

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Physical Fitness Requirements in Law Enforcement**

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**An Administrative Research Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to determine if there should be physical fitness standards in law enforcement. Journals, books, periodical articles, Leadership Command College research papers, and internet sites have been utilized as research for this report. A questionnaire was generated and circulated to various police agencies as a research tool. The research data collected indicates that the majority of Police Departments do not have any follow up physical fitness programs, after the academy, or wellness programs either mandatory or volunteer. This paper concludes that there is a need for physical fitness standards in law enforcement. It concludes that the standards must be relevant to the type of work Police Officers do and that it must be presented and supported by the department from the Administration all the way down to the most junior officer. It is apparent that any positive step taken by the department such as providing time, facilities, incentives, and instruction will help promote good physical fitness and overall wellness.

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research paper is to explore the field of physical fitness as it relates to law enforcement, and to decide whether or not mandatory training and physical fitness requirements should be implemented. Is there a need for physical fitness standards and how should they be arrived at and ultimately implemented? Physical fitness is important to any healthy lifestyle but it is more important in many ways to the members of law enforcement. From the time a person applies for the job of police officer they become aware that a certain level of fitness must be achieved and demonstrated to gain employment. Most applicants come to initial testing capable of meeting the requirements of a test which is designed to simulate activities an officer may encounter during the course of his or her career. These activities may include but are not limited to running, jumping, and even physical encounters that may leave the officer fighting for his or her life. The fact that a basic patrol officer must carry around approximately fifteen to twenty five extra pounds in basic equipment partially demonstrates the level of fitness required. The applicant knows and meets these requirements or else he will not be hired. The disturbing part of this equation is all officers start their careers with this knowledge. Somewhere along the career path the importance of physical fitness is forgotten. This is partially due to the officer becoming complacent and may be partially due to the fact that no standard of fitness is required.

This project will cover the implementation of a physical fitness program for police officers and will provide a vital look at costs and benefits that could be achieved by requiring and maintaining a measurable level of fitness. The questions of whether or not considerations for age and gender should be applicable will also be addressed. The benefits of a physical fitness program outweigh any costs related to it and additionally could reduce cities liabilities.

Although some legal issues could arise out of the implementation of a fitness program these could be overcome if researched properly. Reductions in sick time and workers compensation claims could also be significant. If better fitness is the result of implementing a program then officers needing doctors' care could be reduced. This would cut down on claims and make a city more appealing to an insurance company. This could result in cheaper premiums. Officers that are healthier could make things such as staffing, (less absenteeism) and general manpower issues easier for management to deal with. This would carry over into areas of morale and job productivity.

Journals, books, periodical articles, Leadership Command College research papers, and internet sites will be utilized as research for this report. A questionnaire will be generated and circulated to various police agencies as a research tool.

The intended outcome of this research paper will be to show justification for a mandatory physical fitness program and whether or not there is a benefit to implementing it. The intended audience for this paper will generally be police administrative staff personnel, including those that are responsible for writing and implementing policies, and ultimately those who train the officers who work the streets of America.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Most police agencies throughout the state of Texas, across the nation, and even in many foreign countries employ similar procedures to screen and hire applicants. Most police training academies similarly engage in varying degrees of continuous physical training or conditioning. Those agencies recognize the fact that the job of a police officer demands certain physical requirements, and place a great deal of importance on physical conditioning because of the demands in the field.

Other studies have been focused on the psychological and stress management aspects of law enforcement work, and identified enhanced benefits in those areas to regular exercise programs. Questions still remain as to what should be used as a standard for physical fitness tests as they relate to law enforcement. A common question is; why should we be concerned with physical fitness at all? The reasons are simple, fitness relates to the ability of officers to perform essential functions of the job. Simply put a healthier officer is safer and more apt to do his job correctly and more safely.

A physically fit officer lowers his chance for health problems and gives himself a needed advantage while working the street. This is a must. It is clear that the adverse effects of the lack of fitness are overwhelming, while the positive benefits are overlooked. From the police agency's viewpoint, physically fit officers use less sick time, increase public respect for the agency, and demonstrate improved attitude toward others. Being physically fit diminishes stress, promotes self-esteem, improves firearms accuracy, increases an officer's confidence in confrontations, and generally improves his/her quality of life. Today's officer knows about the dangers of smoking, high-fat foods and a sedentary lifestyle. Police departments have minimum physical fitness hiring requirements. Training academies put recruits through physical training (PT), but few make it mandatory for their employees to remain in shape after graduation.

Several officers resist physical fitness. The idea of physical fitness standards make some very uncomfortable. What should make today's officers uncomfortable is the fact that they as a whole are not as physically fit as they should be. The health and fitness of police officers are most important issues, ones that can save lives and make them more satisfying and productive. Physical fitness programs give something positive to employees and improves

morale Brown (year unknown). Brown (year unknown) states that “management needs to be aware of the stress officers are under and must be sensitive to those stressors”. (p.61).

