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Physical Fitness: Why is it not a Priority?

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ABSTRACT

The public expects the police to be the last line of defense between good and evil. They expect us to be jolly on the spot when they call. The last thing they want is for police officers to look like is a pot bellied slob. When officers can't run across the street in pursuit of a suspect without huffing and puffing, and then if they do catch them, their to tired to take them into custody. This doesn't look good for police relations.

Educating officers in the need for a wellness program, is the first step in getting officers in better physical condition. Police officers have to take a good look at themselves and realizing that they have to be physically fit to perform their jobs in today's society. Extra demands for police services, place a greater amount of stress on police officers. A wellness program has been shown to reduce stress levels, and give officers more confidence in their abilities to do the job.

Written surveys were sent out to large and small police agencies around the State of Texas, in an attempt to ascertain what types of wellness programs agencies have. Personal contacts with citizens have also been conducted, to gather information as to, their views on officer fitness. Through these surveys, most departments had no mandatory wellness program, due to money restraints, and legal issues. The same departments reported that a wellness program would be very beneficial to that department. Almost all of the departments that responded to the survey agreed, that a wellness program was needed. The police professional needs to be fit to manage the demands that are placed on them. Whether it be made mandatory, a volunteer program, paid incentive programs, it's clear that department's realize a wellness program can only be good for them. It's going to be up to each individual officer, has to take responsibility for their health. Your life depends on it, along with the lives of others.

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INTRODUCTION

From 1990 through 1999, 658 law enforcement officers were killed in the line of duty. These officers were killed with handguns, long rifles, and knives while making traffic stops, and while trying to apprehend suspects at domestic and during drug raids. Motor vehicle accidents, such as high speed pursuits, and officers being struck by vehicles at accident scenes accounted for several deaths. A number of officers were injured or died from other causes (F.B.I., 1999). Many of these Officers died by their own weapons that were taken away from them.

Many died for other reasons such as heart disease and other stress related problems. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect is that many of the officers died needlessly.

Many of these deaths, or injuries may have been prevented if the officers would have just done one thing: exercise. Just a few minutes a day of exercise may have been the difference between life and death, for some of these officers. Why do most officers not exercise knowing that it could save their lives? Why do police department's not require their officers to be in shape? The purpose of this research is to find out why departments don't make it mandatory that their officers be in better physical shape or why police departments don't have an exercise program. This research should show that officers who exercise will be more confident, have a better chance of surviving an attack and have a better chance to stay alive even if they are injured.

To gather this data, a written survey was sent to several Texas police departments, and individual officers. Magazines, books, periodicals, journals and other literature were gathered to assist in this research. The survey was designed to answer the questions proposed earlier of whether or not 1) Should police departments have a fitness program? 2) Should officers be required to maintain at least a certain minimum level of physical fitness as a condition of employment and 3) will a wellness program benefit the police department? It is anticipated that this

research will indicate that there are several reasons for wellness program to be implemented into police departments. As with most programs, departments must be ready to defend the reasoning behind any program that is proposed. Administrators must show that there are good reasons as to why we should spend money on any programs and place these mandates on police officers.

Law Enforcement will be the beneficiary of this research as it is hypothesized this research will show that fitness programs will be a great benefit to police departments. It is also hoped that support will be found that wellness programs reduce the number of injuries that officers sustain while on duty, and that officers will be more confident while performing their duties. It is hoped this research will demonstrate officers will be less likely to be so fatigued and stressed while at work or home. The minds, as well as the bodies, need to be healthy. If the mind and the body is not exercised, they will be lost. This research may well be a source for police departments to be able to get a fitness program started. A fitness program can only be a good thing. Anything that reduces the chances of injury or death is beneficial to law enforcement and the public. An officer that is physically fit is less likely to make workers' compensation claims, which saves money and the use of officer overtime.

Review of Literature

The police radio sounds, and one hears the voice of an officer saying, "I need help, I'm at 000 West Road. I'm down and need help!!!" An officer arrives at the scene and find a fellow officer has been injured and the suspect is running from the scene. The officer begins to give chase. He runs about 100 yard~, and then has to stop. The officer is out of breath, his head is spinning and he is getting tired. As the officer stands in the middle of the road watching the suspect run, he realizes that he's not going to catch him the suspect. The radio blares out again, the officer on the radio is frantic, he is advising that the officer that is down is dying. The officer asks himself, "Why didn't I stay in shape, why didn't I eat right and exercise?" These questions are probably asked at least a hundred times a year.

