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Developing and Implementing the Right Physical Fitness/Wellness Programs &
Physical Agility Training for Officers in the Fort Bend ISD Police Department

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ABSTRACT

The physical ability and physical fitness of a police officer is paramount to survival. Police officers are dying every day from physical confrontation and health related illnesses. Law enforcement agencies across the country have discovered not only the need for entry level, physical fitness evaluations, but also physical fitness/wellness programs for their officers. Physical fitness plays a critical role in job performance in all aspects of law enforcement. Today's officers must make instantaneous decisions based on experience, training and education. Often the decisions must be made under very poor, high anxiety and extremely physical circumstances. Most employing agencies, as well as state policy setting and oversight agencies such as the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education (TCLEOSE), require specific training in various areas. A physical fitness/wellness program and physical agility and training for new officers will help decrease officer absenteeism, increase productivity, and decrease the school increase. A physical fitness/wellness program will improve officers' physical and mental health. This research will explore and illustrate the need for implementing a physical fitness/wellness program as well as agility training for new and veteran officers. This allows the officers to increase their awareness of the importance of physical fitness.

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INTRODUCTION

Physical fitness with law enforcement has always been an area of sensitivity. The physical ability and physical fitness of a police officer is paramount to his or her survival. Police officers are dying every day from physical confrontation and health related illnesses. Law enforcement agencies across the country have discovered not only the need for entry level, physical fitness evaluations, but also physical fitness/wellness programs for their officers. Physical fitness plays a critical role in job performance in all aspects of law enforcement. Studies and evaluations of law enforcement agencies across the country indicate that an officer's worst enemy is not the criminal on the street, but the stress inherent to his job (Arters & Aaron, 1989).

Today's officers must make instantaneous decisions based on experience, training, and education, and often the decisions must be made under very poor, high anxiety, and extreme physical circumstances. The officer needs every available tool. If the officer does not possess the proper tools at the time of the critical incident, the ramifications can be severe. Departments will spend countless dollars on training to ensure that its officers are better prepared to handle most of the situations they may encounter. Currently, training is being implemented to curtail the number of lawsuits filed against law enforcement agencies in an effort to reduce the number of future suits. However, it seems that little is done to address the issues of whether our officers are actually physically well enough to be able to perform all that is required of them. In fact, fewer agencies are offer training to their officers as a means of ensuring awareness of the risks that they face by not taking care of themselves physically.

Police work is quite sedentary at times. The combination of the occasional high stress times mixed with the usual "just taking care of business" can be hazardous for officers who are unaware of the effects that this has on their bodies. While many other areas of proficiency are

actively monitored, evaluated, and corrected as needed, the officer's physical conditioning is viewed more as an individual, personal concern than as an agency matter (LCC Agility Surveys, 2000). Among the proficiency abilities an officer is expected to attain, to maintain at a high level, and to demonstrate on sometimes a daily basis, a proficiency in physical abilities is not among those expectations. Most employing agencies, as well as state policy setting and oversight agencies such as the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education (TCLEOSE), require specific training in various areas. In addition to more academic areas of continued training, frequent testing, or exhibition of weapons, proficiency is conducted. However, the skills or abilities that are brought to the fore--most often those of physical strength, endurance, and stamina--carry no such requirements.

A physical fitness/wellness program combined with physical agility training for all officers will help decrease officers' absenteeism, increase productivity, and decrease the school district costs as they relate to worker's compensation and insurance premiums. A physical fitness program will improve officers' physical and mental health. Physical benefits translate to reductions in heart disease, hypertension, and obesity. Mental benefits include minimized stress, divorce rates, and burnout. A fitness program will help to deter the added cost of liability as was the case of *Parker vs. District of Columbia* (850 F2d 708).

These research findings will explore the need and show that implementing a physical fitness/wellness program as well as agility training for the hiring of new and veteran officers will directly benefit not only the officers, but the department as well. This allows the officers to increase their awareness of the importance of physical fitness. Management will see better overall job performance and a decrease in job related injuries and officer stress, both of which can result in decreases in sick leave.

Review of Literature

Much of the supporting evidence exists to show the direct impact between fitness and the officer's ability to perform required job tasks and manage stress. Research data consistently shows that fitness has an inverse causation with stress. Within the findings, fitness will be synonymous with the ability to withstand stress. Public perceptions of police officers include such characteristics as being tough and strong. To the contrary, according to Getz (1990), 56% of police officers are overweight, and 86% do little or no exercise. It is becoming increasingly obvious that physical fitness does play a critical role in job performance for all aspects of law enforcement.

