

The Bill Blackwood
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The Pros For a Police Department Fitness Program

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to provide the members of the Kingsville Police Department with information as to the necessity for a fitness program.

Positive research will be given and shows the selling points of a fitness program. It is not intended to support whether the program is to be mandatory or voluntary. The purpose is only to show both the administrators and officers the positive points as to why the fitness program is important to both.

The department will be supplied with key issues it can and will face with unfit officers. The main point shown to the department will be that of pecuniary loss. The loss will be shown in the categories of sick leave, injury leave and liability. The department will gain an officer with improved morale, which in turn will reduce the likelihood of complaints.

The officer will be supplied with data and information as to the need of beginning and maintaining a fitness program. The key points shown to officers will be reduced stress, sickness, and injury. The officer will also have improved morale and improved job performance.

Introduction

The purpose of this policy research project is to propose a fitness program for the officers of the Kingsville Police Department. Currently, the Kingsville Police Department does not require officers to perform regular or periodic physical fitness tests or to meet minimal health and fitness standards. In a recent collective bargaining proposal, the City of Kingsville has required that the police officers be physically fit. (The minimal fitness/health standards have yet to be determined). The department does not have a wellness or physical fitness program in place.

A fitness program will help decrease officer absenteeism, increase productivity and decrease the city's costs as they relate to Worker's Compensation and insurance premiums. A fitness program will improve officers' physical and mental health. Physical benefits translate to reduced coronary heart disease, back problems, hypertension, and obesity. Mental benefits include minimized stress, burnout, and social disorders, such as alcoholism, tobacco abuse, and dysfunctional lifestyles. In addition, a fitness program will help to deter the added cost of liability as was the case of Parker versus the District of Columbia (850 F.2d 708). This case got the attention of chiefs and city managers. In this lawsuit a man was awarded half a million dollars because the jury reasoned that the officer might have overpowered the suspect instead of reaching for his gun had the officer been in adequate physical shape to do his job. (Getz, 1990)

This paper will provide information, necessary documentation, and the positive conclusions that other departments throughout the country have experienced because a wellness or physical fitness program was in place. This research supports implementation of a fitness program. The information comes from collective research of many articles, and journals, as well as data provided by previous Graduate Management Institute students.

This research provides police administrators and officers with the information necessary to justify implementing a wellness program for their departments. The outcome will also provide the Kingsville Police Department with research data to assist the decision-making process required to implement a voluntary wellness program.

Historical and Legal Context

Research findings consistently show a link between life style and disease. What you eat, whether you smoke, how much you drink, how you deal with stress, and your physical fitness all have direct bearing on health as well as job performance. (Hoffman and Collingwood, 1992). Additionally, officer fitness can have a direct bearing on the department in the way of civil liability.

Departmental liability is becoming ever more increasing as seen in the case of Parker v. District of Columbia (850 F.2d 708). As mentioned in the introduction of this research, a jury awarded a half million dollars to a man who was shot by a Washington D.C. police officer. It was noted in this case the officer had been cited several times for being overweight. The court ruled that his conduct was the result of “deliberate indifference” on the part of the district with respect to physical training of its police officers. The court further stated that the officer's condition posed a foreseeable risk of harm to others.

As in the Parker case, less than fit officers also face the issue of becoming obese. Obesity affects unfit individuals in several ways. Obesity can be linked to heart disease, back problems, and stress. Law enforcement professionals are extremely vulnerable in terms of marked tendencies toward obesity (Kuntz, 1988). Law enforcement is an extremely sedentary profession in which officers may begin to develop signs of obesity fairly early in their careers. (1988). Advancement and increase of automation and technology compound the sedentary lifestyle of the officer.

Regarding the police officer's sedentary lifestyle, law enforcement officers spend most of their time doing little physical activity, but are at times required to perform very strenuous activity. A law enforcement officer typically spends a majority of his on-duty time sitting behind a desk or in a vehicle. A combination of standing and walking activities accounts for the remaining available time (Kuntz, 1988).

Only a very small percentage of time is engaged in very vigorous activities. Jones (1992) also reports that physical abilities are called upon regularly in police work.

Endurance, strength, and physical conditioning are often critical factors in determining the outcome of an encounter between officers and lawbreakers. This lack of exercise causes the officer to become more vulnerable to a variety of systematic problems; such as obesity (Kuntz 1988). In addition, a lack of exercise affects his or her physical inability to perform strenuous and vigorous activities in the line of duty.

