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Physical Fitness For Police Officers

A Policy Research Project
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Of the Requirements for
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by
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Abstract

This paper covers a topic that is relevant to law enforcement agencies and municipal governments all over the country. The physical conditioning of police officers is something that is looked at closely during the hiring process, but is soon forgotten after an officer goes to work. The purpose of this research is to show a need for the continued maintenance of an officers physical conditioning, and the benefits derived from such. It will also show a need for the furnishing of workout facilities and equipment by police departments for their officers to use.

Research was done by studying articles in law enforcement journals, physical fitness journals, health journals and books.

The paper concludes that there is a definite need for today's police officers to stay in good physical shape, and that the furnishing of proper facilities and equipment will aid them in doing so. The individual officer will benefit in that he/she will be better prepared physically to survive a physical confrontation, and survive the stress of the job. The public will also benefit in that it will insure that when an officer answers their call for help, there will be no doubt in the officers capacity to provide that protection.

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Introduction

Despite an increased interest in recent years in physical fitness of police officers, little research has been done. Some feel that it is a problem that is all too often ignored by both administrators and police officers themselves. The Dallas Institute of Aerobic Research indicates that three out of five on the job injuries are fitness related. Research indicates that 56% of the country's police officers were overweight, with 20% of these being more than 20 pounds overweight (Hoffman 25). Despite the fact that individual police officers are aware of the benefit of maintaining good physical fitness, they fail to do so because there are too many things to do, such as working overtime, spending time with fellow officers, or working on furthering their education. Police officers in this country are the best trained in the history of policing, yet physical fitness, outside the hiring process, is in many instances overlooked. Speed, endurance and strength are often critical factors in determining the outcome of an encounter between police officers and law breakers. Unfortunately if an officer does nothing to maintain those abilities, they will deteriorate. A person physically unable to perform the job could pose a direct threat to human life and safety (Law and Order 71).

In addition to the physical dangers faced by police officers, there is a tremendous amount of stress that is inherent with the job. This comes in many forms from many different directions, and is often the cause of early burnout, marital discord, heart attacks, etc. (Violanti et al. 17). A regular program of physical activity has long been shown to be an effective way of dealing with this stress. Studies have indicated that the single most contributing factor in the early death of law enforcement officers is related to the lack of regular exercise. Odds are ten to one that a police officer will die of a heart attack rather than job related violence.

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Unfortunately, many law enforcement agencies do not provide their officers with the means to engage in a physical fitness program. In fact, all over the country, officers who want to get in shape or stay in shape, are forced to join privately run health clubs at their own expense. Not only can a well-developed fitness program help to reduce injuries, boost morale, and foster a more effective crime fighting force, but it can also be cost effective component to a department's overall health care policy.

This paper, by referencing books, journals, and current research will demonstrate that today modern police officers care about fitness and want to maintain it. The benefits of an effective and fairly administered health fitness program for law enforcement agencies should no longer be ignored.

My goal is to convince city governments as well as police administrations, including the City of Lacy Lakeview and Lacy Lakeview P.D., that providing such equipment will help not only the police officers, but other city employees as well. Ultimately, the citizens of the community will benefit.

Historical, Legal and Theoretical Context

Radio dispatch--"Car 10...report of a silent alarm at..." The feeling that results from such a call, calm exterior outside but inside the heart begins thumping, is a familiar one to officers. The palms get sweaty, the chest pounds as you mentally develop a plan of action based on your experience.

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You arrive at the call prepared for any surprise, only to discover it is a false alarm. Now you must shift your body's reaction into reverse and "calm down". Body function must return to normal, but how long does it take? One minute, five minutes, half an hour or more ?

Police officers put their bodies through this process on a regular basis. For them, the problem is compounded by the fact that the body is not designed to handle repeated stress without conditioning (Prentice and Tracy 17).

Law enforcement work is genuinely stressful--physically as well as mentally and emotionally. Your body has a built in system which enabled survival in caveman times, and the system is still in use today. But, fight-or-flight responses can backfire, most commonly on an "out of condition" body (Johnson and Kuha 10).