Arters and Aaron (1989) state that "an officer's worst enemy is not a felon with a loaded gun, but job related stress." Officers of the Fort Bend Independent School District (FBISD) are not required to pass a physical fitness exam during the hiring procedure, nor are they required to maintain any prescribed fitness standard after employment. However, officers should be required to meet and maintain certain prescribed standards of physical fitness and agility. The physical requirements of police officers are unique to most other professions. These requirements should increase every year whether through intensive classroom in service training, physical exertion requirements, or during physical encounters with resistant suspects. The purpose of wellness and or/physical fitness programs in the police department arena has simply to do with health and safety for both the officer and the public. Physical fitness has been shown to directly relate to an officer's job readiness and general mental and physical well-being. The physical fitness/wellness program will predict, identify, and help prevent certain health problems by improving the overall and physical fitness of personnel through medical exams, education and physical fitness testing.

Thomas and Means (2001) have shown nine different categories of medical problems commonly found in police officers. Statistics in Table 1 illustrate their research findings.

Table 1. Common Officer Medical Problems.

Medical Problem	Percentage of Medical Problems
Obesity/overweight	20%-50%
Heart disease	10%-50%
High Cholesterol	20%-35%
Orthopedic injuries	20%-25%
Back injury	15% 25%
Psychological problems	8%-25%
Gastrointestinal	5%-10%
Hypertension	4%-15%
Diabetes	1%-2%

Thomas and Means (2001) show that by implementing the right physical fitness program will help the officers and their department in alleviating common officers' medical problems.

The first step is the initial planning for a fitness program. Thomas and Means suggest nine categories (Table 2).

Table 2. Initial Planning for Fitness Programs.

Initial Planning For Fitness Programs – Nine Steps Suggested by Thomas and Means
1. Establish an agency fitness task force.
2. Assess the need for a program.
3. Develop the mission, goals, and objectives for the program.
4. Define the fitness program components.
5. Identify the resources required.
6. Determine the program budget.
7. Define the organizational structure.
8. Plan how to phase in the program.
9. Develop a program validation report.

Thomas and Means (2001) follow this up by saying that after the initial planning stages and implementing the fitness program we see that several factors hinges on the economics and the impact of these fitness programs (Table 3).

Table 3. Economic Factors of Fitness Programs.

Factor	Law Enforcement
Absenteeism	Generally lower sick time rates (30%) 80% drop in sick time due to injuries.
Morale	No Data
Productivity	Only reported measure is higher supervisor ratings.
Health Care Costs	Some drops reported. Lower injury rates reported.
Cost benefit	No data except the cost of replacing an officer at 165%

After identifying the common medical problems that officers have, followed by initiating a plan for a fitness program, then finally observing the economic impact, we see that the officers and the department will benefit from a fitness program. Table 4 is an increase in four different stages.

Table 4. Administrators' Perceived Benefits of Fitness Programs.

Perceived Benefit	Percentage of administrators with this perception
Improved Health	8%
Improved Morale	26%
Improved Health Insurance	19%
Decreased Absenteeism	19%

While a growing consensus believes that law enforcement officers are held to some standard of physical fitness, that same consensus also believes health and agility are not the most important attributes for law enforcement officers to possess. However, the growing misperception that physical fitness is unnecessary should raise concerns (Thomas & Means, 2001).

An Independent School District (ISD) police officer needs to be physically fit to maintain the pace of the young groups he or she is working to protect as well as keep in line. One of these youth groups ranges in age from 4 years to 19 years old. Yet another group--former students

attending sports functions--range in age from 18 years to 25 years old. Additionally, the officer has to deal with the parents of the students at all levels, sometimes in hostile situations.

There are two types of programs--voluntary and mandatory--which vary the methodology used to get an officer to meet certain fitness standards. With the voluntary programs, there are incentives for the officer to make sure the goals are met. The mandatory has sanctions for non-compliance with the standards (Hoffman, 1998).

Recent reports suggest that cardiac death rates were higher for officers than employees in any other profession. (Lambrinides, August 1992). Additionally, the average American male lives to be 72 years old, while the average law enforcement officer lives to be 59 years old (Strandberg, 1997). Wellness programs focus on the benefits of officers maintaining a healthy lifestyle. As employees' attitude and morale improve the work environment is enhanced, thus reducing the turnover rate (Durst, 1997).

Methodology

The method by which information was obtained is through articles, web sites, news briefs, books, and medical studies. Studies have proved, that yes there is a need for physical fitness. The police department managers should consider several issues when implementing fitness programs within their departments. The factors surrounding non physical fitness within the departments is the lack of time and energy. Lack of regular exercise relates to high stress levels, which leads to chronic illness. Many veteran officers have not participated in physical fitness programs, since leaving the training academy. With this in mind it is critical for departments to adapt a physical fitness training program to insure the older officers maintain some level of exercise regimen.

