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PHYSICAL FITNESS FOR POLICE OFFICERS

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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 officer's 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. In addition, a short survey of the Tyler Police Department was also conducted, and those results are included.

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.

INTRODUCTION

The physical conditioning of officers in today's police agencies is a topic that reoccurs up on an ever increasing basis. Some feel that it is a problem that is all too often ignored by both administrators and the officers themselves. While others do not actually ignore it, they just do not feel that it is a problem, period. Police officers in this country are the best trained in the history of policing. They go through annual and semiannual firearms training. They attend regular driver proficiency training. They also attend many in-service schools on a variety of law enforcement related subjects, yet physical fitness, outside of the initial hiring process, is in many instances, overlooked. This is in spite of the fact that physical abilities are regularly required in police work. Speed, endurance and strength are often critical areas in an officer's contact with a criminal suspect. Unfortunately, if an officer does nothing to maintain those physical abilities, they will deteriorate. Without a regular program of physical fitness, muscles weaken, speed and reactions get slower, and endurance decreases. 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 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.

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.

This paper, by referencing books, journals, and current research will demonstrate that today modern police officers care about their fitness and want to maintain it. It will also indicate a need for workout facilities along with professional guidance. It will show that officers need cost free, easy access to good, well-maintained equipment.

My goal is to convince city governments as well as police administrations, including the City of Tyler and Tyler P.D., that providing such equipment will help not only the

officers, but the cities and departments as well. Ultimately, the citizens of the community will benefit.

HISTORICAL, LEGAL and THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Seven{7} years ago, in the summer of 1990, This writer was an overweight, out of shape cop with ten(10) years' seniority, tons of job burnout, and a terrible personal life. Events that are unimportant to the topic at hand led me to begin a program of exercise that I still maintain. What has it done for me? Well for starters, I feel better both physically and mentally than I have since my high school days. I have a much better outlook on life, complete tasks quicker with more efficiency, and when it seems nothing is going to go right, I remain calm and work things out. Am I something special because of this? No, I am just one more example of why police officers should get physically fit and stay that way. Police have for years been found to have a significantly high incidence of heart disease, diabetes, and suicide. (Violanti et al. 17). The most important muscle in the body is the heart. It can be conditioned to better handle everyday situations as well as emergencies, but it cannot be done with a sedentary lifestyle. According to a national study, almost 90% of all officers perform little or no exercise and almost 60% of

officers are overweight. (Prentice and Tracy 17) The same study shows an officer may be as much as twenty-five(25} times more likely to die of a heart attack than a gunshot wound. Research has found EKG evidence of "definite or suspect" cardiovascular disease in 5% of policemen aged 25 to 34 years, 13% of those aged 35 to 44, and 21% of those aged 45 to 54. One report suggests that the cardiac death rate was higher for officers than for any other profession. (Lambrinides 11)

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 my 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)

Physical fitness, per se, isn't new to law enforcement. Most agencies have minimum standards that must be met before hiring. Some have periodic reviews, but many departments require nothing after initial testing. (Arters and Aaron 62) In many cases .all sworn officers within. a department are expected to perform similar duties at some

time or another. Although a beat cop will undergo more physical exertion on a daily basis than a desk sergeant, the sergeant is also expected, by the department and the public, to be able to perform as an officer, and does under certain circumstances. (Lopez 10). Officers are often called up to apply "The Reasonable Man Standard"(that is, what would a reasonable man do under similar circumstances?) to issues that confront them on a regular basis. If that same standard is applied to physical fitness, it is apparent the "essential functions" of the job do not change. What is required of a rookie may also be required of a veteran officer. (Simpson 16) 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 officer's 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) In addition, if officers are to continue to exercise systematically after leaving the police academy program, emphasis must be placed on simplicity-that

is, a regimen that is not too difficult, time consuming, or costly. (Lilley and Greenberg 47)

REVIEW of LITERATURE or PRACTICE

Covert Bailey, a fitness guru of the 90's, has said for thirteen years, "exercise is the ultimate cure for obesity." (Bailey 4) His, as well as many other highly successful weight loss plans all have one common denominator: EXERCISE. Medical science has long drawn a correlation between cardiovascular diseases and obesity. The overweight person is more likely to have problems with heart attacks, high blood pressure, and circulatory diseases. Cardiovascular and muscular fitness have benefits that are applicable to more than just jogging. Preventing heart and circulatory system disease is important. The strong, lean and fit officer will be more effective and will live long enough to enjoy retirement. (Johnson and Kuha 11) In a LEAA project conducted by the IACP in which 291 law enforcement agencies were surveyed, it was reported that a large number of relatively young police officers were being retired because of disabilities. The most common causes of disability were related to heart problems. (Serra 45) In addition, numerous studies, including those conducted by the United States Secret Service, Ohio Highway patrol, Xerox Corp., Quasar Systems Ltd., Goodyear Rubber, and NASA, have

shown the following evidence of cost savings after the implementation of fitness programs: eighteen (18) to forty two (42) percent drop in absenteeism; four (4) to eleven (11) percent increase in productivity; improved morale; less employee turnover; and reduced health care costs. (Fraser 24)