Getz (1990) realized the importance of a physical fitness program only after one of his officers, only 39 years of age died of a heart attack. Getz did research and found that 25 % of the nation’s police departments have fitness and health standards that officers must meet. This is a relatively low number of departments. Getz implemented a program within his department and kept the cost to a minimum. This is sometimes a deterrent for some agencies.

Prentice and Tracy (1992) state the importance of top administration supporting a physical fitness program. Their stance states that administrators can no longer take the “do nothing approach” and must take an active role in promoting such a program. Collingwood (1988) takes the stance that not only does the administration need to support fitness programs, but that any physical fitness program adopted should have as its ultimate goal all officers participate fully. It has been said that providing manuals and materials detailing physical fitness programs, is not enough.

Ness (1992) discusses the importance of this training being mandatory. He states that voluntary programs work for a while but ultimately fail. Officers are reluctant to adopt these programs either due to their own insecurities, knowledge they can not pass the tests, or because of natural resistance to do something new just because they are told to do so. DeFranco (1999) quotes Davidson Umeh, and associate professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City, by saying “You can not legislate fitness.” Umeh makes reference to the fact that some police officers do not eat properly through ignorance. Proper nutrition goes hand in hand with a physical fitness program. If officers are not taught proper nutrition they will be spinning their wheels in their attempt to better their physical standards. Education in these areas must be

stressed and made available to all officers. Officers must be taught how to do exercise properly so that they can get the optimum out of each work out.

Ness (1992) states, according to Schofield, mandatory tests must be reasonable and rational. Howard and Prater (2000) acknowledge the fact that implementing an accepted physical fitness program is difficult to say the least. Standards vary greatly from department to department and in order to implement a physical fitness program relevance to each individual department needs to be established.

Another question that has to be addressed is once a program is implemented should considerations be given for gender or age. According to a study conducted by URRMA in 1998-1999 a conclusion was reached that standards are the same for people who hold the same job and have the same job requirements. Although this was the conclusion reached in this study this is still a disputed topic.

The Cooper Institute says that no consideration should be given for age or gender. According to the Civil Rights Act of 1991, separate standards are against the law. The term "Absolute Standard" is used. This term also supports the idea of one standard for all officers. Same job = Same Standard is recommended. This may impact the results especially for female officers so the validity of the standards set is a must. They must be researched and deemed job related. When this is done this should make the standards supportable in court if challenged. This may change if physical fitness standards were voluntary, but under a mandatory program there should be one test for all officers. In any case good records of whatever test is given should be kept. How the test was derived at, and why it is relevant must be documented. This will protect the agency from claims of discrimination and if done properly will provide a mechanism for officers to enhance their careers and lives.



## **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this paper is to establish if there is a need for Physical Fitness Standards and how should they be arrived at and ultimately implemented? Based on the research conducted, on a survey taken, this author proposes that there is a need. This author has found through research that only a small percentage of departments in Texas have standards that are in place and require mandatory participation. The survey asked participants if their agency uses a Physical Fitness exam in the initial application process. **(See Appendix)** The survey was sent to twenty three different agencies in Texas. The agencies surveyed cover a large part of Texas. Diverse size agencies were surveyed in an attempt to gain a wide variety of information. The range of agency size is as small as five officers to a department of more than 2500 officers. Out of the twenty three agencies surveyed sixteen do not have a continuing post academy Physical Fitness Program. Seven have training in place and require periodic, usually annually, retesting. The results of this survey provided expected results. It had been anticipated that only a small number of agencies would require and provide physical fitness standards for their officers. The findings of this survey support the hypothesis indicating just this.

## **FINDINGS**

While some officers do engage in personal exercise programs, physical conditioning, or wellness programs, the majority do not. It is clearly evident that as an officers career matures and moves forward his health deteriorates and regresses. The problem most identified is the seemingly accepted practice that this is alright. The research has shown that entry level officers know the importance of being in shape. It is after all a requirement to get into law enforcement. Unfortunately this attitude is lost usually after the first couple of years. The most

common excuses are not enough time or not enough money to implement a wellness program.

This is ironic.

The investment an agency puts into an officer is enormous. The costs incurred from the time an officer is first hired to the onset of retirement is huge. Poor physical health can make these costs even more exuberant. Agencies and administrators who choose to turn a blind eye to physical fitness are a major part of the problem. It is easy to take a stance that if I am not involved then I can not be blamed for problems that may arise from officers who are in poor physical shape. This is a huge mistake and unfortunately the term “deliberate indifference” has been used to describe administrators and cities who take this stance.

Agencies start off with the right plan by requiring new recruits to be in some form of good physical shape. Unfortunately this does not apply to the veteran officers. Out of the 23 agencies polled for this research only 7 have any follow up requirements with regard to physical fitness after the officer is out working in the field.