Each and every officer is responsible for the safety of ourselves our fellow officers and the citizens that each of us gave an oath to protect and serve. It is every police officers duty to stay in the best physical condition possible, to be able to carry out assigned duties. Large or small departments face the same problems everyday about officers being out of condition. Though the amount of crime may not be as much in a small city, the stress of police work is still the same. The adrenaline rush when responding to calls, are still there as is the fact that it takes awhile to come down off that rush. These rushes take their toll on officers. Big or small, the problems are the same, officers need to be in shape and need to be ready for every situation.

For most officers, the police academy was the only time that any physical fitness training was done. Running, jumping and eating well were a part of the training program. Then graduation came and officers \vent to their depm1ments. For most officers, physical fitness and eating well ended. Most every one forgot about the importance of physical fitness once at their departments. Most officers didn't continue physical fitness, mainly for two reasons. 1. The training in the academies used physical

training as a punishment. 2. A poorly run training program can and has lead to injuries, and the dislike of physical training. (Schultz & Acevedo. 2000).

The dislike for physical fitness doesn't preclude officers from being in shape. The job demands that officers stay alert, and ready to answer the call whenever and where ever it happens. Staying fit is not that difficult, with a little initiative officers can maintain a good level of fitness that may save their lives as well as the lives of fellow officers and people of the community. Most officers are in fear of the unknown when it comes to going on calls. The danger of being shot or injured is constantly on the officer's minds. Officers suppress these fears so that the job that has to be done, can be done to the best of the officer's ability. Surprisingly enough, the greatest killer of police officers is not bullets, knives, or car crashes, it is heart attacks and coronary disease (Rachlin, 1996).

Odd hours, long hours, and the constant adrenaline rushes that officers face every day add to the stress that an officer must deal with all the time. The pressures of the job combined with the pressures of home life are a serious problem with police officers. The eat and run meals, the tragedies that are witnessed and the holding in of emotions, take there toll on the police professional. Police officers have one of the highest divorce and suicide rates of any profession. One of the biggest ways to combat stress is to eat healthy, and have a good exercise program (Britannia Encyclopedia, 1989). Reducing heart disease should be a priority not just for police officers it should be for everyone.

For a physical fitness program to pass the legal questions as to validity for being job related, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has used three guidelines. 1. Content Validity. If officers in the course of their duties must scale a 6- foot wall to apprehend a suspect, then the test requiring an officer to scale a 6- foot wall would be considered reasonable. 2. Criterion Validity Testing an officer's aerobic power. This would simulate that an officer had to pursue someone on foot for two or three minutes. 3. Construct Validity. Test for underlying factors that would enable an

officer to do the job. Example: the use of the upper body strength. The ability to carry, lift, or wrestle with a suspect, to apprehend them. (Collingwood, 1988).

Physical agility tests must be given to all applicants, and the test must be job related and consistent with job functions. Physical agility tests are not medical examinations. Departments can have an agility test, but may not require a prescreening prior to the testing. what they can do under the American's with Disabilities Act guideline (American's with Disability Act, 29 CFRI630.14) is request that an applicant's physician answer restricted questions as to the applicants ability to take the agility test with no harm to the applicant. The employer, can request a physical exam after a conditional offer of employment has been made (Higinbotham, 1991). The American's with Disability Act also states that assessments must be made of all individuals that will be required to perform job related tasks. Even if a person is over weight, they may be protected, because that individual may have a medical problem that affects their being able to control their weight (McCormack, 1994). Statistics show that physically fit officers are higher achievers and that they take pride in the work that they do. They tend to pay more attention to details and feel better about what they do (Sweeney, 1992). The public also has an interest in how officers look and if they are in shape or not. The. public wants to feel safe in the fact that officers out on the street can protect them and are reliable. Even today, the perception of police officers is that they go to the coffee shop and eat donuts all day. Police officers have to break this stigma. The public also sees that an officer that is out of shape is a bully, because they have to make themselves look good. "I don't want some pot bellied cop coming to my house when I need help, what are they going to do"? (Hoffman, 1993).

According to a study done by (Chang, Boyle & Otto 1989) it is estimated that people that do not exercise, are 36% more likely to have a higher health cost. They are 54% more likely to have a longer hospital stay.

Overweight people have a 7% higher health care cost, and have a 85% longer hospital stay, Smokers cost are about 25% higher in health care and average 114% longer stays in the hospital. Failure to exercise, means that everyone can or may develop more health care problems later in life.

