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Benefits of Physical Fitness for Police Officers

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ABSTRACT

This paper covers a topic of importance to all police departments - the benefits of physical fitness for Police Officers. Today's police officer is expected to accomplish more duties than ever before with less resources. Because of the nature of police work (i.e. the stress of possible violent encounters, rotating shifts and the poor nutritional habits that often go along with work), the risk to an officer's health is often increased. However, despite the benefits of exercising, such as lower health care costs, fewer injuries and often less reliance on excessive force, most Police Administrators continue to resist implementing tougher physical fitness requirements for officers.

The purpose of the research is to show the benefits of requiring police officers to exercise regularly. I strongly recommend that Police Departments begin to implement Physical Fitness programs for their officers. The Tactical Commander for the Harlingen Police Department's SWAT Team has witnessed fewer sick leaves, less injuries and more physically fit SWAT officers, because of the requirement for SWAT officers to exercise on a regular basis. Physical conditioning is looked at closely when hiring new police officers, but is mostly forgotten after they leave the Academy. Just as departments spend money on recruiting and hiring new police officers, departments should spend money on the maintenance of their officers. It is one of the best investments that a department can make. In conclusion, my research proves that there is a definite need for police officers to exercise and Police Administrators should implement physical fitness programs and motivate officers to utilize them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction.	1
Review of Literature	2
Methodology	9
Findings	10
Discussions/Conclusions	12
References	18

INTRODUCTION

Throughout an officer's career, departments provide training in essential skills such as firearms proficiency, the use of force and pursuit driving, yet in most departments there is no training provided for officers in the area of physical fitness. Endurance, strength, and physical conditioning are often critical factors in determining the outcome of encounters between officers and criminals or successfully rendering assistance to others under emergency conditions. Therefore, physical fitness is directly related to the safety of an officer and their ability to handle critical situations. However, in most departments after officers are hired there are few, if any, fitness requirements for the officer, even as they are expected to perform demanding physical tasks. Thus, the purpose for this research paper is to show why physical fitness programs in police departments should be implemented and examine how both the officers and their departments will benefit from such programs. By having an exercise program, departments will have healthier officers with fewer on the job injuries, which will translate directly into lowered health care costs for the department due to fewer officers on sick or injury leave. Implementation of a physical fitness program, as well as a proper diet, can extend the career and improve the life of officers. In addition, the department will benefit in the public's eyes by producing more professional and impressive looking officers that will help to combat the negative stereotype of the out-of-shape donut eating officer.

Information for this research paper was obtained from several books and journals, through interviews with physical fitness trainers and officers from police departments, a survey, an administrative research paper submitted to the

Leadership Command College and statistical information from the Harlingen Police Department.

The intended outcome of this research paper is to show how police departments, along with the officers, will benefit from a physical fitness program. In addition, this paper will provide police administrators with information on how to implement a physical fitness program. Most police departments can implement a physical fitness program at a relatively low cost and the benefits of the program will greatly outweigh the implementation cost. A physical fitness program will reduce the chances of injury or death and is advantageous to law enforcement and the community. An officer that is physically fit is less likely to call in sick or make workers' compensation claims, which saves the department money and use of officer overtime. The introduction of a physical fitness program will make officers feel more energetic, help relieve stress, and make them feel better about how they look.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It has been shown repeatedly that everyone, including police officers, can reduce their stress levels through physical exercise, relaxation techniques and good nutrition. The relation between physical fitness and nutrition and general well-being has long been known. For instance, according to the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (2004), four pillars have been identified as vital for improving the health and fitness of Americans: 1) being physically active every day 2) Eating nutritious foods 3) Getting preventive screenings and 4) Making healthy choices/Avoid risky behaviors. The health consequences of a poor diet and physical inactivity can result in a chronic disease or health

conditions such as: Heart disease, High blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes, and various cancers - including colon cancer, Stroke, Chronic pulmonary disease (bronchitis, emphysema, and asthma), anxiety and depression (President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 2004). When one adds the specific physical requirements and stressors that are inherent in police work to the fundamental requirements of a healthy adult, it is easy to see why physical fitness plays such a crucial role. In fact, to reduce the risk of these health problems, exercising at least three times per week is recommended in the second edition of the Management and Supervision in Law Enforcement Book published in 1996. These recommendations can help to alleviate some of the specific physical requirements and stressors that are inherent in police work.