The San Antonio, Texas Police Department has instituted a physical fitness program that incorporates friendly competition for the officers. Throughout the year, every SAPD officer partakes in a 40-hour Wellness Training Program which includes driving, marksmanship and physical fitness. Officers meeting or exceeding specific qualifications in each category qualify for the "Top Cop" competition. Many of the competing officers attributed their "Top Cop" contender shape to good eating habits and consistent bi-weekly physical fitness workouts. (Roeder 10)

One police department decided that poor physical condition will no longer be a deadly adversary for its officers. When the Hobbs, New Mexico Fire Department implemented a physical training program to reduce stress on firefighters and EMT personnel, the results were phenomenally successful. As a result, the Hobbs Police Department instituted a similar program for its entire force in late 1985!. (Arters and Aaron 62)

A trend that is being seen more and more around the country is present at one of Florida's largest departments. At the Metro-Dade police Department in Miami, health and fitness assessments are considered valuable enough to be included with annual qualification of a firearm. (Leitner 8)

Still another police department, Appleton, Wisconsin, found that after implementing a physical fitness program with a pay incentive that not only were officers willing to train on their own to meet set standards, but that both participants and nonparticipants alike have become more concerned with their physical well-being. (Witczak 51) This welcome development has been noticed in department after department. Good fitness is contagious!

DISCUSSION of RELEVANT ISSUES

It is important here to point out that those departments who have started physical fitness programs for their officers have without exception reported success. Any physical fitness program within a law enforcement agency, whether it is a recruit program or an in-service program, has as its ultimate goal that officers participate fully, developing and maintaining physical fitness throughout their careers. (Collingwood Physical 29) The constraints in

developing such a program or at least in making facilities available are the same ones we hear almost every day.

"There's no money in the budget." But, is it possible that money could be found, or set aside in a future budget if it can be shown that a comprehensive fitness program can save a municipality thousands upon thousands of dollars in reduced health care costs, sick leave, etc.? Hopefully it is.

Law enforcement agencies can no longer adopt a "do nothing" or I can't be blamed attitude, for legal decisions say quite the opposite. Since we know that the job of police officer has built-in risks, if a department chooses to do nothing, the courts may say the department is guilty of "deliberate indifference" (Parker v. Metro D.C.). To take it a step further, medical experts are testifying on behalf of out-of-shape officers injured on the job who are suing their departments, not for a workman's compensation claim, but rather for the big "liability" money. They are alleging their departments are guilty of "deliberate indifference," that the department knew about the risks of the job and chose to do nothing. (Prentice and Tracy 17)

The relevancy of this topic can be seen in a survey completed in August, 1995 at the Tyler, Texas Police

Department. Out of one hundred and five(105) surveys completed, an overwhelming seventy five(75) answered yes to the question of whether or not they feel a formalized physical fitness program is desirable at Tyler P.D. in order to adequately do their duties. In addition, sixty five (65) replied yes to the question of stress as a result of their jobs as a police officer. When asked if they would participate in a structured physical fitness program if one were available, eighty-seven (87) answered, yes! Clearly, officers at Tyler P.D. want and need a physical fitness program. What would it cost? Not as much as the combined hidden costs of absenteeism, lost productivity and low morale, and surely not as much as the cost of rising health insurance benefits. A physically fit person will have a decrease in sick time, a longer life expectancy, and a feeling of well being and confidence, which is the real goal of most fitness policies. (Lopez 10)

The Columbus, Georgia Police Department took a look at itself and didn't like what it saw. Men were overweight and sluggish and the overall physical appearance was spotty. This led to a poor self-image and sagging spirits. Citizens picked up on this, causing morale to fall even lower. (Bocklet 239) The article goes on to say that the root of the problem for Columbus P.D. was inadequate physical

fitness facilities and lenient rules on personal conditioning.

CONCLUSION

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 the Tyler, Texas Police Department for some sort of physical fitness program, and especially for workout facilities. 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.

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 discovered in the 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 Implementing 24)

The Tyler, Texas Police Department, having outgrown its current building, will hopefully in the near future embark on a building program. When that happens, it will be an ideal opportunity for the City of Tyler to show its officers that it does care about their physical as well as their mental health, and include in that building, workout facilities. The research shows that it is relevant to policing in today's world, that it is timely, and that it is legally desirable. It is also an opportunity for the city leaders to show Tyler Police Officers that city government does care about the well being of their officers. The final result will be better service and protection for the citizens of Tyler.

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