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Health and Fitness in Law Enforcement: A Voluntary Model Program Response to a Critical Issue

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The decline of health and fitness among those in the law enforcement community is an indisputable fact. The consequences of this phenomenon are also well known; greater vulnerability to on-duty injury and illness, increased exposure to liability and loss of respect by the public at large, among others. Alarmed by a revealing body of statistical data, in 2002 the National League of Cities' (NLC) captive reinsurance facility, NLC Mutual Insurance Company, partnered with several law enforcement organizations to form a national Task Group to study the problem and to develop possible solutions.

Initial Task Group participants consisted of the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, the Fraternal Order of Police, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the National Sheriffs' Association, the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, the International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training, the Police Executive Research Forum, the American Society for Law Enforcement Training, NLC Mutual Insurance Company, and FitForce™.

The Task Group held its initial meeting on August 21, 2002 at CALEA headquarters in Fairfax, Virginia. G. Gregory Tooker, CPCU, Principal Consultant to NLC Mutual Insurance Company, presented results of several on-going studies underscoring the enormity of the problem. The frequency and severity of cardiovascular incidences among law enforcement personnel throughout the country is increasing each year. Officers and their families are suffering the consequences of these tragic but often needless events. Jay Smith of FitForce™, a nationally recognized law enforcement fitness resource, then supported the NLC Mutual finding, citing a number of well-respected sources. Smith indicated that most published and anecdotal experience suggests police officers live on average two to five years post retirement, depending on the source. The lack of personal and agency fitness and wellness programs was cited as a predictable contributor.

After consideration of this issue by members of the Task Group, it was concluded the drafting of a generic Voluntary Law Enforcement Fitness/Wellness Model Program would be the most effective approach. The Task Group envisioned an easily adaptable model, which would be universally viewed as positive and in the best interests of both law enforcement agencies and their personnel. A basic outline of the proposed model's components was developed and approved by the Task Group. Smith and Tooker were assigned the responsibility of developing draft language for consideration by the Task Group members at the next meeting.

On November 20, 2002, the Task Group again convened at CALEA headquarters to review the first draft. After much discussion and two subsequent re-drafts, all Task Group representatives approved the Voluntary Model Program third draft. The final version of the model is adequately flexible to permit some expansion by its users to incorporate incentives or other measures should the adopting agency deem it appropriate.

In order to field test the model's efficacy, it was agreed that a pilot should be undertaken, involving a sufficient number of law enforcement agencies in various jurisdictions throughout the United States, to establish the validity of statistically-based conclusions. Understanding that performance data acquisition may possibly present privacy concerns for program participants, protections are being built into the retrieval and storage aspects of the program. All information will be gathered in an anonymous manner, preventing the identification of individual participants.

Administration and day-to-day supervision of the voluntary program at the agency level requires the certification of one or more fitness coordinators, as well as the participation and support of executive management. It is suggested that incentives acceptable to labor and management be incorporated to motivate participation by all agency personnel. National accident, injury and illness data has clearly established that 20% of the average law enforcement agency's workforce is responsible for 80% of the cost of these accidents. Therefore the criticality of full participation by all employees is clearly evident.

To date, nearly 50 law enforcement agencies in four states (Colorado, South Dakota, Kentucky, and Texas) have opted to participate in the field test of the Voluntary Model Program. Fitness coordinators for the involved agencies have been certified in each of these states. State municipal leagues in Florida and Connecticut have also recently indicated they would like to participate. This will provide a broad sample from which to accumulate pilot program performance data. The duration of the field test is expected to be approximately two to five years. State municipal league self-insurance pools and their policyholders may elect, however, to expand participation beyond the pilot program level.

A Working Background

A basic and common understanding of the issues and the names of program components are necessary. The ability to perform the frequent and essential tasks, in this case, the physical tasks of a law enforcement officer at a minimum level of safety and effectiveness, requires knowledge, skill, and physical ability. The underlying constructs of physical job task performance are health and fitness. We defined physical fitness as:

...the ability to meet life's daily demands, without undue fatigue, while maintaining sufficient energy for leisure time pursuits and to overcome emergency situations that may arise personally and professionally.