There are specific critical tasks in which poor physical performance puts the officer or public in jeopardy. These include running short and moderate distances in foot pursuits, climbing stairs and fences, jumping and dodging obstacles, lifting carrying objects and people, dragging and pulling objects and people, pushing and pulling heavy objects, bending and reaching, using force (short and moderate duration), using restraining devices, using restraining or control holds, and using hands and feet for self defense. Although the frequency of a critical physical task is not high, there is a risk of liability if the officers cannot perform the task. To an extent, keeping fit is similar to firearms qualification. Firearms may not be used often, but when they are, it is important to be prepared to do so (Fit Force the Peace Officer's Total Fitness Program, 1995).

The issue of stress is also cause for concern for police officers. The sources of stress for individual law enforcement officers can be placed into five

general categories: issues in the officer's personal life, the pressures of law enforcement work, the attitude of the general public toward police work and officers, the operation of the criminal justice system, and the law enforcement organization itself. The most common source of police officer stress involves policies and procedures of the law enforcement agencies themselves (Behind the Shield, March, 2004). Physical exercise for police officers is important for two reasons. It improves the body's stamina to deal with stress, and it provides time away from work temporarily, which is also healthy.

To further examine the benefits of exercise and physical fitness for police officers, the researcher interviewed Robert Arias, owner and personal trainer at Olympus Gym II, in Harlingen, TX. Arias said that by police officers being physically fit, they diminish stress, promote self esteem, increase confidence and generally improve their quality of life. He said that officers not only hurt themselves through poor life style choices such as smoking, bad eating habits, heavy drinking and lack of exercise, but unfit officers make it easier for others to do them harm. When Arias was asked what specific needs should be considered when implementing a physical fitness program for police officers, he said that three specific needs should be considered: (1) The cardio respiratory system; (2) physical strength; and (3) flexibility. Arias said that "by improving the cardio respiratory system, officers will strengthen their heart, lungs, and blood vessels. It will also reduce risk factors for heart disease, will improve strength and endurance, and reduce stress, and decrease anxiety and depression (R. Arias, personal communication, April 4, 2005). Physical strength training (weight lifting), especially the upper body strength, will allow officers to perform tasks

requiring lifting and pulling of heavy objects, climbing obstacles, and struggling with combative persons. Arias believes that proper flexibility training will help reduce officers back injuries and other muscle strains caused by inadequate joint mobility and muscle flexibility and that when the muscles are warmed up, the body is better prepared to more effectively recruit the muscle exercise, with less chance of damaging the muscle.

Additionally, I also interviewed Johnny Ramirez, training officer for the Harlingen Police Department. He gave me three reasons why implementing a physical fitness program for officers is essential.

- To increase the physical fitness levels of officers so they have the physical readiness to perform critical job functions;
- To improve officer's fitness lifestyle habits so they can develop better job performance, decrease health risk, and improve their quality of life;
- To reduce agencies liability by ensuring officers' physical readiness to perform (J. Ramirez, personal communication, April 5, 2005).

Now that the benefits of physical fitness for police officers have been examined, the researcher will now examine what some police departments have done to assure that police officers maintain the necessary degree of physical fitness.

The Bedford, Texas Police Department has a mandatory physical fitness program for all sworn Police Officers, general order: 2004-020 under Police Chief David Flory. The physical assessment and norms for the assessment were adopted from the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research in Dallas, Texas. Sgt. Griffin, a Patrol Sergeant and a team leader for the Bedford SWAT team, said that the goal for the physical fitness program was to establish a program for

Bedford Police Officers that gave them the opportunity to increase and maintain their physical fitness at a level that provided them a better opportunity to meet the physical demands of their job. (S. Griffin, personal communication, April 8, 2005). The Bedford Fitness Test consists of Push-ups, Sit - ups, 1.5 mile run, and 300 meter run, and is done every four months. Sgt. Griffin explains that one hour per day is granted to each sworn police officer for exercising. Officers are encouraged to utilize the department's fitness/exercise room but may take their one-hour fitness break at any recognized fitness center within the city limits of Bedford. Sgt. Griffin said there has been a reduction of absenteeism, injuries and officer turnover since the implementation of the program on 03-08-04. An officer who is unable to pass any component of the physical fitness test, for two consecutive quarters, will be sent for a "fit for duty" physical at a duly licensed facility as stipulated by the city, to determine if they can perform the essential job functions for a police officer. Members of the Bedford SWAT team must pass a similar physical agility/fitness assessment that meets or exceeds the "elite" category standards of the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research every three months. Sgt. Griffin said that Physical fitness is 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 their job (E. Griffin, personal communication, September 14, 2004).

Sergeant Mitch Russell of the Midland, Texas Police Department said they have a mandatory physical fitness program that is directed to all commissioned police officers employed by the Department. Testing is done on a semi-annual basis, unless the individual is in remedial training or qualifies for incentive testing.

