

A GUIDE FOR IMPLEMENTING A PHYSICAL FITNESS MAINTENANCE TRAINING PROGRAM IN A CRIMINAL JUSTICE AGENCY

DR. JEFFREY C. LEE, PHD, TROY STATE UNIVERSITY & DR. STEPHEN MALLORY, PHD, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

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INTRODUCTION

One issue that most researchers agree on is that police officers need to be physically fit, due to the potential need for officers to be able to exert maximum efforts. Police work is sedentary in nature, without sufficient physical activity to maintain levels of fitness for exertive efforts or general health. The fitness levels of police officers seem to be an issue of some controversy in the literature. The majority report that police officers are at or below average fitness levels. Few researchers described police officers as average or above average (Lee, 2003). A review of the literature suggests that officers achieve an acceptable measure of physical fitness during academy training. However, without fitness maintenance programs, these gains achieved in the academy are shortly lost (Lee, 2003).

Some police administrators have recognized the need for fitness maintenance programs. It is interesting to note that academy graduates are reported to be at average to above average fitness levels, while incumbent officers have been described as below average to poor. When police administrators are considering the implementation of fitness programs for their departments, they must look at certain legal issues.

Administrators should be aware of two important cases. First, in *Tennessee v. Garner* (1985) the Supreme Court's ruling restricted the police's use of deadly force in apprehending fleeing felons. Therefore, officers may opt to allow a suspect to flee and attempt to apprehend the suspect at a later time or the officer may pursue the suspect. A practical implication of this ruling is that officers should be in adequate physical condition to pursue and subdue suspects without depending on their firearms. In another case, *Parker v. District of Columbia* (1988), the court directly addresses police officers' physical fitness and agencies' responsibility. In this case, an unfit officer who was not physically able to affect an arrest resorted to the use of deadly force. The court found that a pattern of deliberate indifference in inadequate training, discipline, and supervision existed (Cooper Institute, 2001; Gaines, Falkenberg, & Gambino, 1993; Getz, 1990). Based on this ruling alone police administrators should implement fitness programs and adequately monitor the fitness levels of their officers.

FITNESS PROGRAM CONSIDERATIONS

There are several issues that police administrators should consider when making decisions about fitness programs. Program goals and implementation strategies are important considerations. Administrators should also consider what type of leadership support is necessary to ensure the program's success. It may be necessary to conduct medical screenings as part of a fitness program. Another important consideration is the type of motivation strategies that are to be employed. Administrators must also decide if fitness standards are to be a part of pre-employment screening, maintenance, or both. The type of program, cost of the program, and manner in which the results will be measured and evaluated are other important considerations.

GOALS

There are two general goals of fitness programs identified in the literature. The first general goal is to get officers fit. Secondly, officers should be taught skills to maintain desired fitness levels. Employees should be prepared to stay active throughout their lives (Charles, 1983; Collingwood, 1978; Cooper, 1982). Johnston and Hope (1981) identified goals of cardiovascular disease prevention, detection of warning signs of officers at risk, and to offer exercise prescriptions. Objectives of maximizing job effectiveness and lessening risks of occupational disease and injury have also been identified (Spitler, Jones, Wade, & Williams, 1987).

Once an agency determines the goals of a fitness program, then individualized goal setting for officers must be considered. Goal setting helps officers answer the question, "Where should I be, realistically?" The Cooper Institute (2001) recommended that fitness assessments be conducted to determine the officers' fitness levels. Raw scores are compared to norms and standards that indicate one's relationship to others of a similar age and gender. Scores are converted to levels of "very poor," "poor," "fair," "good," "excellent," or "superior." Goal levels should be set no higher than one level above the current raw score. It is recommended that goals be made too easy rather than too difficult. Hoffman and Collingwood (1995) concur that it is important for a goal to be realistic and progressive. It is also suggested that contracts be made to improve adherence to set goals.

IMPLEMENTATION

There are several factors that should be considered when implementing a fitness program. Jones (1992) and Ness and Light (1992) believe that the budget appropriators are the first obstacles that have to be overcome. There are costs involved in implementing such programs. Advocates should prepare documentation for the appropriators to provide them with information on the benefits of fitness programs.

Next, administrators need for officers to buy into the fitness program. Collective bargaining should not be ignored in this process. Collingwood (1988a) recommended an evolutionary approach. It is not reasonable to demand unfit officers to meet high fitness standards overnight. This process involves mandatory fitness testing and education.