According to an article written by Dr. Kenneth Cooper M.D., he states, “no matter what your particular exercise goals may be, the most important thing is to achieve it safely. After all, you want to gain your health and not lose it. That’s why a thorough physical examination should be the first step on your road to fitness.” (Cooper, 1970, p. 21).

Hazelwood, Missouri instituted their fitness program after a year old officer died of a heart attack off duty. While conducting the medical screening that goes with their new program two other officers were found to have serious heart conditions, which had been undiagnosed. (Getz, 1990). Addison’s police department implemented a wellness program as well, only to discover that two of its own officers had heart problems (Layman, 1998).

Findings

Most police officers are very much aware of the stress that is associated with their occupation, and the importance of maintaining a normal stress free work place According to NLETA (2002) A police department significant implications to this profile, in terms of health and safety, public safety, officer’s productivity, officer retention, injury rates, limited duties, workers comp, public relations and more. The American Heart Association (AHA) follows consumer health issues as they relate to the health and welfare of heart diseases. According to a consumer pamphlet published by AHA titled *E is for exercise*, “Ask almost anyone and their most common response would be that exercise is good for the heart.” Cardiovascular exercise had been known to be particularly good for the heart. Of course, it is unlikely that exercise alone will prevent or cure heart disease. But a sedentary life style may increaser the risk of having a heart attack and regular exercise is considered an important Influence in reducing that risk factor. Regular exercise brings gains in many ways. It improves blood circulation throughout the body, lungs, heart and other organs and muscles work together more efficiently. It helps an individual

handle stress, so he or she can do more and not tire so easily. It bolsters enthusiasm and optimism and is good for psychological well being, it is a tension relief and helps promote good relaxation and sleep.

Along with proper diet it can help control weight if performed on a regular basis; it may also help the body make the best use of fats and sugars, (carbohydrates). Although exercise is not a remedy for all physical illnesses, and in some cases without proper guidance, it could be damaging.

However, a program appropriate for an individual can make a difference in personal outlook and well-being. Exercise such as weight lifting on isometrics may build muscle strength, but does little to promote cardiovascular fitness, these exercise may be an adjunct to your regular exercise program; that is for you and your doctor to decide. But do not depend on them to build up your cardiovascular endurance. Remember, lack of exercise might be a risk factor leading to heart disease. Ignoring the major risk factor of heart disease such as hypertension, high cholesterol levels, and cigarette smoking, exercise alone probably won't help much; it is only one factor in a total program of cardiovascular health.

The American Cancer Society states that by eating smart will avoid the risk of becoming obese and in doing this you will reduce risk of uterine, breast and gall bladder. Colon cancers, when cutting back on the total amount of fat intake it reduces the risk of breast, prostate, and colon cancer. An increased fiber intake reduces the risk of colon cancer. Foods rich in vitamins A and C will reduce the risk of cancer in the esophagus, lung, and larynx, including vegetables of the cabbage family, which can reduce the risk of colorectal stomach cancers. Alcohol intake should be limited to reduce the risk of liver oral cancers. Additionally, officers seeking to improve their health are advised to consume less smoked, salted or nitrate-cured foods as this has

the potential to reduce the risk of esophagus and stomach cancers. The seven steps outlined by the American Cancer Society in its *Eat Smart-Reduce Your Cancer Risk* brochures advise this will help reduce the risk of any cancer, leading to healthier and more productive life.

The negative effects of stress on police officers reveals that exercise is a critical element in their daily lives. Police work is one of the top rated professions with a high level of job stress, next to air traffic controllers, dentists and doctors. Adding to the mounting daily stress officers must endure is the element of self-restraint, or refraining from acts of personal vigilante justice. Many officers can attest to the fact that at times it can be difficult to go “by the book” when subduing a suspect, particularly when that suspect has threatened bodily harm to the officer or innocent civilians. For law enforcement officials, being cognizant and diligently mindful of what side of the law they’re on can be difficult at times. Coincidentally, the effects of stress on police can unfortunately result in a higher suicide mortality rate. The media has exposed the increased level of suicide among police officers with the recent attention that police suicide has received in the media there has been a number of reviews on police suicide.

Consider the following statistic, which reports that between 1934 and 1960 police suicides were less than half of the general population. Between 1980 and the present, suicide rates almost approach double. What is the difference? Police officers are now held to a higher standard of accountability, and taking matters—and personal grievances--against a life-threatening suspect into their own hands is out of the question. Street justice is all but gone with increased usage of personal video cameras. Seemingly, the media thrives on exposing police corruption and brutality causing a greater amount of restraint causing stress.