Off duty some officers turn to the bottle or other mind altering substance, legal or otherwise, to combat the stress and stave off the depression that results from trying to feel good in the face of so much "bad". Too often stress leads to suicide. Stress can disrupt marriages, pitch officers into despair and substance abuse, and eventually contribute to early death, either directly or indirectly (Johnson 80).

According to a national study, almost 90% of all officers perform little or no exercise and almost 60% of officers are overweight. Studies show an officer may be as much as 25 times more likely to die of a heart attack than a gunshot wound. Police departments must take positive steps to diminish these very real and prevalent dangers to their personnel (Prentice and Tracy 17).

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Working out is one of the most common positive methods officers have to combat stress. "Regardless of the shift I'm working," one officer explained, "immediately after I check off, I change into sweats and running shoes, and I'm off to the park for a five mile run. With each mile my problems melt away. I totally focus on the running experience and can literally feel a sense of euphoria flood my brain," (Johnson 80-81)

Policing infrequently places a high level of demand on either the aerobic or anaerobic process. In fact, it is estimated that only a small percentage of the police officers time is spent enforcing the law, and even when enforcement or nonenforcement activities are performed, they are frequently resolved without strenuous effort. Despite this, police officers are responsible for the public safety and therefore required at times to engage in physically demanding tasks in which their level of fitness may have a direct impact on the saving or loss of life. Therefore, continued fitness among police personnel is essential (Charles 251).

Review of Literature or Practice

It is becoming increasingly obvious that physical fitness does play a critical role in job performance for all aspects of law enforcement. An officers worst enemy is not a felon with a loaded gun, but job stress. Not the stress that comes from immediate threat of direct physical violence, but subtle, mental overload that all too often causes the body itself to send a "bullet" directly to the heart (Arters and Aaron 62). Research has found EKG evidence of "definite or suspect" cardiovascular disease in 5% of the policemen age 25 to 34 years of age, 13% of those age 35 to 44, and 21% of those age 45 to 54. One report suggests that as an occupation, law enforcement holds the distinction of having the

highest rate of heart disease, diabetes, and suicide out of 149 professions (Lambrinides 11).

Many police officers consider themselves invincible because "they are the police" and they are confident that their training with firearms will resolve the majority of situations. In a recent study it was found that officers rated their training in physical activity as inadequate while their training in firearms was rated as adequate or better. It can be readily concluded that police officers tend to rely more on firearms training than physical fitness training.

In 1985, the Supreme Court, ruling in Tennessee V. Garner, restricted the use of deadly force in apprehending a fleeing non-dangerous felon. The practical effect of this ruling is that officers must be in adequate physical condition to pursue and subdue without "firearm dependence" (Ness 74).

To accomplish the police task, officers may have to run, jump, wrestle, shoot, push, swim and or punch at any given time. A case which illustrates this legal issues is Parker vs. District of Columbia , 850 F.2d709 (D.C. Cir 1988). In this case, a police officer shot a suspect. The officer involved in the shooting had been off duty with a fractured shoulder for two months prior to the shooting. The officer was not in adequate physical shape and his condition was a possible harm to others. The court held that the officer's physical condition was lacking due to his agency's deliberate indifference to his physical training program.

Physical fitness is very relevant and applicable to law enforcement, not only for its health benefits, but also because of its job relatedness to an officer's ability to do his or her job. There is no question that a problem exists in the area of officer fitness. A May 1996

police article states that an officer's overall health risk doubles every decade they serve and that their life expectancy is 15 years shorter than the general population (Lasley 3).

A study conducted by Prudential Life Insurance Company, in which 2,000 employees participated, reported that of the employees involved, 533 participated in an exercise program during the year, they averaged 3.5 days of sick leave, compared to 8.5 days for the rest of the employees who did not participate in an exercise program (Cooper 160).

Thomas Collingwood reports in his book "Fit for Duty" that studies with law enforcement report 27% to 42% less absenteeism for fit and active officers, compared to sedentary officers, with one agency reporting an 87 % drop in sick time in reference to job related injuries (Collingwood and Hoffman 10). Police officers in poor physical condition will use more sick leave and suffer more on-the-job injuries than their physically fit counterparts.

In one study conducted on all commissioned officers of the California Highway Patrol, a significant (3.5% to 0.06%) in sick leave days was recorded after implementation of a fitness program. An additional benefit of the program was a significant reduction in job related injuries.

