

# Wellness Program for Law Enforcement Officers

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## **Abstract**

*This study focused on the need for wellness programs in law enforcement agencies. A wellness program can encompass a physical fitness program, medical evaluation, employee assistance program, peer support groups/critical incident stress management team (CISM) and continuing education for stress related issues. A wellness program can improve overall job function. Agencies throughout the State of Florida were surveyed to see what components of a wellness program were offered in their respective agencies. The majority of the agencies surveyed have a wellness program. The research indicates there is a growing trend for law enforcement agencies to add different components to a wellness program to benefit the employee and the department.*

## **Introduction**

Law Enforcement has been recognized as one of the most stressful occupations in the world. Officers have more stress-related physical complaints and psychological problems than workers in most other professions and are exposed to more acute and chronic life-stresses. This work-related stress results in increased rates of heart disease, stomach disorders, alcohol/drug abuse, divorce and suicide, as compared to the general population. Making split-second, lifesaving decisions; facing inherent dangers; working shift work and long hours; constantly interacting with people who are upset, angry or uncooperative all take a toll on individuals. Officers begin their career in excellent physical health and end up retiring early or dying from job related stress disorders. Most officers receive training for physical and mental conditioning in the law enforcement academy. Many, after being employed, never receive any other continued mandatory wellness training at their respective departments. Mental and physical wellness is crucial to maintaining healthy employees. Wellness programs are needed in the law enforcement community. Officers, throughout their career, need an on-going emotional readjustment. Agencies should have a program that is geared towards prevention instead of treating the problem after it has occurred. A wellness program can encompass a physical fitness program, medical evaluation, employee assistance program, peer support groups/critical incident stress management team (CISM) and continuing education for stress related issues. A program can improve psychological wellbeing, physical fitness, overall job function and reduce stress with a sound agency wellness program. Officers who participate in a wellness program are less likely to be injured and retire on disability, which saves the department from disability payments and hiring to train new employees.

## Literature Review

### *A Physical Fitness Program and Medical Evaluation Provides Benefits*

Law Enforcement Agencies benefit from a routine medical evaluation and a physical fitness program. Based on theory, fit officers receive better performance evaluations than unfit officers. This theory also suggests fit officers have 40 to 70 percent less absenteeism than less fit officers. A fitness program improves the quality of life, while reducing employee accidents, injuries, and illnesses, which reduces the departments operating costs. In the law enforcement field, fitness has a direct impact on job performance. Based on the job description of a law enforcement officer, a core list of physical tasks required to perform the duties were identified. Those tasks were identified as running, climbing, jumping, lifting/carrying, dragging, pushing, and use of force. For over 75 percent of police apprehensions, the amount of resistance given by the suspect is described as moderate or strong, and the average amount of time it takes to subdue a subject can vary between 30 seconds and two minutes. For most physical tasks lasting over two minutes, officers use 75-90 percent of their maximum capability. Cardiovascular endurance, anaerobic power, muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, and body composition are all underlying factors in successful job performance (Quigley, 2009).

National accident, injury, and illness data have shown that 20 percent of the average law enforcement agency's workforce is responsible for 80 percent of the cost of accidents. The small percentage of least-fit officers is responsible for the majority of the compensable injuries. Various law enforcement agencies calculated the average cost of an in-service heart attack to be between \$400,000 and \$700,000. Heart disease accounts for 20-50 percent of all early retirements, and back problems account for another 15-35 percent. Lack of physical activity is one major contributor to both conditions (Quigley, 2009).

An effective and well-planned health fair can be an employer's first step toward setting up a quality wellness program. Health fairs typically include screenings such as cholesterol tests, blood glucose measurements, triglyceride readings, BMI calculations, bone density tests, etc. These fairs serve as a mini-physical for employees. This basic assessment can enlighten an employee to the pre-existing indicators of a chronic condition, such as diabetes. Early detection can head off a serious condition and save thousands in health care costs. Exercise and nutrition classes are beneficial as well as offering smoking cessation programs. The options for health fairs are endless and can be tailor-made for the agency needs. They let employees know that their employer cares about them and their health. Most of all, the event identifies what needs to be changed regarding an employees' health and wellness.

### *The Effectiveness of Peer Counseling*

Another concept of the wellness program is peer support groups. A police officer feels no one is better equipped to comprehend the pressures of law enforcement than another officer. Peer support programs are effective in terms of addressing many types of mental health problems. The concept of peer counseling is not a new idea. Law

enforcement officers frequently gravitate toward more experienced colleagues who can serve as mentors in times of crisis. While law enforcement experience is critical and helps to establish rapport, training in the principles of crisis intervention and critical incident stress debriefing is also important. The training of peer counselors should be conducted by mental health professionals. The Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) provides 64 hours of initial training, leading to certification of peer trauma team members, who are then required to receive 24 to 40 hours of additional training every 3 to 4 years to remain certified (Finn & Tomz, 1998). The peer counselor's mandate is to provide a safe, confidential climate for the client. It is also his or her responsibility to decide whether or not a referral to a licensed mental health professional should be the next step in the treatment process. Peer counselors should be selected based on several criteria, including trustworthiness, sensitivity to the issues of racial diversity and other cultural factors. They should also have the ability to command respect and establish rapport with clients quickly (Waters & Ussery, 2007).