(Adapted from the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 1971).

There are six components of physical fitness:

- *Cardiovascular endurance* is the ability to take in and deliver oxygen to the working muscles to produce energy to sustain activity. Cardiovascular endurance is necessary in approximately 11% of foot pursuits and over 50% of use of force encounters^[1] [1].
- *Anaerobic power*, the ability to make short, intense bursts of maximal effort, underlies the ability to run short distances and up stairs.
- *Muscular strength* refers to the muscles' ability to generate maximal force; it is necessary for performance in control and restraint situations.
- *Muscular endurance* refers to the muscles' ability to sustain sub-maximal force, which is necessary for lifting, pushing, pulling, or carrying.
- *Flexibility*, the ability to use the available range of motion at a given joint or structure, is challenged in common tasks such as bending over as well as much less frequent ones, for instance a foot pursuit.
- *Body composition*, the ratio of fat to lean tissue, is associated with physical performance as well as health.

Health is commonly considered by many to be simply an absence of symptoms. However, due to the aging process, symptom-less diseases and the nature of the public safety environment, apparent health may be temporary or non-existent. A more comprehensive definition suggests health is *a state of complete physical, mental, and emotional well-*

being. Wellness may consequently be defined as *those purposeful actions taken to attain and maintain optimal health and fitness*.

These definitions indicate fitness, health, and wellness are not synonymous; rather they are integrally related and complimentary. In addition, they provide some goals for the program coordinator to consider when developing a department's response – that is a program. Further, they conceptualize behavioral and outcome goals for the program participant. Therefore, a total fitness and wellness program, rather than simply a fitness program or wellness program, is recommended.

Health and Fitness

More than 50% of the deaths in this country are attributable to lifestyle choices. These poor lifestyle habits predictably result in high health costs and early deaths:

- Cigarette smoking;
- Obesity, that is more than 25% body fat for males and over 30% for females;
- Poor nutrition, which is a significant contributor to the incidence of diabetes and colon cancer among law enforcement officers (LEO);
- Substance abuse;
- Sedentary living or poor cardiovascular fitness; and
- Stress – stress management is consistently defined as an in-service training priority by agencies.

As an occupational group, LEOs have greater morbidity and mortality rates than the general public, principally due to cardiovascular disease, colon cancer, and suicide. Various law enforcement agencies have calculated the cost of an in-service heart attack to be between \$400,000 and \$750,000. Surveys suggest heart disease accounts for 20 – 50% of early retirements[2] [2] and back problems for 15 – 35%[3] [3]. In fact, younger officers, under the age of 35, have a lower risk of medical problems than the average American, but those 35 and over have a higher risk[4] [4]. One study of a major metropolitan police agency indicated that almost 50% of its officers had at least three of the five major risk factors for coronary heart disease – high cholesterol, smoking, obesity, inactivity, poor cardiovascular fitness, or high blood pressure[5] [5].

The Benefits of a Program

A total fitness and wellness program can produce a host of benefits for its participants and the agency alike. By improving their personal fitness levels, officers will enjoy:

- Improved capability to perform specific physical tasks;
- Improved ability to mobilize the body efficiently;
- Improved tolerance to fatigue;
- Reduced risk during physical tasks;
- Better psychological preparation; and
- Reduced stress and associated health risks.

For the agency, health and fitness also represent a sound investment. Studies of law enforcement officers indicate more fit and active officers have 40 – 70% less absenteeism than less fit officers[6] [6]. The cost savings associated with disability are manifold:

- Partial disability means a loss of flexibility in assignments;
- Total disability results in a loss of valued personnel;
- The expense of disability payments; and
- The expense of rehiring and retraining.

One study tabbed the cost of early disability at 165% of an officer's salary[7] [7]. Each dollar spent on fitness and wellness in the workplace saves several dollars[8] [8]. Fit workers miss fewer days of work, and they are less likely to

suffer degenerative diseases, thereby spending a smaller share of the agency's health care dollars^[9] [9]. Finally, fitness and wellness programs increase loyalty, reduce turnover, and generally improve morale.