Due to the fact that police officers are exposed to all types of stressors on the job any physical fitness program would help reduce this stress. Simply implementing a plan is not enough. The plan has to be supported by the administrative staff. Research has proven an officer who participates in some form of wellness program is less likely to take off from work, and less likely to become injured due to a sedentary life style. An officer in good physical shape has been proven to suffer less from stress and therefore has a more positive outlook on life and is ultimately more productive at his assigned tasks. A physically fit officer looks better and fits the mold that society has grown to expect. Unfortunately research has shown that the average officer can not perform physically as well as the public he has sworn to protect.

This is not a hopeless situation. There is light at the end of the tunnel. By implementing a

wellness program officers can change their physical fitness level with only minimal effort. Physically fit officers reduce their respective agencies vicarious liability, and live longer more productive lives. Research and current trends have shown that officers who get hurt on the job in agencies that have no fitness programs have sued those agencies claiming deliberate indifference. The thought is that the city knew of the inherent dangers of police work and provided no physical fitness training or requirements.

Research has shown that a city can not however implement just any program. The accepted process involves bringing in an independent agency, one who is an authority on physical fitness, and having them evaluate officers tasks, the demographics of the city, and ultimately determining what is relevant and essential to the officers job. A program is then developed based upon said findings. This can incur large costs and therefore limit some agencies ability to start a program that will stand up to litigation and scrutiny.

A simple solution to this problem is to implement a volunteer program. Selected officers can be sent to resident experts such as the Cooper clinic or Fitforce, receive training, and then return to their agencies and implement plans that are voluntary rather than mandatory. Research has shown that officers will take advantage of training and programs if they are voluntary. These type programs have been documented to be successful but only to the extent that officers participate. Agencies that implement these type of programs lay the seed for healthier officers. These programs must have measurable elements and should be evaluated at least annually for their effectiveness. If no advantage can be documented then the program should be assessed and changed to better meet the needs of the respective department.

The most important thing an agency can do is to sell the idea of physical fitness. Once physical fitness becomes the norm rather than the exception officers will look forward to working out

rather than dreading it. Plans for annual assessments can be developed from these volunteer programs. Input from officers participating in the volunteer program can be polled and used to develop plans that are relevant and applicable to an agencies officers.

Incentives for working out can be discussed and implemented is so desired. The research shows that physical fitness is an essential part of today's police environment. Unfortunately today's officers are not as physically fit as they should be. This should concern all administrators and motivate each to find solutions to this problem as they relate to their departments.

## **DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this paper was to discuss physical fitness requirements in Law Enforcement. The question is whether or not there is a need for a physical fitness standard. Police officers life expectancy in the United States is about eight years less than that of the general population. It has become apparent through the research, that Police agencies are very consistent with physical fitness requirements for entry level officers, but that is where the interest seems to end. Out of the 23 agencies polled for this research only 7 have any follow up requirements with regard to physical fitness after the officer is out working in the field.

Due to the fact that police officers are exposed to all types of stressors on the job any physical fitness program would help reduce this stress. Simply implementing a plan isn't enough. The plan has to be supported by the administrative staff. 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 (Miller, 2000). Agencies are reluctant to implement physical fitness programs either due to cost or fear of litigation.

It is important that when requirements are implemented that they are job and department related. Considerations may have to be made by the department with reference to how a test will be administered and how training to prepare for the test is provided. The objectives need to be clear to the officers and proper training and instruction must be provided.

The fear of litigation resulting from a poorly implemented program is real. If the plan is not researched properly through an expert in the field, such as the Cooper Institute, it could be deemed unrelated to the department if challenged in court. It is apparent that there is a need for physical fitness requirements in law enforcement.

Although only a small sample of the law enforcement population was polled the results from this poll indicate that less than one third of those departments had any wellness program. Research proves that health problems such as heart disease, diabetes, and stress related illnesses are abnormally high within the law enforcement community Getz (1990). Wellness programs will improve the health of officers. This will in turn reduce sick time and present to the public a more physically fit, professional looking officer.

The outcome of this research paper supported the hypothesis and shows justification for a mandatory physical fitness program. It clearly shows there is a benefit to implementing a program. The goal of this paper is to educate administrators of the importance of a wellness program and ultimately those who train the officers who work the streets of America.

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1. Is Physical Training a continuing practice in your agencies training academy?
2. Does your agency have a continuing post academy Physical Fitness Program? If they did is it required of each sworn officer?
3. Does your agency give consideration for age? Does your agency give consideration for gender?
4. If the agency did have continuing post academy training is the training allowed while on duty?
5. Is an off duty physical training program recommended, but not required?
6. Does your agency provide any incentive for maintaining a fitness level?
7. Does your agency have a fitness center / weight room?
8. Does your agency require periodic retesting in Physical Fitness?