

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS**

Mandatory physical fitness programs for police officers?

**A Policy Research Project
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Professional Designation
Graduate, Management Institute**

**by
Brian Kyle**

**Bryan Police Department
Bryan, Texas
August, 1996**

#351

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Historical Context	2
Review of Literature or Practice	5
Discussion of Relevant Issues	7
Conclusion/Recommendations	10
Bibliography	13

ABSTRACT

This project considers the need for a mandatory health and physical fitness program for police officers. Requirements of the police profession are tremendous in terms of mental and physical demands. Through a proactive approach of improving fitness and/or maintaining physical fitness, an officer is better able to manage the demands of the job. An officer's fitness can directly relate to costs to a law enforcement agency through lost time on the job, medical bills and liability issues associated with an officer's actions based on his fitness.

This paper will address the following issues: first, an overview of stress; how stress relates to the health and fitness of a police officer and the state of current fitness programs. Second, research regarding how officers perceive their state of health as related to stress and physical fitness. Finally, research applicable to fitness programs and how law enforcement agencies are maintaining standards of fitness.

Research shows job related stress has a detrimental impact on a police officer's health and job performance. Research findings also support the idea that police officers generally perceive themselves as experiencing large amounts of job related stress and many are not undertaking a regular physical fitness program on a voluntary basis. Also, voluntary fitness programs are underused due to a lack of tangible inducement since most officers have time constraints based on other commitments on or off the job.

The stated hypotheses was strongly supported through the literature review. Findings related significant support for a mandatory physical fitness program if conducted during an officer's work hours. Conclusions to be drawn included correlation between stress reduction on the job through physical fitness and improved health of officers and reduced costs to the agency and sponsoring entity through lower medical and liability claims.

Introduction

The purpose of this project is to consider the need for mandatory physical fitness programs within law enforcement agencies in this country. The need, if any, for mandatory physical fitness programs will be established as a correlation to stress reduction and overall improvement in officers' long term health. Such a correlation can be viewed in terms of productivity increases, improved fiscal responsibility, improved employee health and fitness, and enrichment of job satisfaction. These correlations, in turn, can be considered by law enforcement administrators as another tool in dealing with human resource management issues.

Physical fitness program applicability will be limited to those departmental components of law enforcement agencies in which personnel work a continuous shift. Continuous shift refers to personnel who are subject to be on-call during a work period without the ability to take potentially uninterrupted breaks. In the majority of law enforcement agencies this would ecumenically refer mainly to uniformed patrol officers. This author, through contact with officers of other departments, has noted other sections of law enforcement agencies are generally scheduled for a break, e.g., a lunch hour, in which they are able to take an uninterrupted break allowing those personnel the opportunity to engage in a physical fitness program during the course of their work schedule. Some patrol components also operate on rotating shift schedules with no time available during the on-duty work period to engage in regular, planned physical activity.

Although many, perhaps the majority of, law enforcement officers engage in physical fitness programs outside their normal work schedules, the ability of an agency to promote a program during the work period could be beneficial for all involved. Any improvement by starting officer participation or increased levels of participation could exhibit a significant cost-

benefit analysis outcome. Any capital costs incurred for space and/or equipment (most departments of any size generally already have these facilities in place) can be recouped through savings in employee fringe benefits and/or expenses. This is an especially vital point when considering the drastic increases in health care costs that have occurred in the past and continue with little chance of decreasing anytime soon.

The text of this article will be qualitative in nature. The literature to be reviewed throughout this project on the associated topics of stress, physical agility, physical fitness and health wellness should provide an integrated overview of the subject matter. The context of this article is primarily set for those components of a law enforcement agency who work shift schedules, whether permanent or rotating. Such components will be referred to in this article as "patrol" and all agencies will be called "department" for standardization of syntax.

This brief overview is anticipated to show a strong qualitative correlation between individual physical fitness exercise programs and health wellness programs as related through a means of stress management. This project is aimed at convincing department managers of the need for adopting a mandatory wellness program. Although numerous factors exist that contribute to an individual's level of health, such as aging, disease, etc., research strongly suggests that proper exercise and diet can be an ameliorating factor(Levin, Neporent, Williams, and Arnold, 1993). Closely akin to this aspect is the vast research on the deteriorating effects, both psychological and physiological, of stress on law enforcement officers.

