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A Wellness Program For The  
Houston Police Department

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research paper is to examine the responsibility and well being of an organized wellness program for the Houston Police Department and its officers. Few studies have attempted to identify what coping traits or strategies are successful when applied to surveying a police career. But all have noted that stress is the number one variable that affects officers performance and health. Common sources of stress are identified as the personality of the individual officer himself, his job, or position within the agency, the officer's personal problems, and the atmosphere and working relationship of the agency. Various studies written by doctors of medicine, psychology, and nutrition will be documented in this proposal. This paper examines whether or not a written wellness program is vital to ensure the performance, safety, and well being of the Houston Police Department and its officers.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this research is to propose a policy, which will provide a uniform and structured wellness program for the sworn officers throughout the department. This program can target the disturbingly high risk of unhealthy officers who have significantly increased mortality rates found through studies of police officers. Causation factors that attribute to high stress are fatigue, being overweight and mental meltdown.

Stress, named as the number one factor, contributes to many diseases such as heart attacks and strokes. In the working population, law enforcement is rated three times higher in this area. A well monitored fitness program will improve the performance of law enforcement officers and prove to be cost effective.

This research will identify other programs in existence that have been successful in decreasing health related problems in various police departments throughout the country. The primary intent of this research is to provide police administrators with accurate and relevant information regarding wellness programs. The research will serve as a guide for other departments during the development of policies relating to the implementation of wellness programs in their respective agencies.

The research will be instructive to determine how other departments are utilizing wellness programs. A review of these department policies will provide examples of operating guidelines for the officers overall fitness. Also, research has been collected from written material on the use of physical wellness training programs for employees, articles from medical journals that discuss the benefits of wellness programs and information provided by previous student research.

## **Theoretical and Historical Contexts**

The suggestion or idea that psychoemotional stress can predispose an individual to physical illness has persisted for centuries, according to Kaslof (1987). Current research in the rapidly developing field of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI), may finally prove scientifically this theory to be a fact, according to Richard and Fell (1975), "mental and emotional stress is a primary factor in nearly all physical diseases".

Stressful events can contribute to the secretion of high levels of detrimental hormones causing physiological changes such as: attitude, low morale and distress at home and/or on the job. Historically, police agencies have provided their officers with every technical scenario that might be encountered from reading the key map to chasing an armed robber. Physical conditioning, however, virtually ceases to exist in most agencies past the training academy.

The police officer is expected to deal with stressful situations that are often beyond his/her ability to manage or control. The literature also suggests this stress will invariably lead to job burnout. Dishkin (1989) defines burnout as the total of our unsuccessful efforts to cope effectively with our daily life situations, resulting in a state of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion.

In addition, fitness is becoming a legal responsibility for agencies. There has been one court decision, (Parker v. Washington, D. C., 1988) in which the city was found negligent for not having an ongoing fitness program for officers. The issue in this case, was inappropriate use of force (Shapaka, 1996). Court decision suggest that "law enforcement administrators have considerable latitude under the constitution to enforce reasonable health and fitness standards.

These job related standards must be fair and reasonable. (Shapaka, 2). The courts generally assess the validity of a legitimate government interest, (mandatory standards) by which is often referred to as the "rational basis" test (Shapaka,2).

### **Review of Literature or Practice**

Studies show that as far back as the 1950's officers health and well being were affected by several negative indicators:

- a. habits and environment of the job
- b. the irregular hours
- c. the fast eating
- d. lag time between calls
- e. ups and downs of the adrenal glands.

A cost effective wellness screening case study of 4,524 law enforcement officers of the California Highway Patrol was conducted by a diverse interest group. Dr. Stephen Wood, a professor of quantitative systems studied health care cost containment and health services marketing and strategic planning (Wood 1982). Dr. Robert Kreitner, associate professor of management, developed and evaluated employee fitness/wellness programs (Kreitner 1982).

Dr. Glenn M. Friedman, president of Health Evaluation and Longevity Planning (HELP) Foundation implemented comprehensive coronary heart disease prevention programs (Friedman 1982). Dr. Mark Edwards, assistant professor of agribusiness, developed a comprehensive human resource planning model for the prediction and control of employee health care costs

(Edwards 1982). Dr. Margaret A. Sova, former HELP associate, conducted research on the psychosocial, aspects of coronary heart disease among employees (Sova 1982).

