



PHYSICAL READINESS PROGRAMMING:  
What EVERY *Smart Administrator* Should Know

*“Law enforcement executives who fail to  
incorporate fitness and health programs in  
their management strategy create significant  
liability exposure for their agencies.”*

**Myth:** *“Without standards, a program just will not work.”*

**Fact:** Without a program, standards will not work.

The bottom line is that behavior change is the goal – a change in lifestyle behaviors, such as exercise and eating habits, must take place before officer or agency truly benefit.

**Myth:** *“It’s management’s responsibility, I’m not doing anything for nothing.”*

**Fact:** A recent review of workers’ compensation claims in a state with a presumption law revealed that the majority of the claims were due to off-duty cardiovascular events; most were found to be non-compensable and preventable!

**Myth:** *“It’s the individual officers’ responsibility, we pay them – they should take care of themselves and their fitness.”*

**Fact:** In one jurisdiction, the community and the police departments were informed their health insurance premiums would become cost-prohibitive if a health and fitness program was not installed.

**Myth:** *“A program is too expensive for us to undertake.”*

**Fact:** The cost of doing business: Industry estimates suggest several dollars are returned for every dollar invested in a health and fitness program.

The cost of not doing business: One high profile “failure to train” decision with respect to physical fitness was worth \$400,000.00 (in 1983 dollars!) to the plaintiff.

**Myth:** *“Cops (or firefighters or trash collectors...) are different and nobody understands our (health and fitness) needs.”*

**Fact:** FitForce™ is a full-service physical fitness entity serving the law enforcement and public safety communities for over 17 years. Our programs and services have assisted hundreds of local, state and federal agencies in fulfilling their mandate to ensure a capable workforce for the community they serve.

***Let's start with the job...***

Our collective experience conducting validation studies (currently over 130 agencies using the same methodology) as well as a review of another 150 job-task surveys and job descriptions, supported by an FBI report in which experts defined essential job tasks, point to a core of physical tasks required of all law enforcement officers.

<b><u>Core Physical Tasks for Law Enforcement</u></b>	
<b><u>Global Physical Tasks:</u></b>	
Searching	
Controlling and arresting	
Lifting, carrying, pushing, pulling objects and persons	
Driving	
Foot pursuits	
<b><u>Specific Frequent Tasks:</u></b>	<b><u>Specific Critical Tasks:</u></b>
Driving	Running
Standing	Jumping and dodging obstacles
Climbing stairs	Using force
Walking	Pushing or pulling heavy objects

In fact, we can quantify those tasks identified:

- Running: the majority of the time running tasks are less than 1 minute, approximately 11% of the time they exceed 2 minutes;
- Climbing: in most instances the fence is 5' tall;
- Jumping: vaulting or jumping typically over obstacles 3' or less;

- Use of force: in over 75% of the incidences, the amount of resistance is moderate to strong; the duration of the event is 30 – 120 seconds.

**FACT:**

That 'moderate to strong resistance' is likely to come from a 21 year old male, 5'-10" tall with 6% body fat and possessing good to excellent aerobic capacity. This is the average physical profile derived from a recent study of over 900 arrestees from one jurisdiction in a mid-Atlantic state.

*The take-away point is that the job of a law enforcement officer is at times a physically demanding one and in instances where an arrest is made, the arrestee is most likely to be a young, very fit male.*

***What about the people doing the job?***

Data reaching back to the early 1980's suggest the average police officer demonstrates average to poor fitness compared to other adults their age and gender (remember the average arrestee – 21, male). These data were repeated in 1992 in the Pennsylvania State University Aging Study of 5,000 – 10,000 officers in six large agencies (not all participated). This survey's data point to below average aerobic fitness and body fat levels and slightly higher than average muscular strength and flexibility for the officers participating. In both studies, officers 21 – 35 had slightly higher than average fitness while those 36 –

55 had slightly lower than average fitness for their age and gender adjusted cohort.

The health profiles of officers of officers on the job are equally disheartening.

