

**The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement
Management Institute**

The Benefits of a Wellness Program
For the Officers of the Sugar Land
Police Department

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Abstract

Physical abilities are called upon regularly in police work. Officers are not only killing themselves through poor lifestyle choices - smoking, bad eating habits, heavy drinking and lack of exercise - but unfit officers make it easier for others to do them harm. The adverse affects of the lack of wellness of the police officers are overwhelming and the positive benefits of a wellness program are often overlooked.

This research paper will provide information to help support the request for a wellness program for the officers at the Sugar Land Police Department. The research will be conducted using relevant articles, books and other wellness program research. It will show that a "wellness program" can be beneficial to the officers as well as to the department. It can provide information on training and fitness and encourage employees to actively pursue health and fitness through knowledge and activity. The department can benefit by officers using less sick time, increasing public support and respect for the department and the officers having a better attitude towards others. A wellness program can also prevent premature retirement and on the job injuries. A well-developed program can also lead to reduced overall health care costs.

The most important aspect of a wellness program is that it can increase the effectiveness and security of the Sugar Land Police officers, as well as enhance morale within the Sugar Land Police Department. It is inevitable that the police department will have to provide some type of wellness program in the future, so why not begin now.

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Introduction

The purpose of this research is to consider the benefits of conducting a "wellness program" for the police officers of the Sugar Land Police Department. The research gathered will provide administrators of the Sugar Land Police Department with information concerning the implementation and legal considerations relating to providing a wellness program.

The City of Sugar Land currently offers a yearly wellness profile to all the employees of the Sugar Land Police Department in which many of the officers participate. The profile provides the officers with valuable information concerning their personal health. However, after the results of the profile are provided to the officers, there is not further follow up or programs offered to those needing assistance.

Police officers of the Sugar Land Police Department are required to pass a physical agility test before being offered a job at the police department. After the officers are hired there are no further physical requirements of the officer, however they are expected to perform many different tasks that require them to be physically fit. Being physically fit is directly related to the wellness of the officers.

There are many different aspects of wellness that this research project will identify. This research will be conducted using relevant articles, books, related case law and an examination of other police department wellness programs.

This research will demonstrate how awareness, education, intervention and fitness programs can effect behavioral change, modify and control risk factors and thereby

significantly prevent disease. A wellness program is an "organized program in the work site that is intended to assist police employees in making voluntary behavior changes that reduce their health risks and enhance their individual productivity and well being." A well-developed health promotion program can also lead to reduced overall health care costs. Most importantly, however, they can increase the effectiveness and security of the Sugar Land Police officers and enhance morale within the Sugar Land Police Department.

Historical, Legal or Theoretical Context

There are many different definitions of wellness, but the most straightforward one is simply the process of being aware of and actively working toward better health.

Wellness is not only the process of learning more about your individual health status and what can be done to enhance it, but it is also a process, which includes actively working toward achieving better health. Most people never appreciate the value of their health until they lose it. At this point most people try to do something to improve their health.

The potential problems for the police department if the officers think this way are; unnecessary costs, excessive absenteeism, increased stress and lower productivity.

Today's leading cause of death is related to individual lifestyles. Of the 2.2 million people who die each year in the United States, approximately 50 percent are largely from preventable causes. Tobacco related illnesses are responsible for more than 400,000 deaths each year and some 300,000 deaths are due to poor nutritional practices

and a lack of physical activity. Also high-risk consumption of alcohol contributes to another 100,000 deaths in the United States each year. As you can see the need for wellness programs for increasing physical activity, quitting smoking, moderating alcohol consumption and eating more nutritiously are very apparent. (Health Promotion Sourcebook for Small Businesses)

Despite the abundant research and information regarding the value of exercise and nutrition, many police officers are both out of shape and overweight by any reasonable standards. Routine sedentary working conditions of patrol officers are not conducive to maintaining the level of fitness, which may be required of them. There are also a number of environmental factors associated with police work that may place officers under stress, which includes boredom, role conflict, supervisory style and the Criminal Justice System process. (Schofield, 1989)