Following are the characteristics of the California Highway Patrol personnel, that were surveyed:

- a. 92% Anglo
- b. 4% Mexican American
- c. 2% Black
- d. 2% Other

Of those surveyed:

- a. Thirty five were females
- b. Nearly half of the officers evaluated had more than 10 years seniority
- c. 14% had more than 20 years of service.

Twenty seven percent of the California Highway Patrol officers screened were referred to physicians for further medical evaluations because of one or more of the following conditions:

- a. significantly elevated blood pressure
- b. significantly elevated total cholesterol/HDL
- c. significantly elevated blood glucose
- d. significantly abnormal lung function.

In 1981 a study of 376 officers in the Portland Oregon Police Bureau studied the correlation of officers:

- a. self esteem
- b. time on the job

c. crime contact

d. interpersonal relations with the strain and stress they experienced.

In the late 1980's the Palo Alto Police Department in California recognized the stress problem on the job. Counseling and referral teams for employees experiencing high stress, conflict resolution for individuals and groups, and the identification of sources of organizational stress and consultation with work units and managers to resolve them.

In the early 1990's the Midland Police Department saw a need for a fitness program for its officers. The administration sent two supervisors to the Cooper Aerobic Institute in Dallas, Texas to assess the program.

The following is a list of results of independent research conducted by the California Highway Patrol, Palo Alto Police Department, Portland Oregon Police Department and the Midland, Texas Police Department.

The results of the California study concluded the following risk factors:

a. age

b. sex

c. cholesterol level

d. systolic blood pressure

e. glucose

f. smoking.

Of the officers studied, 4 percent were at a significant risk of having a heart attack and three officers were at extreme risk (greater than 20 percent likelihood) of suffering the same fate. In spite of typically perceiving themselves as healthy and fit, actual objective measurement



of health risks uncovered a disturbingly high portion of law enforcement officers who did not meet acceptable health standards. In view of these conclusions, health evaluation/wellness screening is strongly recommended for law enforcement officers to help ensure that they are able to carry out their important mission safely and effectively.

The Palo Alto Police Department ultimately hired a health resources coordinator and a clinical psychologist trained in individual stress management to assist the department in reducing police occupational stress (Scotland 1986).

The Portland Oregon Police Department study concluded that adverse consequences of stress can result in illness, accidents and inappropriate violence. The study defined stress as "the state of persons when in a situation whose demands they perceive and cannot meet" (Buren 1986).

The Midland Police Department developed a fitness program for its approximate 170 sworn officers based on the findings of the Cooper Aerobic Institute, and research from other sources. The fitness program is designed according to the officer's age and personal condition. A mandatory fitness policy was implemented with the stipulation of no negative sanctions. Additionally, a wellness program was initiated for all city employees. This program entitles each employee the opportunity to have appropriate blood screening and other tests to determine health risks and offer suggestions for improvement (Shupp 1996).

### **Discussion of Relevant Issues**

The five key issues that have been addressed are as follows: (Scotland, 1986).

- a. Need for a fitness/wellness program
- b. Development of a plan of action
- c. Implementation
- d. Costs
- e. Departmental Policy

Many officers already think it is their responsibility to be fit, and stay fit, as part of their job as police officers. We have learned through studies of physicians, psychologists and nutritionists that the police officers are rated in the top three percent of working fields in the United States to succumb to the negative aspects of stress. Negative stress indicators such as environment of the job, irregular hours, lag time between calls, personal stress and ups and downs of the adrenal glands have contributed to the need to develop an organized fitness plan.

Programs such as the police olympics are tangible evidence of a growing nation wide commitment to improve officer fitness. Law enforcement agencies have gone so far as to establish objective physical fitness performance standards for all officers.

The goals of a wellness program for police officers are:

- a. better mental and physical health
- b. reduce job related injuries
- c. increase self confidence and productivity
- d. reduce abuse of sick time
- e. monitor individual health

Implementation of the wellness program is sure to draw negative feedback from a small percentage of officers. Some of the officers will be resistant to change, but the end result for

the individual officer, his/her family, the department and community at large outweigh any negative views.