---

### **Major Chronic Health Problems**

#### **Condition**

#### **% of Officers with**

#### **Condition**

Obesity	20 – 50%
High Cholesterol	20 – 35%
Back & Orthopedic Problems	15 – 25%
Hypertension	16 – 20%

---

One study of officers in a major department reported 88% of its officers had at least one primary risk factor for **Coronary Artery Disease**, 65% had two, 48% had three, and 31% of its officers had four primary risk factors. [This study was conducted before a fifth primary risk factor was added.]

*The take away point is the people occupying this at times demanding job are for the most part unfit (compared to those they may have to arrest) and perhaps unhealthy as well.*

These factors combined with the job conditions no doubt contribute to this commonly reported statistic:

**Law enforcement officers on average live 2 – 6 years post retirement.**

This statistic in light of the average life expectancy for an adult male in the United States (+78 yrs. of age) bears a strong witness to the need for an intervention.

***So...What happens when these conditions collide?***

It only takes one incident to cast a bright light on the ramifications of not having a health and fitness initiative. We have some indication from *Parker v DC*. Parker was a paraplegic who filed suit over injuries he sustained while being arrested by Officer Hayes of the Metropolitan District of Columbia Police Department. Hayes, a decorated Vietnam veteran and police officer had recently returned to duty when he shot Parker twice, once in the spine during the course of affecting the arrest. Hayes had been off duty because of a severely injured shoulder. His doctor returned him to light duty, noting that Hayes' shoulder precluded him from performing the full range of law enforcement duties. He further noted that Hayes would never regain full use of his shoulder, implying that he could never again perform those duties.

The lower court found for Parker, citing among other things the department's lack of a fitness program, and awarded the plaintiff \$400,000.00 in 1982. In 1983, the United States Court of Appeals upheld the ruling, stating in part:

"Officer Hayes' conduct was the result of *deliberate indifference* (emphasis added) on the part of the District with respect to the physical training of its police officer."

## ***Over the long haul, the results are no less profound***

As an occupational group, law enforcement officers have greater morbidity and mortality rates than the general public due to cardiovascular disease, colon cancer, and suicide. This comes at a significant cost. In fact, various law enforcement agencies have calculated the cost of an in-service heart attack to be \$400,000.00 - \$750,000.00! Further, national accident, injury, and illness data have clearly established that 20% of the average law enforcement agency's workforce is responsible for 80% of the cost of these incidents.

### **A Review of Workers' Compensation Claims**

In 2002, on behalf of NLC Mutual Insurance Company, Risk Probe, Inc.

conducted a review of heart/hypertension-related claims involving police officers insured by a state municipal league self-insured pooling organization. More recently the same state was again reviewed with results that supported the earlier findings. Most recently, a sample of 295 workers' compensation claims filed by local government employees revealed 101 (34%) by law enforcement officers. Of that number, 87 (86%) involved heart/hypertension-related incidents – many suffered off-duty and found to be non-compensable.

Finally, if the big, single incident doesn't get you, consider:

- Health insurance premiums are rising over 10 - 15% per year;
- Workers' compensation rates are rising over 2 – 3% per year;

- More fit and active officers have 40 – 70% less absenteeism;
- The estimated cost of early disability is 165% of an officer's salary;
- Fit officers are less likely to suffer degenerative diseases, thereby spending a smaller share of the agency's health care dollars;
- Fitness and health programs increase loyalty, reduce turnover, and generally improve morale.

*The take away point is all parties, labor, management, and host community, bear significant cost(s) when a relatively unfit – and unprepared, and apparently unhealthy workforce continues to operate without a health and fitness program.*

**Quick review so far...**

1. Law enforcement is at times a physically demanding job requiring the safe, effective performance of critical tasks.
2. Therefore, the agencies have a reasonable, legal, and logical responsibility to ensure a fit and able workforce.
3. However, occupational studies suggest the workforce, as a whole may be neither fit nor healthy.
4. The result of this conflict may be personally, legally, and financially profound.

By now some agreement exists as to the conditions and the possible consequences. A PHYSICAL READINESS PROGRAM benefits the officer, the agency, and the community at large. This plan simultaneously considers the officers' health and fitness/performance status. The agency recognizes that in



order to get and maintain both, it must teach and support positive lifestyle habits. The foundation of the agency based program are introduced at the outset and reinforced throughout the officers' careers:

- Exercise
- Nutrition
- Weight Management
- Tobacco Cessation
- Substance Abuse Prevention
- Stress Management

This can be achieved within the current constructs of recruit and in-service training.