Review of literature or practice

Much supporting evidence exists to show the direct impact between fitness and the officer's ability to perform job tasks and manage stress. Research data consistently correlates stress with fitness. Within this paper, fitness will therefore be synonymous with the ability to withstand stress. According to Getz (1990) cops have an image of being tough and strong, but according to his study, 56% of them are overweight, and 86% do little or no exercise.

Arters and Aaron (1989) state 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 also state that studies and evaluations of law enforcement agencies throughout the country indicate an officer's worst enemy is not a felon with a loaded gun, but job stress. Officers are not generally required to pass a physical fitness exam during the hiring process of a department, nor are they required to maintain prescribed fitness standard after employment. Colligon (1995) reported 86% of officers surveyed reported getting little or no exercise, 48% of those officers over the age of 40 were tobacco users.

Hoffman and Collingwood (1996) have summarized in the following table the medical and health problems resulting from an officer's lack of fitness.

Percentage of Incumbents with medical problems

Medical Problem	Percentage
Obesity / Overweight	20% - 50%
High Cholesterol	20% - 35%
Orthopedic and Back injuries	15% - 25%
Psychological Problems	8% - 25%
Heart Disease	5% - 10%
Gastrointestinal	5% - 10%
Hypertension	4% - 15%
Diabetes	1 % - 2%

According to Hoffman and Collingwood (1996), mortality statistics suggest that police officers have increased risk of premature death and may have a special vulnerability for certain diseases. Most studies indicate that police officers die at earlier ages than expected when compared to the general population.

Obesity can cause severe back problems for the officer. When an overweight officer spends most of his time in a patrol car, the frequency and severity of back problems he may develop increase. Puccetti (1993) states that the cost of back injuries is estimated at more than \$14 billion a year. Puccetti also states the more you minimize a large stomach the better. Carrying extra weight in this area puts enormous strain on the back.

The officer who participates in a fitness program will also reap the benefits of better health. The overweight officer who has a sedentary life style is destined to be plagued with medical problems such as back problems and heart disease. Willingham (1993) reports an estimated 8 of 10 Americans suffer from back problems in a lifetime. Police officers may suffer at an even higher ratio. A typical officer spends the majority of an eight or ten hour shift sitting in a

vehicle. The prolonged sitting takes a toll, medical experts warn (Puccetti 1995). The back follows three curves, one at the neck, one at the middle back and one at the lower back. (Puccetti 1995). If stressed is placed on the back due to one of the curves being enlarged by the stomach then more back problems are likely to occur. This is not to say that the slimmer officer will not encounter back problems from patrol; it is only stating that problems may be minimized.

The unfit officer must also realize the possibility for heart disease and coronary problems. Again, studies show that there are a large number of early retirements and officer deaths due to medical/health reasons... Back trouble, permanent injury suffered in the line of duty, and heart attacks are responsible for nearly half of the early retirements (Charles 1983).

Obesity also plays a major role in the cause of heart disease. Of all occupations, police officers are among the highest in incidence of heart disease. (Charles 1983) All research shows that an officer who does little to stay fit runs the risk of health problems, which in turn could lead to early retirement or death. Heart disease has been the leading cause of death since the 1950's and much attention has been given to its prevention. The most commonly identified form of preventive medicine is exercise (Getchell, 1992; Hockey, 1993). Obesity is a problem which law enforcement cannot afford to overlook. An attempt at some type of rectifying action or departmental education program is a necessity (Kuntz 1988). The department may even consider contacting local health care professionals about educating members of the department about proper dieting and nutrition. Many local hospitals would be willing to provide classes.

Another study, which further supports the employer's concern regarding the monetary impact due to unfit officers, is based on data gathered by Dr. Jim Hilyer, a professor at the School of Medicine, University of Alabama. He states that "officer fitness has a tremendous effect on the bottom line" and bases his comment on data he accumulated over a five-year period. His database cross-referenced fitness data with medical and lost time costs and showed that unfit officers cost two to three times more than fit officers.

The following table illustrates a portion of their cost analysis (Strandberg 1997).

Costs	Per Unfit Officer	Per Fit Officer	Incremental Costs
Injury-related	\$ 619.50	\$ 301.14	\$ 318.36
Medical	1755.17	863.33	891.84

Another factor that employers should consider are burned out or stressed officers. Being a police officer is a psychologically demanding job and stress levels can be enormous. In a study by Folkins of 36 policemen and firemen, after 12 weeks of exercise, improvement in physical fitness was associated with decreased anxiety and depression (Lambrinides 1992). Police departments should consider these factors and understand that lack of a fitness program could result in a great pecuniary loss.