Based on the research, the following key issues to the Houston Police Department have been identified:

*Defining the mission* - It is critical that the Chief of Police make policy describing the purpose and objectives of the Wellness Program.

*Officer acceptance* - A notable percentage will be resistant to change by human factor. A departmental incentive program will enhance participation.

*Training* - Participants will receive initial and on going training and evaluation by academy staff.

*Costs* - The personnel and equipment are already in place at the Training Academy. The City of Houston has already initiated a wellness program covered under existing insurance coverage. The implementation of the wellness program will curtail high medical costs by targeting health risks at an early stage.

All indications at this time are that this new and innovative approach to police fitness through a formula of exercise and incentive may be the answer to a longstanding police administration problem.

The fact that the above mentioned studies and successful wellness/fitness programs initiated are in themselves a great resource and example of the need for a more productive and healthier police officer. Police Departments across the nation will do their community a great service in implementing a program as described.

Major points discussed within this research are outlined below:

- a. California Highway Patrol
  - \* Health care cost containment
  - \* Health services marketing and strategic planning
  - \* Evaluation of employee fitness/wellness programs
  - \* Comprehensive coronary heart disease prevention programs
  - \* Comprehensive human resource planning model for the prediction and control of

employee health care costs

- \* Psychosocial aspects of coronary heart diseases
- \* Disturbingly high portion of officers did not meet acceptable health standards
- \* Screening recommended to ensure officers are able to carry out their important mission safely and effectively

b. Palo Alto Police Department

- \* Hiring of health resources coordinator to assist the department in reducing police occupational stress

c. Portland Oregon Police Department

- \* Concluded adverse consequences of stress can result in illness, accidents and inappropriate violence

d. Midland Police Department

- \* Fitness program studied and implemented based on officer age and personal condition
- \* Stipulation that no negative sanctions exist

Based on the research, the following section will list a recommendation for implementation of a Wellness/Fitness Program conducive to the need of the Houston Police Department.

### **Conclusion/Recommendation**

The purpose of this research was to identify and suggest an effective method of evaluating and implementing a fitness/wellness program proposal conducive to the need of the Houston Police Department.

This research has provided insight into several studies conducted by various police departments and doctors. The information will serve as a guide for the Houston Police Department and City Leaders in the development of policies relating to the implementation of a Wellness/Fitness Program.

The Wellness/Fitness Program will serve many purposes, not only to the individual officer, but the department and community at large.

The primary goals of the proposed wellness program are:

- a. to involve every officer in some type of physical training program designed to enhance individual wellness.
- b. to provide a structured training program in fitness and wellness.
- c. to increase the capacity to maintain balanced physical and mental health.
- d. to increase the capacity to reduce related injuries.
- e. to enhance the capacity to maintain increased decision making skills in biologically and emotionally intense situations.
- f. to increase survival skills in physical confrontations
- g. to decrease the negative effects of stress and increase the quality of personal life.
- h. to improve the basic health level and reduce the use of sick leave.
- i. to reduce the negative effects of stress that contributes to certain diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure, lower back pain, and obesity.
- j. to reduce premature termination of a otherwise possible productive work life.
- k. to promote self confidence contributing to a greater job satisfaction and positive work attitude.
- l. to field physically fit officers, both in appearance and demeanor, thereby increasing citizen respect and confidence.

The objective of the physical fitness program is to impact officers in four critical areas:

- a. increase or maintain a high aerobic capacity.
- b. increase or maintain good flexibility.
- c. increase or maintain good muscular strength.

d. increase or maintain good muscular endurance.

Prior to the first physical assessment test, all officers are required to have a physical examination. This cost is covered by the City of Houston Insurance Wellness Program that is already implemented at no additional cost to the officer or department. Officers scheduled for a physical examination are expected to appear at their own physician on the officer's own time before their birthday month. All officers must complete a medical history questionnaire signed by their personal physicians.

The recommendation of said proposal is that the police and city administrators review this proposal and consider its implementation for the overall good of the police department and the community it serves.

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