Testing is conducted by the department's Physical Training Coordinator. The standards for the assessment are also from the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research Dallas, TX. The assessment is designed to measure an individual's fitness in the areas of Aerobic capacity, muscular strength, and muscular endurance. Officers who do not fall below the 75% level in any of the three categories are only required to test once a year, (Incentive Testing). Officers who achieve an 80% percentile in all three categories receive a Physical fitness award to display on their uniforms. The officer's lowest score in any of the three physical areas determines the fitness level. Each officer of the Midland Police Department is asked to be at the 50% level in each of the categories. Officers that fall below the 50% requirement are consulted by the Physical Fitness Coordinator. The physical Fitness Coordinator will work either monthly or weekly on an individual fitness program with the officer to help him meet the 50% requirement. Because the Midland Police Department has such strong emphasis on fitness, each commander is encouraged to adopt a liberal on-duty workout program that adapts to their manpower situation (Midland, TX Police Department Policy Chapter 3, section 11). Based on my interviews with Sgt. Eric Griffin and Sgt. Mitch Russell it's apparent that the Police Chief's at Bedford PD and Midland PD value and understands the benefits of exercising for their officers.

According to Ashabranner (2009), there are at least four law enforcement agencies in Texas besides Bedford and Midland that have a mandatory fitness programs. They are College Station PD, Fair Oaks Ranch PD, Highland Park DPS, and Richardson PD. Fair Oaks Ranch PD and Highland Park DPS tie their merit raises and eligible for promotions to successfully passing their physical

fitness exam. Still other departments have mandatory testing, but voluntary compliance to fitness standards.

There is no governing body that tells Law Enforcement Agencies how to implement a fitness assessment, choose fitness standards, or implement a physical fitness program. However, the majority of Police Departments in Texas that have implemented a physical fitness program have based it on standards and recommendations set out by The Cooper Institute for Aerobic Research of Dallas, TX. The Texas Tactical Police Officers Association and its SWAT teams follow the Cooper Aerobic Institute guidelines. Police Departments such as Hurst, TX have voluntary fitness testing with recommended standards that are not enforced (voluntary compliance). At Hurst, an officer will establish a set of goals with the assistance of a fitness coordinator at the department. Any officer, who passes the physical agility assessment (Cooper Aerobic Standards) and meets the goals set out for them, will be compensated with eight hours of compensatory time. Officers are assessed twice a year, which makes them eligible for sixteen hours of compensatory time annually. Earning the compensatory time is an incentive for staying in shape. Other departments have mandatory compliance for fitness assessments, meaning that the individual will not be hired or will be fired if the standards are not met or maintained. (Ashabranner, 2002).

At the Harlingen Police Department we use the Cooper Aerobic Institute guidelines for our SWAT team. The researcher and Tactical Commander for the Harlingen SWAT team notices improvement in SWAT Officer's physical appearance and conditioning through the use of the Cooper Institute guidelines

within a three year period. Physical fitness assessments for Harlingen SWAT officers are similar to those of the Bedford, SWAT Team. Harlingen SWAT officers do a physical fitness assessment every four months. If an officer fails the assessment the first time, he is verbally counseled by the Tactical Commander or a Team Leader. If an officer fails the assessment a second time, he is subject to being removed from the team until he can pass it. It is the opinion of the researcher that the main goal for a physical fitness program should be to focus on exercises that help reduce cardiovascular disease by focusing on the blood pressure, cholesterol, and body fat and stress reduction. Police Officers should be concerned with fitness for the following reasons. (A) It relates to the ability of officers performing essential functions of the job. (B) It relates to minimizing the risk of excessive force situations. (C) It relates to minimizing the known health risks associated with a public safety job. (D) It relates to meeting many legal requirements to avoid litigation and have a defensible position if challenged in court. (The Cooper Aerobic Institute, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

I contend that there are benefits in implementing an exercise program and that these benefits include lower health care costs, fewer injuries, improved officer morale and performance and improved public image. To determine this, a physical fitness survey involving sworn officers of the Harlingen Police Department was conducted. 100 survey forms were passed out and returned. The ages of the officers answering the survey ranged from 21 to 55. Seven questions regarding physical fitness were on the survey. A second survey was conducted among the 14 members of the Harlingen SWAT team concerning their

physical fitness and feelings about the physical fitness program that was implemented. The questions covered their observations prior to becoming a SWAT team member and their status now. In addition, comparisons were made of the difference the mandatory physical fitness program has made on the SWAT team members' performance on standard fitness tests administered regularly. This information will be used to draw conclusions and examine the possible benefits of a physical fitness program for police officers.