Historical Context

Research tends to agree that negative consequences of stress can adversely affect an

individual's physical and/or psychological health(Beutler, Nussbaum, and Meredith, 1988; Fusilier, Ganster, and Mayes, 1987; Goolkasian, Geddes, and DeJong, 1985; Vulcano, Barnes, and Breen, 1984). Any element that is a potential for negative consequences to the individual police officer may in turn reflect negatively on the officer's department. This possibility is ever increasing with the increasing tendency of people to seek redress of either perceived or actual abuses through civil litigation.

As in business, a sponsoring entity (i.e., city, county, state, etc.) can ultimately be subject to severe financial liability outside any individual officer liability because of stress related factors affecting their employees. The unique discretion and authority vested in police officers, coupled with the mental and physical demands of the job, allows untold scenarios for liability repercussions to occur. The direct costs incurred through health costs, compensation claims, lost work time, legal fees, damage losses, and any myriad of pecuniary expenses should provide a fundamental basis for a proactive approach in improving fitness as one means of stress reduction and management. Such would be a prudent managerial approach.

Other than fiscal considerations, stress related factors can adversely affect productivity standards and have negative effects on an officer's job satisfaction(Sigler, Wilson, & Allen, 1991). According to Sigler et al(1991), reduced performance can result when a person perceives an imbalance between societal demands and their capacity to respond to those demands, such that the person's failure to meet those demands produces dysfunction. Any reduction in officer performance can logically relate to at least a reduction in any increase in productivity, if not a decrease.

Dealing with the topic of individual physical fitness and wellness can be equivocal in

nature. Sometimes subtle yet significant differences exist between physical agility, physical fitness, and overall health wellness. Gaines, Falkenberg, and Gambino(1993) reported that by 1990 there were eighty percent of municipal and eighty-four percent of state level departments using some form of entry level physical agility testing for applicants. Physical agility testing is a separate and distinct subject from physical fitness as a whole. However, the utility, validity, reliability, and acceptability of physical agility testing in applicant screening does offer a corollary impact on this evaluation.

Physical agility testings' primary focus in a qualitative approach to physical fitness programs is their association through method of application. Physical agility tests are generally summarized as either performance based or health based(Gaines et al, 1993). Gaines et al also reported a large majority of departments and training academies have adopted the health based screening tests as opposed to performance testing for a number of reasons. First, to eliminate gender and age based adverse impacts on applicants. Second, the performance based testing lacked any universally accepted method of establishing passing scores. Finally, the health based screening was better adapted to the implementation of health maintenance programs within departments. This final reasoning for a health based approach to applicant screening gave rise to the realization that older officers could not realistically perform at the same level of younger officers within departments.

This realization offers both ancillary and associative logic toward a need for mandatory physical fitness and wellness programs within law enforcement agencies. Since logic dictates that aging can affect ones physical fitness and health level, it is important to realize the need for health maintenance. It is at this point that the conglomeration of physical agility, physical fitness, and

health wellness can be observed. Through an understanding that applicants and younger officers are operating under a higher performance standard than older officers, the issue of individual physical fitness and health wellness arises.

Levin, Neporent, Williams, and Arnold(1993) report that a fitness program consists of five basic physiological system workouts. These five essential workouts are of the heart, muscles, sensual systems, bones, and brain. Closely aligned with physiological workouts of the body is the need for a proper, nutritious diet. This brief description is what is commonly referred to as an individual "wellness" program. This idea is important if utilized in the context that research by Scanlon(1990) advocates two approaches to stress reduction: physical fitness programs and individual appraisal of priorities and goals. To better understand the adverse impacts that can be stress related in nature, an operational definition of "stress" must first be assigned.

Review of Literature or Practice

Research data regarding stress abounds in almost any context. Although stress has positive and/or negative consequences commonly affiliated with it, the research literature generally deals with the resulting adverse factors due to the negative. The various conditions that may or may not be present in subjects are usually expressed through weighted correlations to specific and/or general sources of stress or stressors(Beutler, Nussbaum, and Meredith, 1988). For our purposes, stress will be viewed from a self-reported perspective of the individual officer. According to Beutler, Nussbaum, and Meredith(1988), significant conclusions can be reached from such findings but external validation is not possible due to the unreliability of such reports.

Many research studies have suggested a multitude of adverse physical and psychological

conditions significantly correlated with police stress. Such conditions included "burnout"(Hills and Norvell, 1991; Burke and Desza, 1986), detrimental health impacts(Fusilier, Ganster, and Mayes, 1987; Vulcano, Barnes, and Breen, 1984), increased work alienation and work-family conflict(Burke, 1989), emotional exhaustion or other personality disorders(Jermier, Gaines, and McIntosh, 1989; Gaines & Jermier, 1983; Lester, 1982) and a psychologically felt need for constant readiness due to potential danger(Alkus, 1983).