Peer supporters are like professional counselors who are also sworn officers. They offer instant credibility and the ability to empathize. A large number of trained peer supporters can match fellow officers with those who have experienced the same incident, thus creating a more cohesive peer relationship. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms operates three peer programs linking officers with peer supporters who are critical incident survivors, victims of sexual assault, or recovering alcoholics. In addition, because of their daily contact with fellow officers, peer supporters are in a better position to detect problems before they become out of control. As a result, peer support groups are "proactive and preventive" in nature. Peer supporters have three major responsibilities: listening, assessing and referring. By listening, peer supporters provide an opportunity for officers under stress to express these emotions to another person who understands from personal experience how they feel and why they are upset (Quigley, 2009).

It is also important to recruit peer support groups for civilians in the workplace. Civilian employees many times deal with the same clientele as law enforcement. Civilian personnel may feel uncomfortable sharing problems with officers. The commitment to provide these services not only benefits the involved officers and non-sworn employees, but also their families, their departments and the community they serve.

### *Prevention and Educational Programs to Combat Stress are Beneficial*

It is critically important to provide wellness programs which promote psychological and emotional wellness of law enforcement personnel. In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that the constant exposure to traumatic incidents in the daily tour of duty is an important factor in the development of violence and other psychiatric problems among police officers. Appropriate prevention, intervention and treatment of stress associated with police work are essential to preventing psychosocial impairments that contribute to misconduct (Heglund, 2009). The police personality stands as a major stumbling block in understanding why counseling has been slow to evolve. Police officers surround themselves in "image armor" and perceive the expression of emotions as a weakness. They are themselves suspicious people and

many find it hard to trust and confide in others, so they isolate their feelings. This leads directly to sick leave abuse, aggressive behavior, job loss, high rates of divorce, suicide, and substance abuse (Kureczka, 2002).

The Newark Police Department (NPD) cooperated with a project spearheaded by the New Jersey Medical School in 1999. A grant project was launched called, "Violence Prevention for Law Enforcement Officers in Newark, New Jersey." The project was established to identify the most effective ways to address the sensitive and urgent mental health needs of its law enforcement population. This was done through two programs. The first program was a primary prevention and educational program to assist officers regarding major sources of stress that affects their lives. The topics were stress management, domestic violence, post-traumatic stress syndrome, critical incident stress management and substance abuse. The second part was a confidential facilitated referral system which was established providing a dedicated 800 number for a 24 hour hotline service. This service provided access for the entire NPD for their outpatient psychiatric needs. The confidential referral system provided access to NPD before, during and after the program. The results indicate the number of calls made to the hotline increased significantly during and after the prevention and educational period (Amaranto, Steinberg, Castellano & Mitchell, 2003). This study suggested that officers were receptive to the wellness training and actively used the confidential hot-line established for mental health counseling and resources. Access to a confidential counseling source, such as an employees' assistance program, along with psychological and emotional wellness training can increase the use of provided counseling services to promote healthier employees.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this research was to examine the need for wellness programs in law enforcement agencies. Several topics were examined such as physical fitness testing, crisis intervention stress management teams (CISM), peer counselors and wellness classes (stress management and physical fitness). The data was collected through a nine question survey. The various Florida departments in the Senior Leadership Program, Class 14, hosted by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, participated in the survey. The survey posed questions relating to the type of wellness programs offered in various agencies such as: Is physical fitness testing mandatory? Are incentives given to employees who participate in a wellness program? Are there peer counselors and critical incident stress management teams (CISM)? A strength of this study was raising awareness of the benefits a total wellness program could provide for law enforcement agencies. A wellness program improves the quality of life of each employee, which reduces health care costs, saving the department money throughout an employee's career. A weakness of this study was the limited number of general questions for each specialized area and not having the time or resources to evaluate a department who has a mandatory fitness/wellness program. This time consuming study would evaluate officers who have experienced a stressful event and have received assistance through a critical incident stress management team (CISM) or who have

participated in a mandatory physical fitness program due to officers being unfit. Tracking their progress through counseling and training would be the ultimate study.