The physical and mental demands placed on officers necessitate their strong commitment to an above average level of health and fitness. The effects of stress on police officers are well documented. Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Standards and Education (T.C.L.E.O.S.E.) rules, section 211.80(a) 12 a, currently requires only, "that police applicants must be examined by a licensed physician and be declared in writing to be physically sound and free from any defect which may adversely affect the performance or duty appropriate to the type of license sought." T.C.L.E.O.S.E. does not require in-service physical exams or evaluations of the officers after the initial hiring process. The "Sugar Land Police Department requires certain physical fitness

requirements be met to qualify for a job with our department, however, there is no further evaluation or information about wellness supplied to the officers.

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. Liability for departments who fail to train their officers to be physically fit was addressed in *Parker v. District of Columbia* (1987). This officer shooting case proved "deliberate indifference was exhibited by a pattern of inadequate training, supervision and subsequent discipline of officers" (*Parker v. District of Columbia*). This case set a dangerous precedent of future liability cases involving any physically unfit officer. Public Safety departments will have to consider some type of wellness program to help the officers be more fitness conscious.

Review of Literature or Practice

In 1986, the F.B.I.'s Training Division Research and Development Unit mailed training needs survey packets to 2,497 police agencies across the United States at the request of the Department of Justice. The survey results indicated that handling personal stress and maintaining an appropriate level of physical fitness ranked one and two respectively in programs most requested by police officers. Most officers would like to have some sort of a physical fitness or wellness program. (Hess & Wroblewski, 1993)

The Cooper Institute for research reported that United States Police Officers are about ten years behind in the area of physical fitness and wellness. Another study found

that due to a largely poor diet and lack of exercise, a significant number of Police Officers possessed a body composition, blood chemistry and general level of physical fitness to that of a similar sized sample of convicts. This researcher believes that the police department should take an active role in providing information, programs and equipment to help the officers stay healthy. Officers are not only killing themselves through poor lifestyle choices - smoking, bad eating habits, heavy drinking and lack of exercise - but unfit officers make it easier for others to do them harm. The adverse affects of the lack of wellness are overwhelming, while the positive benefits are often overlooked. (Hanks & Didion, 1994)

The Ohio State Patrol has implemented a mandatory health and fitness program for all of its officers and a progressive discipline policy is currently in effect. Their program is designed to ensure a "high quality of life during the trooper's active career period and into retirement." New recruits are subject to the entire program upon graduation from the academy and current troopers were subject to discipline if they did not meet the requirements after a significant period of time. Closer to home, the Houston Police Department, (HPD) has a wellness program. HPD has developed appropriate operating procedures and seem to have average success with administration of the program and with the fitness results. (Goss, 1995)

"Wellness" programs that merely establish goals for healthier employees are not in violation of either the Constitution or title VII because there is no mandatory fitness

standards or agility tests requiring a specific level of fitness. However employees can be required to participate in "wellness related" activities, such as an annual physical examination, training and counseling sessions, or a periodic fitness test to measure overall health and fitness. Required participation during working hours is a reasonable condition of employment that enables law enforcement management to gather information relative to employee health and fitness for duty; no constitutional or title VII provisions are implicated, since there are no mandatory standards resulting in adverse personnel action except for an employee's insubordination for failure to participate. (Williams, 1985)

"Wellness Programs" focus on the benefits to the employee and the organization of health and fitness. Such programs use measurement of fitness to assist employees in assessing their own fitness and health. These programs provide information on training and fitness and encourage employees to actively pursue health and fitness through knowledge and activity. Since no employment actions are based on assessment results, wellness programs are less likely to experience legal challenge. (Schofield, 1989)

Discussion of Relevant Issues

There are many different definitions of a wellness program. It has been defined as the process of being aware of and actively working toward better health. (Health Promotion Sourcebook) The Sugar Land Police Department should consider developing and implementing a health promotion initiative program for many important reasons.