These adverse conditions are generally attributed to what are considered significant stressors or sources of stress. Studies have identified numerous factors commonly referred to as specific stressors but overall sources of stress seem to fall into two general categories of either life stressors or work stressors(Cullen, Lemming, Link, and Wozniak, 1985). The broadest categorization of all sources of stress would be any of those life events which are likely to cause stress(Sigler, Wilson, and Allen, 1991). This allows for the broadest of interpretation when dealing with the subject.

Work stressors, particular to police stress, usually related highest to a police agency's organizational aspects, one of which according to Crank and Caldero(1991) was shiftwork as well as family/personal concerns. Overall, the police work stressors were categorized from various sources to include: extra organizational (the criminal justice system and police-community relations), intra organizational (physical danger, shiftwork, over and underload of work, and organizational structure), and finally, individual characteristics of the individual officer(Crank and Caldero, 1991).

The total effect attributed to role stressors has been widely reported in relation to detrimental health impacts that correlate significantly. Vulcano et al(1984) reported headaches,

ulcers, and high blood pressure had higher prevalence rates for police subject samples than for the general population sample. Reviere and Young(1994) reported higher incidents of heart disease, cancers, and work related automobile accidents for the police population than that of the general population. It is a rational assumption that such adverse health impacts will result in lost work days, increased medical expenses, increased equipment maintenance and replacement costs, and possible compensation claims over the career of individual officers. Should improved physical fitness, as a means of stress management and/or health wellness maintenance, ameliorate any of these conditions in any way it can result in financial savings for the employing entity.

Discussion of Relevant Issues

A program designed at an effective least cost has the potential for substantial reduction in pecuniary measure. A mandatory physical fitness program for an agency's patrol component on Departmental time would be such a program. An overlap of shifts could allow for individual officers to participate in the program without a sacrifice in ability to respond to calls for service and no additional salary is being expended since the officers are already on shift as scheduled.

Despite what term is used to refer to it, humans are subject to demands in life that they sometimes cannot meet or else the demands are so great as to be overwhelming. It really seems to make little or no difference whether these demands are perceived or actually experienced. In the occupational situation, it would seem rational to expect that workload levels(Stotland and Pendleton, 1989) and interactional situations will affect stress levels.

Whether these conditions are called stressors, strains, or any other name, it would seem most appropriate to provide some intervention technique that can help individuals to deal with the

demands placed on them. Each individual will differ in how they are able to cope with these demands. One such technique might be through maintenance of overall health through a regular program of exercise.

Although individual physical fitness programs should be tailored to the participating individual, a standard program should include a sustained aerobic workout with an associated nutritious diet. Education emphasizing the dangers of certain activities or behaviors, such as smoking, excessive consumption of fats, etc., would be an appropriate affiliated feature of a well-rounded wellness program.

A basic health and fitness program has an overall objective of encouraging the individual to develop good personal habits in an effort to attain and maintain a reasonable level of fitness. A program must be designed so that an individual engages in exercise several times a week over an extended period of time on a regular basis. A fitness program does not necessarily mean the same as being muscle bound or athletic prowess. For law enforcement officers, an applicable definition on fitness is "having the energy to carry out daily law enforcement job requirements effectively with reserve energy to meet emergencies"(Price, Pollock, Gettman, and Kent, 1978).

As previously mentioned, physical agility is sometimes considered synonymous with physical fitness. Agility is much too narrow and limited in scope, relating only to specific job skills. Physical fitness programming is comprehensive in nature, including overall health and well-being. Such a program is important since today's law enforcement is largely sedentary due to motorized patrol, electronic technology, and a general decrease in the level of physical activity associated with the job. This decreased physical activity level has a resultant decrease in officer physical fitness levels.

The intent of this evaluation is not to outline specific physical fitness programs. An overall, well-balanced conditioning program should be tailored to meet the needs of the individual. Important considerations include the need for medical screening prior to beginning a workout program and the need to design and adhere to a regular, planned program be it in a gym, outdoors, in the home, or where ever the individual decides on. The program should ultimately have as an objective the desire to instill into the individual the habit of working out on a regular basis. Once instilled as a habit, an individual comes to recognize the program as a benefit and not merely "working" out.