## Results

Twenty-one Florida law enforcement agencies from the Senior Leadership Program participated in the nine question survey. The agencies are listed below:

- An anonymous County Sheriff's Office
- Altamonte Springs Police Department
- Brevard County Sheriff's Office
- Florida Department of Law Enforcement
- Florida Fish and Wildlife
- Florida Highway Patrol
- Florida State Fire Marshall's Office
- Florida State University
- Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office
- Lakeland Police Department
- Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office
- Orange County Sheriff's Office
- Panama City Police Department
- Pasco County Sheriff's Office
- Pinellas County Sheriff's Office
- Pinellas Park Police Department
- Polk County Sheriff's Office
- Quincy Police Department
- Santa Rosa County Sheriff's Office
- Tallahassee Police Department
- Volusia County Sheriff's Office

All of the agencies selected participated in the survey. Not all of the questions in the survey were answered due to the lack of an agency involved specific program. The following data was collected from the twenty-one surveys:

- 11 agencies have a mandatory physical fitness test



- 7 agencies allow employees to work out on duty



- 17 agencies have a critical incident stress management team (CISM)



- 19 agencies have peer counselors available for employees involved in critical incidents



- 12 agencies offer wellness classes



- 1 agency has mandatory wellness classes



- 7 agencies offer incentives for participating in a wellness program



The survey results from the various law enforcement agencies provided different incentives given for participating in a wellness program which are listed below.

- The Board of County Commissioners offers incentive bonuses towards insurance premiums for those who participate in an on-line wellness evaluation and complete a physical. Awards are given for those who can complete a rigorous physical training course.
- Officers who pass a mandatory wellness test per Cooper standards receive 8 to 16 hours of leave per year.
- Officers receive up to \$300 per year to pay for gym membership and have continued employment for passing the fitness abilities test.
- Members with agency insurance can receive up to \$225 annually for participating in various preventive screenings and wellness classes. Members without agency

insurance can receive up to \$100 for participating. Officers can receive \$100 for running their annual physical assessment in the allotted time.

- Officers participate in a monthly 1.5 mile run for pay.
- Employees receive a reduction in insurance premiums for participating in a wellness program.
- Money is given to those who walk or run 1.5 miles within time limits every six months.

The majority of the agencies surveyed have some component of a wellness program to include a mandatory physical fitness test, critical incident stress management team (CISM), peer counselors and wellness classes. Only one agency answered yes to all questions contained in the survey. The Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office has a mandatory physical fitness test and mandatory attendance for wellness classes. They offer all of the surveyed items to their employees. Only one agency answered no to all of the questions contained in the survey. The State Fire Marshall's Office does not offer any of the surveyed items to their employees.

## **Discussion**

Twenty-one law enforcement agencies were surveyed concerning their overall agency wellness programs. The research indicates there is a growing trend for law enforcement agencies to add different components to a wellness program to benefit the employee and the department. Upon further literary research, the benefits of a wellness program are reduced insurance premiums and improved physical and mental fitness. Providing mental health support will help keep officers more competent and effective in performing their jobs, help manage the stress of their environment better and may also enhance job satisfaction.

A comprehensive wellness program should consist of a physical fitness program, stress management, mental health, nutrition and alcohol and chemical dependency education/treatment. All components are interrelated and each is an important part of maintaining a necessary level of mental and physical fitness. Nearly all of the agencies surveyed provided at least some type of wellness program for their employees. However, based on the wellness program components which were surveyed, most of the law enforcement agencies lacked a total wellness program.

A well-managed wellness program is important in the early detection and treatment of employees suffering from various physical and mental problems. The lack of an effective program permits employees to fall through the cracks in an organization. This could include persons who probably should have never been hired and those who possibly could have been helped if services were available.

## **Recommendations**

Law enforcement agencies should investigate programs of other agencies and adopt aspects of those programs to fit their needs. Officers should strive to put forth a positive and professional image in both mental and physical health. Their image can be improved through the use of a well-managed and comprehensive wellness program. Providing these interventions will help officers to become more effective in performing their jobs, managing the stress of their environment better and may enhance job satisfaction. It is critical throughout the state and country to protect and preserve those officers dedicated to serving the public. A total wellness program incorporates the development of good lifestyle habits, including regular exercise, good nutrition, weight management, stress management, and substance abuse prevention. Such a program must be supported by an agency's administrators for it to be successful. Fitness and health programs are believed to increase employee loyalty, improve morale, and decrease turnover. More importantly, employees benefit from improved quality of life and health while reducing employee related accidents, injuries, and illnesses, thus reducing operating costs. There is a recent trend within the law enforcement community to recognize the importance of fitness as it relates to job performance, officer safety, and wellness. Several agencies have initiated programs to encourage participation and improve health.

Lieutenant Tracy Yuhasz has been in law enforcement for 25 years with the Escambia County Sheriff's Office. She has been assigned to many different units to include Patrol, DUI squad, School Resource, Investigations, Internal Affairs, Community Relations, Records, Communications, Court Security, and Civil. She is currently assigned to the Asset Forfeiture Unit.

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