FINDINGS

The results of the first survey among the general population of police officers indicated that 57% of the officers do physical exercise other than their normal daily activity and that they do so an average 3 times a week. Thirty-five percent of the surveyed officers indicate that they presently use the Harlingen Police Department Gym, on average once a week. Interestingly, while 63% of the officers said they would participate in a physical fitness program if one was implemented at the Harlingen Police Department, 86% indicated that they would participate in a physical fitness program if one hour per day was granted to them to exercise during their shift. In addition, 73% of the officers indicated that they would be interested in a personal physical fitness program or a Nutritional program that would be based on their physical or health needs, if one was offered to them.

Chart 1: Officers Who would participate in a fitness program if one were offered

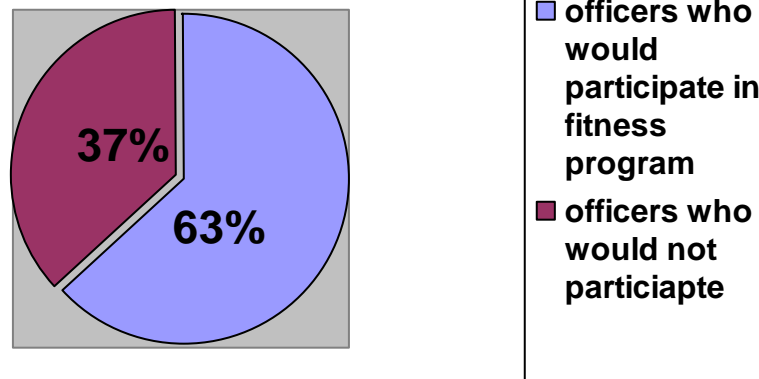
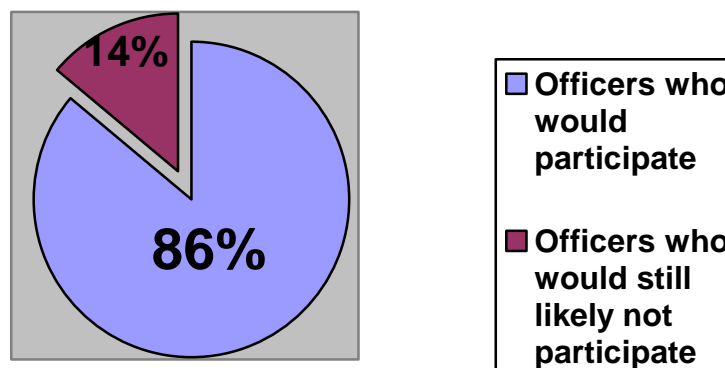


Chart 2: Officers who would participate in a physical fitness program if they were given 1 hr. per shift to exercise



The second survey was given to the current members of the Harlingen police department SWAT team. The results were unanimous. For the question examining whether or not officers feel the mandatory physical fitness program had been helpful to them, they all agree that it had. They also all agree that the physical fitness program had resulted in improved confidence and morale. In comparison to their health status prior to the SWAT team's fitness program, each

member indicates that they noticed marked improvement in energy levels, appearance and overall well-being. Each of the members also indicate that they had fewer illnesses and took fewer sick days since starting the fitness program. They were also in agreement that the physical fitness program had been of great benefit to themselves, their families, the Police Department and the community as a whole.

Examining the SWAT team members' performance on physical tests demonstrates that they have indeed improved physically. The average time for both long-distance running and short-distance running for the majority of the team members has improved significantly, 5 seconds on average for the 330 meter run, and 15 seconds on average for the mile and $\frac{1}{2}$. In addition, the average member of the team has gained 20lbs in bench press capacity.

DISCUSSION

As the rest of America grows heavier and more out of shape, police officers, have also packed on the pounds as a group. Interviewing police officers regarding physical fitness determines that most officers recognize the importance of physical fitness. Unfortunately, many lack the motivation, strength, stamina, and more importantly, the knowledge regarding how a physical fitness program will enhance their law enforcement career. The public expects a certain level of fitness from Police Officers. As indicated by the increase in yearly sick leave usage at my department, the Harlingen Police Department and the amount of Workers' Compensation claims paid for a two year period, it is the researcher's opinion that implementing a physical fitness program will undoubtedly pay off on the long run for police departments. By starting a physical fitness program, police