## **Health**

More than 50% of the deaths in this country every year are attributable to *lifestyle choices*:

- **Sedentary lifestyle** – less than 10% of the adult population exercises vigorously three times/week;
- **Poor nutrition** significantly contributes to the development of diabetes and colon cancer- both of which have a much higher incidence in law enforcement;
- **Obesity** (+25% body fat for males and +30% for females) significantly affects performance and officer appearance, in addition to a host of other health issues;

- **Cigarette smoking** accounts for almost 390,000 deaths annually and \$15 billion in health care costs;
- **Alcohol abuse** affects approximately 18 million Americans with costs estimated over \$100 billion;
- **Stress** accounts for up to two thirds of all visits to primary-care physicians and stress management is consistently identified as an in-service training priority for agencies.

## **Fitness**

In the occupational setting, *two significant performance concerns* exist: the ability to perform physically on the job and in leisure time pursuits such as an exercise program. An effective physical fitness program focuses on:

- **Cardiovascular Endurance** refers to the body's ability to take in and use oxygen to sustain activity;
- **Anaerobic Power** is the ability to perform short, intense bouts of work, often rapidly (is rapidly redundant?);
- **Muscular Strength** refers to the ability to generate maximal force one time;
- **Muscular Endurance** on the other hand is the ability to sustain a sub-maximal force over time;
- **Flexibility** refers to the ability to use the available range of motion at a given joint structure;
- **Body Composition** is typically referred to as a percent body- fat; this expresses a ratio of fat to lean tissue.

The Physical Readiness Program can produce a host of benefits for participants and agency alike. By improving **personal fitness levels**, officers will enjoy:

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

### ***The Elements of a Successful Physical Readiness Program***

A number of characteristics, personal and organizational must be in place to ensure a successful program. Starting at the top, there must be a real commitment from the community and the command staff to sustain the program over the long haul. Staff, trained as fitness leaders or coordinators, should be respected, good communicators, and committed to a healthy, fit lifestyle (though not necessarily the most fit officers). All should recognize and support the notion that behavior change is the foundation of the educationally based program.

Although the specific nature and offerings may vary from agency to agency, here are

### **9 (or 10) ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL PHYSICAL READINESS PROGRAM.**

1. A **trained and well-oriented leadership** at the highest levels is an essential, first element of the agency based program.

***FitForce Recommendation:***

This is the key to success for any program. Instruction is offered on issues such as legal concerns, budget, and policy and procedure for administration as well as leadership with an overall emphasis on behavior modification.

2. **Program Coordinator** is the cornerstone of the program.

***FitForce Recommendation:***

The *peer counselor* model has many values including capitalizing on internal resources and employing fitness staff intimately familiar with the target population – themselves.

KSA's include screening for safe participation, assessing current levels of fitness, setting goals, prescribing exercise and lifestyle changes to meet those goals, and basic safety.

3. **Health screening** clears the participants for testing or exercise.

***FitForce Recommendation:***

This program element is not be concerned with mandatory medical examinations, though they can serve similar functions.

Nearly every agency that has conducted health screening has identified at least one officer in need of additional referral, often resulting in a life saving intervention. However, a few simple questions will determine that most people

can safely participate in an exercise program. Finally, additional low cost health screens may include blood pressure, resting heart rate, and whole blood analysis for blood lipids to include triglycerides and cholesterol as well as blood glucose.

4. A **fitness assessment** is the follow-up to the health screen.

***FitForce Recommendation:***

The agency fitness coordinator would be trained to conduct valid field measure of physical fitness using equipment that is both inexpensive and readily available.

These fitness tests measure the components of fitness underlying abilities necessary to the all of the physical tasks an officer may be called upon to perform. A written *activity questionnaire* is also a valuable tool to assess fitness.

5. **Goal setting** is a process that establishes a set of outcomes that are challenging, specific, attainable, measurable, measurable, systematic, and progressive.