Fitness levels also affect the officers' ability to handle stress. Failed marriages, strained relations with mends and relatives, and lengthy battles with illegal drugs or alcohol can plague officers. (Albrecht 1992) Officers under a great deal of stress can also cause a disruptive work environment. One officer in my department experienced severe stress and its symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and insomnia, and missed approximately six months of work. Because the officer was a supervisor in the department, other departmental supervisors were required to perform their own duties as well as this supervisor's duties. They too experienced increased stress levels and the department incurred additional health care costs including sick leave pay. We cannot say with certainty that the officer's high stress levels were casued solely by his lack of fitness. However, based on my observations, I believe that if the officer had a fitness program available to him, he could have and would have been able to have an alternative measure to relieve his stress. My comments are further supported by my observation of another officer who is physically fit. The officer has approximately 9% body fat, seems to experience minimal stress, and

is rarely ill This officer's attendance is almost prefect, his attitude is always positive and his job performance is excellent.

Discussion of relevant issues

Police department managers should consider several issues when implementing fitness programs within their departments.

What is the necessity for a physical fitness program? When beginning to look at this issue, what are the factors that must be considered? From the employer's point of view, pecuniary loss is the number one factor. Employer cost increases when an unfit officer misses work due to sick leave, injury, or stress. Hoffman and Collingwood (1996) state that fit and active employees have lower absenteeism rates. The statistics included in the Hoffman and Collingwood study show companies report 20 - 35% reduction in absenteeism after the installation of a worksite fitness program. The study also shows improved productivity and reduced health care costs.

When an officer embarks on a fitness program, he must realize that there will be obstacles to beginning a fitness program. First, the fluctuating schedules inherent in shift work make it difficult to plan meals, establish a regular exercise routine, and get adequate rest. (Colligon 1995)

Lack of self-motivation is another factor. Without motivation, a fitness program has no foundation. My personal motivation was a poster we had in our department briefing room. The poster showed a muscular inmate working out. The caption on the poster read "Every day you don't work out, someone else is".

Based on my personal experience, after being in the department two to three years, I began having medical problems with my back and also developed stomach ulcers. After six years of service, my weight increased 35 pounds. I began a simple workout program, which has steadily increased over the last year and a half Since beginning the fitness program, I have experienced less stress and have almost eliminated all ulcer and back problems. I have also lost 40 pounds.

Department administrators should anticipate the possibility that officers may object to or reject new fitness programs and their requirements. The department will spend much of its effort eliminating the "they're out to get us" attitude. Department leaders should emphasize program objectives that aim to produce more capable officers and help the individuals become healthier and more physically fit (Jones 1992). Once a program is established, department leaders will have to take a positive stand and monitor and enforce requirements. In addition, any department with a serious commitment toward health and fitness promotion should assist officers by making exercise equipment readily available to them (Jones 1992). The Department might also consider some type of incentive to assure complete participation by the officers. Incentives may or may not have to be monetary. The department could offer perhaps a day off extra a year for passing a non-mandatory fitness test. Reviere and Young (1994) reported if higher incidence of heart diseases and cancers are, in part, a function of poor health practices, then law enforcement agencies could target these behaviors with incentive programs for change.

Another obstacle departments may encounter with regards to establishing and maintaining a fitness program, is an officer's inaccessibility to training facilities such as a track, weight room, or gym. Because many departments were designed and built before gyms were commonplace, exercise rooms at a police department are generally not available. Today, departments are still building new facilities and moving into larger buildings. Many departments however still do not provide adequate or proper facilities to establish and maintain a fitness program.

In departments where efforts have been made to provide exercise facilities, we find that "exercise rooms might be a converted storage area where officers can use fitness equipment that's been confiscated in a make shift gym. It's not ideal but it's better than nothing". Other departments may have one central gym for all precincts or station houses. Still other departments might have no facilities at all but have arrangements with local health clubs (Strandberg 1997).

If studies show time and again that stress causes numerous problems and a fitness program can control stress, then the rational assumption is that a fitness program is worthwhile. A fitness program can be made cost effective by, decreasing injury leave, sick leave, and emotional burnout.