One of the reasons is that healthcare costs continue to be an issue of significant concern. Each year our health insurance premiums are rising in cost. Because much of these costs are linked to health habits, it is possible for the police department to take aggressive action towards reducing healthcare utilization and help contain costs by taking on a health promotion program. (Violant, 1986)

In 1960 American Health care costs were 26.9 million dollars and as of 1996, the cost had risen to over 1 billion dollars. The leading causes of illness are largely preventable. If the police department can reduce the burden of illness among the employees by preventing the major causes of sickness, more employees will remain healthy and productive. (Health Promotion Sourcebook) Currently at the Sugar Land Police Department there are several officers on light duty due to job related injuries, which probably could have been prevented.

According to Harvard Economics professor, Juliet Schor, people are working harder than ever before, especially police officers, Some of the. officers at the Sugar Land Police Department work their normal 40 hours in a week and sign up to work overtime and then they have regularly scheduled extra jobs. Some of the officers work 60 hours per week or more. This poses a number of threats to the health and well being of the police officers. However, a well-organized health promotion program can help to alleviate some of these concerns. It has also been proven that physically fit officer's use less sick time and demonstrate improved attitudes towards other. (Fuller, 1990)

The Sugar Land Police Department has the opportunity to have the officers be

required to participate in the wellness evaluation, which is offered yearly to all employees, by the city. This could be a great starting point for our police department wellness program. With the results of the wellness evaluation, the police department could provide information and training in the areas that are most prevalent on the wellness evaluation. The police department currently has a gym with equipment for cardiovascular workouts, weightlifting and general fitness workouts. There are also several officers in the police department that have been through the Cooper Institute training which qualifies them to be a personal trainer. These officers could be utilized for their expertise in wellness.

In measuring the effectiveness of a wellness program, this researcher concludes the police department should consider that it could improve the health and fitness among officers and it could save money on health care costs. Improving health and fitness is by far, the most important objective and can be measured through tracking the fitness scores, cholesterol levels, blood pressure levels, dietary trends, smoking habits and weight levels of the officers. Program options can then be directed toward those areas requiring the most attention on an individual basis. Also a database to track health care related issues; such as absenteeism, injuries, and the number of insurance and workman's compensation claims should be kept. (Fuller, 1990)

Conclusion/ Recommendations

There is no question that police officers must be in good physical condition to perform their jobs at the utmost level. Physical challenges occur regularly and officers must be prepared to meet the demands put on them. It is clear that the adverse effects of the lack of fitness are overwhelming, while the positive benefits are often overlooked. Being physically fit diminishes stress, promotes self-esteem, improves firearms accuracy, increases an officer's confidence in confrontations, makes him/her more effective with impact weapons and defense tactics and generally improves, his/her quality of life. Well officer's use less sick time, can increase public support and respect for the police department, and have a better attitude towards others. The department can also benefit by preventing premature retirement and on the job injuries.

Since the City of Sugar Land currently provides the employees with an opportunity to have a wellness evaluation each year, that cost is already taken care of. We could utilize the officers that work for us to help with counseling and recommendations from the results of the wellness profile. We already have the facility at our police department that could be utilized by all the officers. The cost for implementing and continuing a wellness program at the police department is very minimal considering the benefits that we could reap from the program.

The ultimate results of a wellness program for our police department should be an improved department, with employees who are healthier; personally more secure, and better able to provide effective policing services to our community. It is a critical factor

in promoting the wellness program to get the chief and other administrators to support, participate and promote the wellness program among the department.

As stated earlier, our police department is already equipped to provide most of the services that would be needed for a wellness program. As a recommendation resulting from this research, the Sugar Land Police Department should require that officers participate in the yearly wellness profile and from the results, the department could provide the needed information, training and facility to the officers to improve their physical wellness in all aspects. The well being, safety and productivity of our officers can be greatly enhanced through a total program of fitness that addresses strength, flexibility, endurance, proper nutrition and education on maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

We live in a violent society. The training in impact weapons, firearms, defense tactics and weapons retention, along with a solid physical foundation, will enable our officers to perform their sworn duties.

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