***FitForce Recommendation:***

The fitness coordinator assesses the current level of fitness of the participant and together they establish the goals. To be effective, goals must be challenging yet attainable, realistic in light of the current level of fitness and short-term. Short-term goals assist in the next step. Finally, goals may be tied to incentives or some other motivational tool.

6. **Planning** can take many forms including exercise prescription, nutritional and lifestyle planning, or an activity program

***FitForce Recommendation:***

All plans and prescriptions are based on current levels of fitness or activity and the previously established goals. The fitness coordinator together with the participant apply the principles of specificity, progression, overload, adaptation, balance, moderation and regularity to come up with a plan of action to meet their goals.

7. **Education** is a cornerstone of the agency-based **Total Fitness Program**.

***FitForce Recommendation:***

The goal is to provide all personnel with the information necessary to enact healthy, long-lasting changes to their lifestyle. Starting with recruits and continuing throughout their careers, officers will need: *information about how to change, positive experience with that change, and continued reinforcement to maintain the change*. To ensure this process is valid, administration and program leadership will need ongoing education themselves, particularly in the face of staff turnover. **This element is perhaps most critical of all** and is outlined below.

8. **Ongoing support** for the program, as noted comes from up and down the chain of command.

### ***FitForce Recommendation***

Support for the program takes many forms including monitoring and feedback both to participants and administration concerning progress and program effectiveness, newsletters, subscriptions to publications and off course, leading by example is perhaps the most genuine form of support. Perhaps the most important contribution the administration can make to look for ways to **provide on-duty training time.**

9. A plan to **phase in** the program is the final mandatory element of the **Total Fitness Program.**

### ***FitForce Recommendation:***

Most agencies will choose to begin the program with recruits, since fitness is typically inculcated at that level. Others may choose to start with an incumbent in-service program. In order to be successful however, eventually the program must include all personnel, perhaps even non-sworn personnel.

10. **Standards** are the tenth and optional element.

### ***FitForce Recommendation:***

Historically, agencies have fallen into one of three categories:

1. Standards for applicants and recruits
2. Standards for applicants and recruits and considering incumbent standards
3. No standards at all

The mission of an agency fitness program is to ensure officers are capable of performing the physical tasks required of them; the role of *valid standards* is to predict whether the officers will be able to perform those duties when they are called upon. Together they provide the most assurance for the agency, officer and community.

**THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A**  
**PHYSICAL READINESS PROGRAM**

- A trained and Well-Oriented Leadership
- Program Coordinator
- Health screening
- Fitness Assessment
- Goal Setting
- Planning
- Education
- Ongoing Support
- Phase-In Plan
- Optional: Standards



## Final thoughts on our report

In 2009, the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) adopted a standard requiring all agencies would have in place a *fitness and wellness program*. The standard is below.

### **22.3.3 The agency has a written directive that addresses a fitness and wellness program which includes:**

- Mandatory or voluntary participation by agency personnel
- A trained program coordinator
- Individual health screening and fitness assessment
- Individual education and goal setting
- Ongoing support and evaluation

**Commentary:** A fitness and wellness program has two main elements. The first is physical performance, i.e., the development and maintenance of physical performance capability to satisfactorily perform job tasks and personal activities. The second is the individual's present health status as well as the risk for future disease. This is impacted greatly by lifestyle choices, including smoking, nutrition, weight, stress management, inactivity, etc. The agency should also consider incentives to encourage employee participation.

We consulted with the NLC – Mutual Insurance Co. and the Law Enforcement Task Group. Our thinking is the same now as then – the difference is the terminology; we feel the term ***physical readiness*** is more descriptive, accurate, and defensible.

### **About FitForce™**

FitForce™ is committed to finding Physical Readiness Solutions for the public safety community we serve. Our pledge is to provide our clients with the very best scientific, legal and practical training and education, validation of selection and retention standards, policy and procedure analysis and development, as well as ongoing administration, arbitration and litigation support.

FitForce™ and its consultant team together have 70 years of public safety physical fitness experience. This includes: over 100 articles, columns, chapters, books and technical reports, experience with nearly 300 agencies and their representatives, over 215 validation studies and a database of over 4000 randomly selected law enforcement officers at agencies for whom we've developed standards. *If you would like to discuss how we can be of assistance to your agency, please call us at 978.745.3629.*