The Voluntary Model Program

The mission statement of the Voluntary Model Program is to develop a guide for a cost-effective, voluntary law enforcement fitness and wellness program that serves the interests of the agency, its individual officers, and the community it serves.

A public safety total fitness and wellness program helps to ensure that:

- Officers have the requisite fitness to perform their duties;
- Officer's lifestyle habits will decrease health risks and improve quality of life; and
- Agencies reduce their liability by ensuring officers' physical readiness to perform while controlling risk and its associated costs.

The program has two main elements. The first ensures the development and maintenance of physical performance capability, that is the ability to perform job tasks and personal leisure time pursuits. The second element addresses the officers' health status, present as well as future. For the officer, this total fitness is achieved through the development of good lifestyle habits, taught and supported by the agency's administrators. These fitness lifestyle areas – regular exercise, nutrition, weight management, stress management, tobacco cessation, and substance abuse prevention – are the foundation of the agency-based program.

Program Components

The pilot study based upon the Voluntary Model Program will provide the initial training and ongoing support for the development and maintenance of a department based health and wellness program. In partnership, the state league pools, the departments, NLC Mutual Insurance Company and FitForce™ hope to create programs with the following elements:

- Trained leadership
- A program fitness coordinator
- Health screening
- Fitness assessment
- Goal setting
- Planning
- Education
- On-going support
- Plan to phase in the program components

The introduction to this body of work, for most departments, begins with a FitForce Fitness Coordinator Course with an additional day of training on the specifics of the pilot program.

The goal of the pilot is to gather data on the current health status of the incumbent officers in the participating agencies nationwide – this essentially represents our 'pre-data'. The follow-up intervention is a voluntary wellness program based on education, fitness programming, and perhaps some form of incentive. The anticipated benefits of this national endeavor will be improved health indices and fitness levels among the law enforcement personnel, as well as a reduction in employment-related accidents, fatalities, injuries, and illness. This will result in a reduction of operating costs for law enforcement agencies and their local governments. It is our strong belief that the savings achieved through efficient implementation of this program will more than justify the comparatively minimal investment of capital and personnel. Most importantly, the participating law enforcement officers and their families will be spared the consequences of poor health.

About the Authors:

J. E. Smith, Jr., M.S., C.S.C.S., U.S.A.W. is the founder of Integrated Fitness Systems and the president of FitForce, a full-service physical fitness entity. He is an exercise physiologist, certified strength coach and club coach for the sport of weightlifting. Prior to establishing IFS, he served as the only

Director of Physical Fitness & Health Maintenance Programs for the Massachusetts Criminal Justice Training Council for eight years. Jay consults to public safety agencies throughout the country on training and employment issues, particularly the development and validation of fitness standards. He has published dozens of articles, technical reports and book chapters. Jay can be reached at jfitforce@aol.com.

G. Gregory Tooker, CPCU is President of Risk Probe, Inc., a risk control management consulting firm located in Wrentham, MA. Mr. Tooker has assisted local governments and other public entities in designing and implementing risk control programs for over 25 years. He began special focus on law enforcement in 1975, assisting the National Sheriffs' Association in developing and implementing liability assessment and avoidance educational programs. Presently, Mr. Tooker is the national risk control management consultant for the National League of Cities' captive reinsurance facility, the NLC Mutual Insurance Company based in Washington, DC.

[1] [10] Wollack & Associates (1992). *Multijurisdictional law enforcement physical skills survey*. Sacramento, CA: Wollack & Associates.

[2] [11] Collingwood et.al. (1988). *FitForce™ Coordinator Guide*, p23. Salem, MA.

[3] [12] *Ibid*, p23.

[4] [13] *Ibid*, p23.

[5] [14] *Ibid*, p23.

[6] [15] *Ibid*, p26.

[7] [16] *Ibid*, p26.

[8] [17] Sharkey (1997). *Fitness & Health*, 5th Ed., p296. Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL.

[9] [18] *Ibid*, p296.

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