The benefits of a wellness program are immeasurable. When an officer gets injured, one day in the hospital could cost several hundreds of dollars. One week could cost thousands. The time lost on the job also costs the department and the city money. The loss of that officer means overtime for someone, which causes those officers more stress. A wellness program can also bring down the cost of insurance to the city and to the officer personally. If officers are in good shape, they will be less likely to be injured, and even if they are injured, they spend a lot less time in the hospital on average. This means less overtime for other officers. In reality, a wellness program is cost effective to all concerned (Getz, 1990).

Older officers are susceptible to the same problems that younger officers face in their work. The stress and daily grind can even be more hazardous to these officers. A wellness program would be very beneficial to the older officers. Setting up a program for these officers would be the same as for other officers, they would just be given a longer time to get physically fit, and adjust to the program, The officers would gain more confidence, and hopefully live long enough to enjoy their retirement (Smith, 1997).

What about the legal aspects of having a wellness program? Remember, the American's with Disabilities Act, and the Civil Rights Act all have requirements that must be met to have a valid testing program. But what about the courts, how do they feel about wellness programs? In the 1988 case of U.S v. City of Wichita Falls. et al., it was determined that the physical agility tests that were given to persons seeking employment were if fact valid. The tests of running, and climbing fences and upper body strength test were shown to have a direct bearing on what the officers had to face everyday in

the city (Ness, 1992).

In the *Tennessee v. Garner* case, police officers were called to a residence in reference to a prowler. Upon arrival, the suspect, a 15 year old boy runs from the officers. The suspect then climbs a fence to get away from officers. An officer that was giving chase, was unable to apprehend the suspect, so he draws his weapon and applies deadly force, shooting the suspect in the back of the head. The court said " The use of deadly force to prevent the escape of some felony suspects, under specific conditions is constitutionally unreasonable. Just because an officer is a little late or are slow of foot. does not always justify killing the suspect" (Tennessee v. Garner, 1985). In another case an officer in the District of Columbia attempted to subdue an unarmed suspect. During the struggle, the officer shot the suspect. The courts found that, due to the officers lack of adequate physical conditioning, and the officers lack of knowledge of arrest procedures, he posed a threat to the public. It was found that the officer had had no training in these areas for several years (Parker v. District of Columbia, 1988). In the case from California, an officer felt that the departmental physical agility test was an invalid testing procedure. However the court upheld the test saying that the test was reasonable and that it was part of the job requirements that had to be performed everyday while on duty (Hardy v. Stumpf, 1978).

In another case, a discrimination suit was filed against a police department claiming that the 1.5 mile run was discriminatory towards women. The courts upheld the training requirements that all officers should have to pass a 1.5 mile run, because it was shown that officers would have to pursue suspects on foot at times, and officers needed to be in shape to run and subdue a suspect (U.S. v. Septa, 1997).

Another important issue is getting officers involved in a wellness program. One strategy is to... make it a part of the promotional process. To be promoted to a higher rank, an officer must meet certain physical requirements, along with a written test, and oral interviews. Time off

incentives can also be used. If the officers meet or exceed the requirements of the wellness program, extra days off can be given to those officers. Extra vacation days could be an incentive in getting officers to be in the wellness programs. Two extra days off along with vacation days or with normal days off provide incentive. This part of the incentive would have to take into consideration that manpower would allow such a move. Workout time on duty could also be an incentive. If manpower permits, officers could be given 3 to 4 hours a week to workout while on duty (Tielsch, 1976). If the department has the resources, pay increases could be an incentive for the program. Bonuses, can be another way to get officers involved. Two day trips can be given to officers that meet or exceed the wellness program requirements. Public recognition, such as officer of the year awards or officer of the week awards that are put into the local news papers are another option, (Witozak, 1984). These are only a few ideas as to getting officers involved in a worthwhile program. The limit to getting officers involved to staying healthy, is only limited to the imagination of the program directors.

People look at the police to help, and to keep them safe. Many Kids look up to the police as a role model, and want to be cops when they grow up. Officer's should give them what they deserve, someone to be proud of, and to be trusted.

METHODOLOGY

Do we really need fitness programs in law enforcement? Do police officers think that a fitness program would be beneficial to them and to other officers? What are the benefits to a wellness program? Should wellness programs be mandatory? It is hypothesized that the answer to these questions will be varied from officer to officer and department to department. Departments and officers will most likely know the benefits of a wellness program, but they will not have any type of program. It is further hypothesized that many departments will be in favor of a wellness program, but they are hesitant due to fear of lawsuits, and the cost of implementing such programs.

