers attempted to remove Mr. Parker from the vehicle without success. Mr. Parker continued to resist the officer, and at some point, the officer thought Mr. Parker was armed and shot him four times. Mr. Parker survived; however, he was left paralyzed for life.

In this case, “the arresting officer was accused of used excessive force to affect an arrest of a combative subject” (Quigley, 2008, para. 15). According to Quigley (2008), “the officer’s lack of physical fitness and inability to use defensive tactics or less lethal options resulted” in him firing his duty weapon causing the lifelong injury to Mr. Parker” (para. 15). The plaintiff in the Parker case was awarded a large sum of money. The appellant, D.C. Metropolitan Police Department, was found to be deliberately indifferent to the physical training needs of its officers (*Parker v. District of Columbia*, 1988).

The officer who can run three miles with ease and catch a suspect is better prepared for the job than the officer who can lift a Volkswagen (Zagaria, 2007). Actually, neither of these assumptions is true. Crossfit training in law enforcement is the new trend. Crossfit training was developed by Mr. Greg Glassman of Crossfit.com. Crossfit training “not only includes strength, power and endurance as components of fitness, but also flexibility, speed, coordination, stamina, agility, balance, and accuracy” (Zagaria, 2007, para. 6). The physical training and exercise most officers receive in the academy is inadequate. Zagaria (2007) also stated that “there may come a time when

you know what to do,” but a person’s fitness level may not allow them to do it (para. 13). Oldham (2009) stated that a supervisor or patrol officer “do[es] not need to bench press your body weight or run an eight minute mile to be in shape...But officers need to be in good enough shape to the job” (Oldham, 2009, para. 14). Oldham (2009) also stated that the fitness level should allow an officer “to be able to chase after those who flee and stay in the fight with those who resist” (para. 14).

## **COUNTER POSITION**

While conducting research for this paper, two arguments against this issue came up: officers can do their job just fine even if they are out of shape, and some people are naturally obese. The first argument is not completely accurate. Mroz (2008) stated that “The physical parts of the job are better performed by physically fit officers” (para. 9). Some officers are able to act in fights, and many have marksmanship skills until they have to exert themselves. Unfit officers are at a higher risk of heart attack during a stressful situation.

Supervisors, from a leadership perspective, must lead by example. Oldham (2009) stated that supervisors must set the bar at a higher level for their officers. If the overweight patrol sergeant “has to stop and catch his breath after descending down a flight of steps, then a physically fit rookie officer fresh from the academy may begin to lose confidence” (Oldham, 2009, para. 10).

Some unfit officers will argue that gaining weight is a genetic defect. Mroz (2008) contended that these officers only need to work harder at being fit. Fast food restaurants are in excess, so eating healthy foods is difficult. Unfit officers need to educate themselves on proper nutrition. Unfit officers, in general, lack the discipline it

takes to work a little harder to keep off the extra weight. Officers are creatures of habit. Obesity is a result of bad habits. Changes in genetic makeup over time occur at a much slower rate to be responsible for the rapid rise in obesity. The problem lies in the notion that officers have poor eating habits and tend to take in more calories than they expel.

## **CONCLUSION**

Police officers should be encouraged and given the resources to prepare for and perform annual physical readiness assessments. Fit officers, on average, will miss less work due to job related injury and illness. Fit officers save their employers money through lower insurance rates, less absenteeism, and less liability lawsuits. Remsberg (2006) found that “Unfit officers who do get injured tend to stay out longer and cost their employers more” in the long run than do fit officers who get injured (para. 8). Fit officers are also less likely to make inappropriate decisions when faced with use of force situations.

The notion that unfit officers can do the job just fine in the shape they are in is not completely accurate. Officers are placed in situations by choice or not that may require a foot chase for several hundred yards or even a fight that may require physical exertion past the benefit of adrenalin. Unfit officers may chose not to pursue the suspect or may lose the fight without back up.

The idea that some people are born predisposed to obesity is not entirely true. Unfit officers need to be motivated and disciplined to work harder at bringing their fitness levels up to or exceeding an acceptable level. Mroz (2008) wrote that “healthy food is now widely available; it requires a little effort to get it” (para. 10). Law

enforcement agencies must make an effort to provide education and training to their officers regarding health and wellness.

Officers are creative in figuring out ways to avoid calls that may require physical exertion if they are unfit. According to Remsberg (2006), the lack of physical readiness is not due to inability but training. Jay Smith is the president of FitForce a company that favors total fitness solutions for public safety. Smith stressed that physical readiness assessments must be validated and “that standards established and tested be related to actual job demands” (Remsberg, 2006, para. 14). Examples of job related scenarios are removing “a resisting subject from a vehicle, pushing a stalled vehicle” (Remsberg, 2006, para. 18), foot pursuits, and ground fighting. According to Di Naso (2006) “almost all law enforcement-specific tasks involve the greatest contribution from the anaerobic energy system, not the aerobic energy system” (para. 4). Di Naso (2006) goes on to say that “high intensity, short duration activities such as getting out of the cruiser and sprinting after an offender or fighting with a noncompliant person are anaerobic” activities (para. 4).

Agencies, when determining what type of training plan to develop, need to do three things: “identify the physical demands of the job in the agency, develop standards to those demands, and develop programs that will help in-service officers meet those standards” (Remsberg, 2006, para. 22). Administrators cannot afford to accept the status quo any longer with regards to fitness and wellness. It is essential for police administrators to ensure the physical readiness of their troops. Agencies owe it to the communities they serve and the officers they employ.

According to Wright (2003), Surgeon General Richard Carmona said, “when you look at obesity, what he called the terror within, a threat that is every bit as real to America as the weapons of mass destruction, obesity as an epidemic is growing” (para. 8). If officers take the elevator instead of the stairs, if they get a ride to their patrol car because their buddy is parked closer to the building, and a fitness program does not even register on the radar, then they might be out of shape (Moore, 2006).

Officers have to be mindful of the people out there who can bench press 400 pounds or run a marathon with no problem. Officers are going to run into these people, and they may inevitably take an officers life. The old saying is true: “somewhere your enemy is training, one day, when he meets you, he will defeat you” (Oldham, 2009, para. 17).

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