What causes stress for the individual officer? Albrecht (1992) reports many officers become obsessed with "being a cop" sometimes to the exclusion of all else. Obsessive officers cannot leave work at work. They don't know how to "decompress" after a particularly hazardous or tiring patrol shift. As a result their personal life suffers.

What does this have to do with fitness? An officer who cannot balance work and home is headed toward problems within their personal life. If indeed officers allow work to affect their life styles, they must find a "controlled out" to assure proper stress relief. I do not believe an officer has to run two miles a day and work out five days a week to see a positive change in their life style or to relieve stress. The officer simply needs to begin a fitness program with a minimum level of activity. For instance, walking to the store instead of driving, taking the stairs at work instead of the elevator, using a push mower instead of a riding mower would be simple yet effective ways to increase physical activity (Lambrinides 1992).

In addition, even if a fitness program is implemented, the department will still need to continue supporting their officers. Whether the program is voluntary or mandatory, the employer needs to be willing to assure progress. Motivating individuals to continue participation in an exercise program is a difficult problem especially when participation is desired over a lifetime (Charles 1983).

When looking at the issue from the officer's point of view, the officer experiences improved job performance, improved health, and better emotional fitness. Of the three, the most important factor is the officer's job performance because his own survival depends on how well he performs. The officer who performs poorly is sure to have a lesser work life span. Studies also show that the more physically fit officers generally receive higher job performance ratings (Hoffman and Collingwood 1996).

The department must realize that some financial support will be necessary in order to establish a viable program. The department will either have to fund the use of a private gym or incur the cost of furnishing and upkeeping a facility of its own.

Implementation of a fitness program may not generate immediate results however, over a period of time police departments should begin to reap the reward of fit officers. Eventually, the department should see less employee absenteeism, better officer morale and improved emotional and physical fitness. Departmental health costs should decrease as should Worker's Compensation costs.

A department must be willing to offset the growing problem of lack of fitness before it becomes greater than the monetary amount available in its budget. All it takes is one on-duty death, one serious on-duty injury or one liability suit that relates directly to the lack of fitness.

Conclusions / Recommendations

Policing in America is not becoming easier and the job tasks are becoming more strenuous for police officers. Police officers in this country are still required to give chase, fight and be able to apprehend the crook. Departments in this country still do not require to demand that their officers meet minimal fitness requirements nor are they required to supply the means for the officer to perform or participate in a fitness program.

The research presented provides the data that supports definite needs for a fitness program. One must understand the monumental benefits that can be derived from implementation. The department should understand that without a fitness program in place, monetary losses could be astronomical. The department must also acknowledge that the loss of an officer affects not only the budget but also the department as a whole.

The officer, on the other hand, should understand that without a fitness program his life and physical and mental wellness are at risk. The officer must be able to take a strong look at himself and be willing to change. Most officers are victims of their own status quo. No one likes change but to improve, one must change.

An officer's emotional and mental fitness can be achieved by implementing and maintaining a fitness program. The officer, who is fit, will more than likely have higher self-esteem and feel better about himself and his job. The officer will experience greater job satisfaction and

employee morale. The officer who does not participate in a fitness program is less likely to feel good about himself and the work he performs. The unfit officer in many cases lacks the confidence required to perform routine job functions and the public may not respect him or her for this very reason. Imagine John Q Public seeing that 300-pounder and saying to himself, "how the hell can he help me?". (New York Times 1994). The officer not only endures public disrespect, but also may be unable to perform required job tasks.

The department should not judge the success or failure of health/fitness programs solely by whether a cost savings results. The ultimate result should be an improved department, with employees who are healthier, personally more secure, and better able to provide effective policing services (Jones 1992).

Once a fitness program has been instituted, the department gains an officer better able to perform all required job tasks. In addition to guaranteeing that officers are better able to perform their job duties, physically fit personnel live longer, contract fewer illnesses, and use less sick time (Lopez, 1991). The department is less likely to have an officer out on stress leave. The department will also be less likely to have to defend the officer in an excessive use of force liability suit. The department will gain financially through decreased lost workdays due to sick leave.

In conclusion, we have seen studies that show most of the officers in America's police departments are physically unfit. Additionally, most departments are currently financially unable to provide the officers with the necessary means to participate in a fitness program. So, both sides fall short in having a healthy, fit officer force.

Implementing a fitness program will demand commitment from both the officers and their department leaders. The department must invest budgetary funds to support the program. Officers must, on the other hand, invest their time and recognize departmental efforts and objectives. The program will then benefit both the department and the individual officer.

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