departments have nothing to lose but a lot to gain. As indicated by Sgt. Eric Griffin, Bedford Police Department is seeing positive returns from such a program. The perception of an overweight cop eating donuts no longer sits well with the American public in general. The demands placed on officers today are greater than in the past. In many departments officers have several responsibilities within the department such as patrol, SWAT, and Honor Guard. In most police departments once an officer completes his Field Training Program, there is no mention of physical fitness, for officers except for an annual medical physical exam that the officer takes. It's a must that Police Departments look into implementing Physical Fitness Programs for officers. The officers will need to be motivated to buy into the program. An officer that gets into a physical fitness program is sure to become healthier, probably have less doctor visits, present a better image of himself, and will feel better about themselves. Incentives such as compensation time or gift certificates can be given as rewards for officers who participate in such a program and show improvements. The researcher suggests that the department's training coordinator be assigned the task of such a program. He or she could over see the program and provide progress reports to the Police Administration. Police Chiefs should realize that lack of physically fit officer's results in greater pecuniary loss for the department. Starting a physical fitness program at a Police Department may not generate immediate results. However, over a period of time police departments will begin to see the rewards of physically fit officers. Eventually, the departments will see less absenteeism, better officer morale and improved overall health of officers participating in such a program. As Captain of the Patrol Division the researcher reviews officer injury

reports and finds that some of the injury reports include officers complaining of strained or pulled muscles. Some of the injuries occur while officers are running, jumping, or struggling with a suspect. The researcher concludes that those officers that do not exercise regularly may have avoided the injury if they did exercise. Additionally, officers that exercise regularly, such as members of the SWAT Team, rarely get injured. At the Harlingen Police Department, only SWAT officers are required to exercise. They are assessed quarterly on standards set out by the Cooper Institute for Aerobics. Proper implementation of a physical fitness program will yield positive results towards the morale in a department. Officers become more confident and have a higher sense of respect for themselves as their overall health improves. This will have a positive reflection on the department and will have a positive effect on the productivity of the officers. Small Police Departments may not be monetarily able to buy workout equipment start and maintain a physical fitness program. The answer to this could be that small Police Departments provide officers who stay physically fit on their own with rewards. The rewards along with the officer knowing that his department cares about his well being will motivate most officers to exercise on their own. When assessing the cost of implementing a physical fitness program you must look at the whole picture. Departments should consider if it would cost more to implement a fitness program or hire a new officers? If an officer is lost that has been trained and has experience, how much is that worth? When replacing an officer a department must pay for the training, possibly paying the recruit while he or she is at the academy, and pay for his or her equipment as well. It is apparent that for every dollar a department spends on a physical fitness

program, they will get that and more back as a result of the reduced medical premiums, higher employee productivity, and higher employee morale. Stress is a growing health concern and fitness helps control stress and promotes emotional stability. For a physical fitness program to work it should be enjoyable for the officer. A trainer should monitor the officer's productivity and have regular discussions with the officer, showing the officer that the department has a concern about his well being. Exercise should be combined with education on why exercise so important. This will increase the likelihood of a successful program.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research proves that law enforcement agencies will benefit by the implementation of a physical fitness program at their departments. Presently, few Police Departments provide their officers with a physical fitness program. Police administrators should realize that by having physically fit officers the entire community benefits. Along with the agency, the officer, and his family also benefit. Citizens keep close eyes on officers and demand more services and a higher quality of service from them. The purpose of this research is to show how that every dollar an agency invests on a Physical/Fitness program they will get it back as a result of reduced medical premiums, higher employee productivity and higher morale. Generally speaking, people respond differently to a person who appears physically fit. It is the opinion of the researcher that agencies should aim for an education oriented program that encourages long term fitness. The researcher has noticed that an officer's fitness levels diminish significantly after they leave the police academy. This is why police

administrators need to implement physical fitness programs. It makes little sense that departments select police officers on the basis of physical fitness and abilities and then have no requirement that minimum fitness and abilities be maintained. Law Enforcement Agencies spend large sums of money recruiting the best people for the job, but fail to make an investment in a physical fitness program that will help keep the people physically fit to perform job related duties. The assumption that exercise is not important to an officer's career may be heard only from officers who do not value their careers or their health. From conversations with citizens the researcher found that citizens expect a certain level of fitness from its officers. When one goes into law enforcement, he or she can give up the right to be unfit. Critical incident calls that officers respond to make it essential that officers can survive until backup arrives. The public expects a certain level of fitness from officers. The researcher recommends that Police Departments send an officer from their Training Division to the Cooper Institute in Dallas, TX. Upon returning, the officer could be assigned the responsibility for implementing a physical fitness program. This program will help to ensure that police officers will continue to serve and protect to the best of their abilities.

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