An individual should be aware of the need for well-constructed athletic shoes that fit well, clothing appropriate to the workout and environment, and an individual should be ever conscious of warning signals from the body. Such warning signals would be to experience dizziness, blurred vision, difficulty in breathing, etc. To complete the complete program, the individual should seek to coordinate rest, hygiene, and diet in a lifestyle conducive to lifelong, healthy habits.

As reported by Reviere and Young(1994), "If higher incidence of heart diseases and cancers are, in part, a function of poor health practices, law enforcement agencies could target these behaviors with incentive programs for change"(p. 62). The importance of an incentive for participation cannot be over emphasized. Eventhough it may be in an individual's best interest to maintain a wellness program on their own, the point which must be considered is cost reduction for an agency. Since personnel costs typically account for up to seventy-five to ninety percent of a public safety agency's budget, clearly the most savings can be drawn from this area.

The form of incentive will be particular to a department based on a number of elements,

e.g. union contract, civil service regulations, at-will employment, etc. The important feature is that it be a substantive incentive to encourage participation from employees not currently maintaining a wellness program. At the same time the incentive should offer an additional reward (outside the rewards of a wellness program itself) to those actively engaged in a program on their own.

An argument could be made that law enforcement officers, as well as the general population, should be maintaining physical fitness standards on their own. In view of the physical agility standards that typically exist in the majority of departments for applicants, one might assume that fitness standards are common across an agency despite length of service. Unfortunately, as reported by Reviere and Young(1994), increased length of law enforcement service generally finds older officers exhibiting less physical fitness standards. Though not totally related to exercise and diet, these are significant factors. Any potential to offset these sliding levels of physical fitness must be seriously considered by administrators.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

The demands of policing are not likely to decrease. It is more likely that the demands will increase in light of increasing population, a decreasing sense of community with the public ever more dependent on the police to control and handle differences, and ever increasing litigation associated with both civil and criminal statutes. The research literature presented demonstrated a significant correlation to show stress has detrimental impacts on an individual's physical and/or psychological well-being. Using a proactive approach of mandatory wellness programs for officers should lead to improved fitness through which officers are better able to handle the

demands of the job. Improved officer fitness can benefit departments through decreased lost time on the job, medical bills and liability issues associated with officer's actions based on fitness.

It is recommended that departments adopt a mandatory wellness program to help reduce or eliminate the effects of stress. These programs, in turn, will have beneficial impacts in terms of general individual health. Associated with this would be the benefits derived by the work place organization in realized financial gains through a decrease in lost work days because of either injury or sickness, an enrichment in job satisfaction for the officers, possible improvement in police-community relations thereby reducing citizen complaints experienced by a department, and a plausible increase in officer productivity due to an increased better fitness to perform the job.

Collateral logic would anticipate that sworn officers of an organization's patrol component would as a majority be supportive of a mandatory physical fitness program if conducted on Departmental time. Though there will probably always be those who have to disagree simply for the sake of disagreement and those who become offended by seeing such a program as one more means of managerial control, it is predicted the vast majority of officers will be appreciative. Such a program would allow for regular exercise programs since a voluntary strength development approach is most probably not utilized to the extent that it might be if offered on Departmental time. A mandatory physical fitness program would not impede the operational effectiveness of the patrol component since full complements of all patrol teams is anticipated within the framework such a program could be implemented. Additionally, the managerial prerogative would remain to utilize such a program only within the context of not interrupting line operation functions.

Any improvement in individual officer fitness would most probably have significant

impacts in lowering medical and liability claims to some degree for a Department, which directly affects the workers compensation and litigation costs for a City. Through the implementation of an evaluation method a Department should be able to relate tangible benefits from a mandatory fitness program and it would be expected to have a baseline measure of each officer so as for reference in individual fitness improvements. Through correlation of injury and sick time usages a perceptible improvement should be evident. This would be one of the appraisals which would need to be monitored in order to fully justify the program.

At the very least such a program is cost effective in that it will have little or no direct capital costs and can be deferred if necessary should the need arise due to manpower scheduling. Other than manpower considerations there is no obvious drawback to a mandatory physical fitness program conducted on Departmental time within the patrol component, other than possibly the opinionated opposition which might arise as previously mentioned. If presented to personnel in terms of honest consideration for their health and well-being, with resultant benefits to both the officer and the sponsoring entity, it would be anticipated that physical fitness levels as well as morale would be increased. Just as importantly, such mandatory programming would appear to be a judicious managerial policy for the sponsoring entity, the department, and employees.

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