Additionally, officers are to be given exercise prescriptions based on current fitness levels. Once officers have their prescriptions they are given the opportunity to participate in voluntary training sessions. Once standards have been developed, officers are tested against the standard. Reinforcement systems are formed to encourage maintenance or to assist those who fall below the standard. Time frames for adherence to the standard should be negotiated and stated. Giving officers ownership in program development will assist in a smooth implementation process.

LEADERSHIP

Effective program leadership is critical for the success of a police fitness program. Collingwood, Homes, & Motely (1979) recognized that it is unfeasible for law enforcement agencies to hire academically trained exercise physiology experts to manage fitness programs. Therefore, the use of physical fitness coordinators that provides a human link between physical fitness programs and officer participation is recommended.

Coordinators should be able to demonstrate the roles, skills, and competencies associated with the physical fitness program. Proper selection, training, and certification for the position of physical fitness coordinator are critical. Often physical training instructors are defensive tactics instructors with no training in physical education. Courses have been developed that prepare police fitness instructors with the skills

and concept to develop and implement fitness programs safely. These courses should include principles of conditioning, curriculum development strategies, fitness assessment techniques, exercise techniques, evaluation techniques, and safety procedures. Without coordinators who are properly trained and certified programs may fail (Collingwood, 1988b).

MEDICAL SCREENING

Medical screenings are an important part of fitness programs. The purpose of medical screenings is to review existing information to see if there is any risk of exercise. These screening techniques can be quite sophisticated or somewhat practical. The Cooper Institute (2001) suggested that screenings function as a check step to ensure safety. If the screenings indicate any contraindications, fitness tests should not be performed. One simple and validated screening questionnaire is the PAR-Q test.

Screenings may also include blood pressure checks and the 3-minute step test. Proper medical screenings can help prevent litigation. Jones (1992) and Getz (1990) suggested that sophisticated medical screenings be used for officers over forty or officers that have certain risk factors. Some contend that agencies may consider making professional medical screenings a part of regular fitness assessments. It should be noted that these might be expensive. Often medical screenings are a part of the pre-employment selection and candidates may be required to pay for these types of screenings (Jones, Spitler, Swan, & Hawkins, 1987; Spitler et al., 1987).

MOTIVATION

Police administrators should ask themselves what motivates officers to adhere to fitness programs. Most officers do not adhere to diet and exercise programs although they know they should. Self-responsibility and reinforcement are key factors for adherence, according to the Cooper Institute (2001).

Administrators must decide if departmental fitness programs are going to be mandatory or voluntary. Jones (1992) pointed out that programs with mandatory standards need considerable legal scrutiny. These standards may be the basis of personnel actions such as assignment, dismissal, or promotion. Furthermore, he suggests that voluntary wellness oriented programs that focus on benefits to employees are less likely to experience legal challenges. However, Ness and Light (1992) suggested that voluntary programs tend not to have lasting success. Collingwood (1988a) concurred that successful programs are mandatory.

Another important aspect of motivation is officer incentives. One researcher suggests that peer pressure and personal motivation are sufficient incentives (Serra, 1984). Certainly officers should be self-motivated, but reinforcements in the form of incentives may contribute to higher adherence rates. Many of the common incentives offered to officers include additional leave time, on-duty workout time, pay bonuses, fitness club memberships, and special recognition such as T-shirts and awards (Cooper, 1982; Getz, 1990; Lindell, 1975; Slahor, 1990; Weinblatt, 2000; Witczak, 1984).

MEASURING RESULTS AND EVALUATIONS

In 1992 Jones reported that there are two important issues to be considered in measuring the effectiveness of fitness programs. The first and most important is whether the program is improving the health and fitness scores of the officers. The evaluator should determine if officers' cholesterol and blood pressure levels, dietary trends, tobacco habits, and levels of obesity are improving. The second is whether the program is saving money in health-care costs. A database should be formed that tracks health-care related information such as absenteeism, injuries, insurance claims, and workers' compensation claims. Any positive effects can be documented to justify the program (Jones, 1992).

CONCLUSION

Turner (1982) noticed that officers' fitness levels diminished significantly after the academy. Therefore, police administrators should consider fitness maintenance programs. Many feel that it makes no sense to select police officers on the basis of physical fitness and abilities and then have no requirement that minimum fitness and abilities be maintained (Lee, 2003; Carter, 1982). Maintenance programs are necessary to achieve fitness goals. Serra (1984) suggests that agencies may be guilty of negligent retention or failure to train when it comes to unfit officers. Law enforcement administrators may utilize these suggestions to successfully implement fitness maintenance programs for their agencies.

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