Politicians continue to pander to the public with the new laws and restrictions for police officers that further tie their hands as it relates to the handling of it suspects. Additionally,

several other stressors come into play. Research supports the idea that both killing someone in the line of duty as well as having a partner killed in the line of duty is perhaps the source of the greatest stress for police officers. However, the most common police stressor is the lack of support by the department and bosses. Family with a disruptive lifestyle considered being unstable plays an important role in the stress arena. Interestingly, physical danger is ranked low on the list of stressors by police officers. As we examine research from Cooper Aerobics Institute of Dallas, expectations of physical fitness decrease with an increase of a police officer's age, according to three different charts illustrating standards for physical fitness based upon age. They range from below average to excellence (see appendices, Tables I, II and III).

Discussion/Conclusions

The purpose of this research is to develop and implement the right physical fitness wellness program/physical agility and training for new as well as veteran's officers, within the Fort Bend ISD Police department. Research data shows that fitness programs that benefit police departments are not only costly to the department especially to the ISD police departments. The ISD police department has access to the school field house, (weight room) and track, gym areas and natatorium for swimming. Fort Bend ISD has also implemented a ropes program as an obstacles course. The test or assessment must be fair and doesn't discriminate against particular protected groups. The assessment must be an essential part of the department's job function. Liability is a good reason to implement a physical fitness program for veteran's officers to alleviate long-term disability.

The question now is how the lack of physical fitness affects a peace officer's life span? Is it critical to your mental health? To maintain an even life balance exercise is vital to long life and wellness. All reasonable individuals recognize the need for law enforcement officers to be

healthy and fit. Police work in the 21st century is largely sedentary in nature. Getting past all of the barriers, and working to increase the health and fitness of your officers can be a tall order, but it is certainly feasible. And at the end of the day if keeping your fellow officers and your community safer is the end result, then the efforts put forth are definitely worth it, (NLETA, November 2002). One of the best reasons for implementing a physical fitness/wellness program is to maintain good health habits, safety, as well as the well-being of the department. When officers are in a better fit condition, less sick time will be taken and there will be a reduction of on-the-job injuries.

When an officer is better fit he will be able to react more efficiently in use of force situations. A physically fit officer looks better and presents a more confident and professional image. In writing my research paper I feel that the implementation of a voluntary physical fitness wellness program would better accommodate the Fort Bend ISD Police Department. Currently there are no wellness or fitness programs in place. The implementation of a private work out gym could prove to be beneficial to the officers.

The common motto of many law enforcement agencies across the country is “To Protect and To Serve.” For any officer to perform at his or her best and to provide the highest level of service, maintaining top physical condition is required.

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Appendices

Cooper Aerobics Institute of Dallas

Appendix I. Police Fitness Chart, Ages 20-29 Years.

Fitness Category	1.5 Mile Run	Body Fat	Flexibility	Push ups	Sit ups	Agility Run
Excellent	Below 10.15	Below 6.7	Above 25.9	Above 43	Above 51	Below 16.2
Good	10.16 12.00	6.8 17.3	25.8 19.7	42 28	50 40	16.2 17.7
Average	12.01 14.30	17.4 22.6	19.6 16.6	27 20	39 35	17.8 18.6
Below Average	14.31 16.30	22.7 33.2	16.5 10.5	19 5	34 24	18.7 20.2

Appendix II. Police Fitness Chart, Ages 30-39 Years.

Fitness Category	1.5 Mile Run	Body Fat	Flexibility	Push ups	Sit ups	Agility Run
Excellent	Below 11.00	Below 13.8	Above 26.4	Above 37	Above 45	Below 16.2
Good	11.01 13.00	13.9 21.5	26.3 19.2	36 23	44 34	16.3 18.1
Average	13.01 15.30	21.6 25.4	19.1 15.6	22 17	33 29	18.2 19.1
Below Average	15.31 17.30	25.5 33.0	15.5 8.4	16 3	28 18	19.2 21.0

Appendix III. Police Fitness Chart, Ages 40-52 Years.

Fitness Category	1.5 Mile Run	Body Fat	Flexibility	Push ups	Sit ups	Agility Run
Excellent	Below 11.30 11.31	Below 16.8 16.9	Above 23.3 23.2	Above 28 27	Above 39 38	Below N.A. N.A.
Good	14.00 14.01	22.9 23.0	16.3 16.2	18 17	26 25	N.A.,
Average	16.30 16.31	26.0 26.1	12.8 12.7	13 12	19 18	N.A.
Below Average	18.30	32.2	5.7	2	6	