To answer these questions a written survey was sent to several departments in the State of Texas. Surveys were sent to large and small departments, such as Dallas, Houston, Amarillo, Lubbock, Snyder, Littlefield and Brownfield. Several Sheriff's departments were also contacted.

Approximately 50 surveys were sent out, and 38 surveys were returned. The survey questions dealt with having a wellness program, is it a mandatory program, do you recommend a program to other departments, and do you think that the wellness program has helped your department to reduce officer injuries and sick time used. Citizens were also contacted and asked what they thought about the physical condition of police officers that they have met? Approximately 10 citizens were contacted for this survey. They were chosen from patrons at grocery stores, restaurants and included men, women, hispanics, whites and blacks.

FINDINGS

Of the fifty surveys sent, only fifteen departments reported that they had any type of a wellness program. Twenty-five Departments reported that they had no wellness program. Six of the fifteen departments made it mandatory for their officers to attend training. Nine departments left it up to the officers to workout on their own time. Twenty of the departments that had no wellness program, still felt that a wellness program would be very beneficial to their departments. They hoped to be getting a program started in their departments soon. Ten departments only required officers to pass a fitness test during their time at the academy, there was no wellness training after that.

The biggest percent of any continued training was reserved for the special units within the department. K-9, SWAT and Motorcycle Patrol. Training for these special units are essential for what they do.

Four departments reported that they had wellness programs, however the programs were discontinued, due to civil service restraints, workman's comp complaints, and lack of funds. The workman's comp complaint had to deal with an officer that got hurt due to working out.

Many insurance companies feel that a wellness program would benefit these agencies in the long run. The better shape that the officers are in, the less they get injured, and the less insurance moneys have to be spent. In some cases, a wellness program, actually reduced the amount of insurance that a police department had to pay. Due to agencies not keeping records of wellness programs, only two agencies noticed a drop in absenteeism and workman comp claims since the wellness programs were implemented. They also noticed attitudes by officers were better.

The cost of starting and maintaining a program is an important issue. Many departments are not monetarily able to buy workout equipment. A good weight set and a place to put all the equipment could bankrupt a small department. \$2000.00 would be the bare minimum that a

department would have to spend for weights and other items. This would not include the space needed for the weights and exercise equipment. A membership to a good gym would cost approximately \$300 to \$500 per person, many departments and officers just can't afford that type of expense.

The result of six informal citizen surveys were revealing. Six *of* the citizens surveyed, said that the officers that they met, needed to lose some weight. They didn't look good in their uniforms. They stated, they felt that they could out nm the officers if they had to. Others said that they see officers smoking, and that this was unhealthy for them (several of these citizens were smokers). Four citizens didn't even think about it They didn't have an opinion as to the officers being in shape. when asked if officers needed to be in shape, these four people stated that the officers should be physically fit.

Officers that were contacted from different agencies, had several different attitudes about wellness programs. Twenty one officers felt that wellness programs were needed. The problem that most of them faced included time to workout, money to join a club and legal considerations by management. Many of the officers felt that wellness programs should be used in promotions and getting assigned to special units. They also wanted to be compensated for being in these programs. Pay incentives were discussed, and receiving extra days off during the year were also talked about. The overall feeling from the entire survey was that a wellness program was needed, and that police officers as well as administrators realize that in today's society, all police officers need to be aware of the consequences *of* their actions, as well as the failure to act. Failing to get officers into a wellness program can be detrimental to all concerned.

CONCLUSSION/DISCUSSION

Is there a need for a wellness program in law enforcement? All of the research done, has pointed to the fact that a wellness program is in fact needed. Research has shown that most all law enforcement officers feel that a wellness program would be very beneficial to their departments, and to the officers themselves. Administrators feel that a wellness program would reduce sick time and lost officers hours due to injuries. They also feel that it would be a morale booster for their departments. In addition, a wellness program would hopefully help officers to live, longer due to them exercising and staying healthy. Wellness training needs to be monitored, and the officers given the correct training on how a workout should be done. That old saying "no pain, no gain" is not correct. If there is pain your doing it wrong. There is a difference in pain and physically tired muscles. Straining muscles get tired, painful muscles are injured, know the difference, and save any problems that may arise.