Discussion of Relevant Issues

The development of a physical fitness program for police employees is essential for two reasons: (1) physically sound officers will be able to respond successfully to

emergency situations requiring high degree of physical effort; and (2) improved health should result if officers acquire and maintain fitness, a circumstance that could provide financial savings to the police department.

To be successful, police training should be developed around two major goals. First, police fitness programs should be designed to safely enhance those physiological characteristics that are needed by the officer for the performance of his or her duties and to enhance officer health. Second, physical training should be conducted in a manner that will encourage officers to maintain fitness throughout their lives.

These three factors in combination suggest specific fitness needs which should be considered in a police training program: (1) the cardiorespiratory system; (2) physical strength; and (3) flexibility. By improving the cardiorespiratory system, officers will increase their general overall fitness and quite possibly lower the incidence of coronary heart disease and related disorders. Adequate physical strength, especially upper body strength, will allow officers to perform tasks requiring the lifting and pulling of heavy objects, climbing fences, and struggling with combative persons. Proper flexibility training should aid in reducing officers' back injuries and other muscle strains caused by inadequate joint mobility and muscle flexibility.

Benefits for organizations involved in encouraging their employees to take part in active physical fitness programs appear to be substantial. Decreased health claims, lower job related injuries, less absenteeism, increase productivity, and higher job satisfaction have been attributed to employee physical fitness.

Fitness has been found to be excellent insurance against cardiovascular disease and related illnesses. The police departments which have physical performance programs provide motivation for officers to maintain themselves in good physical condition, thereby

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ensuring the organization that its personnel are capable of protecting themselves and the public.

It was found that police personnel are from time to time required to exert and incorporate physical strength and endurance; therefore, the training of a variety of physiological variable was found to be essential for the efficient and safe performance of various job tasks.

On July 26th, 1990, President Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) which prohibits discrimination against qualified individuals with physical or mental disabilities in all employment settings, including the areas of public service, transportation and telecommunications, and provides additional amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The ADA might well be the most important piece of legislation affecting law enforcement since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Basically, all persons who can perform the "essential functions" of a job, without accommodation by the employer, is protected by the ADA. It appears that the ADA will completely reshape how police agencies as well as most other employers, recruit, select and promote employees (Schneid and Ganies, 47).

Conclusion / Recommendations

As originally stated, the purpose of this paper was to show that there is a need in today's police departments and more specifically in Lacy Lakeview Police Department for some sort of physical fitness program, and especially for workout facilities. Arguments for and against physical fitness requirements will center initially around the cost of

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implementation. The research has shown that today modern law enforcement officer must stay in good physical condition for several reasons, among those being stress control, cardiovascular fitness, personal appearance, morale, and additionally so they will be able to better perform.

The Lacy Lakeview Police Department should, as a minimum, present the research information and training to all its officers. The decision on making a physical fitness program mandatory will have to come after many hours of debate by its leaders. If an officer becomes involved in a court action which alleges poor physical condition of the officer kept him or her from performing their job properly, the presence of fitness program within the Lacy Lakeview Police Department, whether mandatory or voluntary, could have a tremendous financial impact.

The good news in this police dilemma is that by simply instituting a department health promotion program, police agencies can begin to fix the problem. Responsible departments will not only prevent liability, they will have officers fit for duty who will live longer and have more productive lives. And the service they provide to the public will be enhanced accordingly (Prentice and Tracy 17).

There are no short cuts to health and fitness, and no drugs and gadgets can enable a person to get there. The need to take a positive and immediate action to improve the fitness of the British bobby is paramount. As the police officers job becomes more demanding, and rising crime and violence increase stress, it is most important that every officer is fit for the job--physically and mentally.

In agencies all over the country, police agencies have developed and implemented physical fitness programs and built facilities for their officers use. Virtually every agency

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discovered in research found widespread voluntary compliance among their officers. With this compliance came officers who looked better, felt better, came to work more often, did more satisfactory work, and improved the overall quality of their lives and thus the overall quality of the department itself. Physical fitness programs are being viewed as a necessity within law enforcement (Collingwood 24).

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