Should a wellness program be mandatory? There are many mixed emotions about this question. Many officers feel that if it is made mandatory, who will pay for the program? While talking with many of the Leadership Command College students, and from my own personnel experience many officers will not do anything extra without getting paid for it. Due to the fair standards labor laws, if an officer is required to do anything extra off duty, they must be paid for that time. What's even worse, is that many officers just don't want to do it. They feel that they have survived this long without it, why change. One day this attitude will come back to haunt them. unfortunately, others may pay for it also. Fortunately, this kind of attitude is changing due to the recognition by officers that a wellness program is beneficial to them in many ways. Pay incentives for working out, getting a few extra days off (good days off), the biggest incentive is staying alive. Each of us knows that to live a longer life, we have to exercise and eat right. Police

departments are on tight budgets and there is a concern as to how the programs would be paid for. However there are ways around this problem. Donations: Ask the public or even some of the officers to donate weight lifting equipment to the department. The equipment that the officers donate can revert back to them if they decide to leave the department. Set up fundraisers, ie.. bake sales. car washes. almost anything to get the items that the department needed. Civic groups like the Lions Clubs and Rotary Clubs are often willing to help. Try to get a group membership at a local gym, or try the local high school or college. They have exercise rooms and they may be willing to give the police department access to the gym. If the departments or officers really want a wellness program, a way will be found to get one. Remember, this program is really about saving lives. While talking with many of the Leadership Command College students, and from my own personnel, many officers will not do anything extra without getting paid for it. Due to the fair standards labor laws, if an officer is required to do anything extra off duty, they must be paid for that time. What's even worse, is that many officers just don't want to do it. They feel that they have survived this long without it, why change. One day this attitude will come back to haunt them. unfortunately, others may pay for it also. Fortunately, this kind of attitude is changing due to the recognition by officers that a wellness program is beneficial to them in many ways. Pay incentives for working out, getting a few extra days off (good days off), the biggest incentive is staying alive. Each of us knows that to live a longer life, we have to exercise and eat right. If it is made mandatory, what about the officers that are already in service? How does a department deal with them meeting the standards? Current officers would have to be given time to meet the standards. Employees could not be terminated for not meeting standards without being given time to prepare. Every officer would need the opportunity to get in shape, so that the standards could be met.

The department that sets up a wellness program, must meet the legal standards for the jobs that the officers perform. Failure to comply with these standards can leave the department open for lawsuits. Department's are also open to litigation if it they are negligent in not trying to do something about officers that don't meet job requirements. It is the responsibility of the chief of the department to address these problems as they arise. Failure to address these problems leaves the depa11ment and the city, and the officers and administrators open to litigation. It is the chief's responsibility to make sure that his officers are fit for the job. The safety of the officers, and the public are in the hands of the administration. It is the responsibility of the chief to make sure that training, and the fitness of the officers in his command is done properly and above reproach.

The hypothesis is supported. Police chiefs and police officers all agree that a wellness program would be beneficial to their departments. They also feel that they are between a rock and a hard place because of the restrictions imposed by the Fair Labor Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act as to what they can and can't do. There is also concern because the coulls have made so many decisions against departments for lack of wellness programs and then turn around and allow lawsuits from police officers because of wellness programs. It is hard for police departments to know which way to turn. Cost also deters departments from implementing programs. Monies for these programs are not available in many cases. How can departments mandate a program, if that department can't pay for it'?

It is in every ones best interest, that police officers stay in shape. The public is better served due to the officers being able to handle situations without being heavy handed, and having a better attitude. in meeting these situations. The police depm1ments benefit due to the officers using less sick time. not using workmans comp as often and insurance rates going down in

some cases. The officers benefit from wellness programs also. Officers are less likely to be injured, they have better self esteem, and have better attitudes towards their jobs. Officers are also less likely to have heart problems, and are less likely to develop health problems in the future.

Law enforcement needs to keep up with the times. In this day and age of staying fit for life. police officers have to keep up with the times. The public is getting healthier, even the inmates in prison exercise to stay fit. Law enforcement have to stay up with the ever changing times. Technology is changing and criminals are becoming more sophisticated but the bottom line is that officers still deal with everyday street crime, and they need to be ahead of the game. Staying in shape will put officers that much farther ahead. Officers should feel that staying in shape is a commitment to life. Even if it's mandated, officers still have to want to be better. The public, and fellow officers deserve the best that can be given. Be fit for life.

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