

Garner, N.C., implements officer fitness requirement



Physical fitness is a requirement to gain employment in the field of law enforcement. Not all departments obligate officers to remain physically fit throughout their careers, however, even though studies have shown increased effectiveness and fewer injuries sustained by officers who do. (Photo provided)

About 80 percent of police officers in the U.S. are overweight. Another report suggest that 40 percent of the same officers are considered to be obese.

By JULIE YOUNG | The Municipal

Communities ask a lot of their members of law enforcement. They want them to be able to respond at a moment's notice when something goes awry, and officers are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner at all times. They must adhere to best practices to ensure public and personal safety, and stay on top of classroom, firearms and practical training programs in order to remain certified. However, when it comes to physical fitness, a requirement is too often nonexistent.

When Brandon Zuidema became chief of police in Garner, N.C., in December 2009, he was determined to change that. To best execute their duties to the best of their ability, police officers must remain physically fit, he believed. He set out to develop and implement a fitness requirement for sworn law enforcement officers.

"This was something we did not have at my old work location, so when I was getting ready to become chief, I started thinking about what I could do that would make a difference in the lives of officers not only now, but in the future," Zuidema recalled.

Writing on the wall

The statistics are sobering. According to a report released by the FBI in 2014, about 80 percent of police officers in the U.S. are overweight. Another report suggest that 40 percent of the same officers are considered to be obese.

According to the Mayo Clinic, there are a number of reasons why law enforcement

officers have weight control and fitness issues. Recruits begin their careers in good shape, but along the way a change occurs. While the stress of the job is a big contributor, poor eating habits, loss of sleep, inactivity and the lack of a fitness program play their parts as well.

When there is no accountability for weight gain and no incentive to take it off, it can lead to serious and potentially life-threatening issues.

Zuidema is convinced creating a fitness requirement will not only improve officers' performance, but also help prevent illness

and work-related injuries, reduce health care costs, enables

his personnel to maintain a positive image in the community and even lengthen lives.

"I've read that police officers don't have the longest lifespan post-career; they die about 10 years earlier than the general public. So it's important that we do all we can in order to encourage them to adopt healthier habits." ▶



Passing the POPAT

In 2010 Zuidema began an internal dialogue with members of his department to determine what their fitness standard might look like and how it would be implemented. After considering several possibilities, it was decided they would adopt the North Carolina Police Officer Physical Abilities Test. POPAT is a two-phase, 15-step procedure given to every officer prior to employment. The state standard for its completion is 7:20 minutes, and Zuidema said it emphasizes the general fitness goals his department hopes to set for its personnel.

"The POPAT is a test our officers are already familiar with so that made the most sense for us. We could have gone with the more rigorous Cooper test, which is used in some departments, but we thought the best route for us was to use the test our officers were required to pass in the first place."

Zuidema began talking up the POPAT in the summer of 2010 so officers could begin training long before they had to take it two



years later. Zuidema said it was important to him to be fair with his employees and 63 sworn officers in his charge.

He knew there would be some who could pass the test immediately and some who

could not. Because he wanted to give them the best possible outcome, a new station, complete with a wellness center, was opened, and he encouraged everyone to work out for at least an hour a day while on duty.



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LEFT: Garner, N.C., and some other U.S. cities have decided maintaining a minimum level of physical fitness among officers is of enough value to institute it as a requirement for continued employment. (Photo provided)

"We also offer fitness coaches, classes and other assistance in order to give them the best chance for success," he noted.

So far, the results have been promising. According to the Garner Police Department's annual report, the average time of employees taking the POPAT in the fall of 2012 was 8:29.

In the fall of 2013, that time fell to 7:52. By 2014, the spring and fall combined average was 7:32. Zuidema is confident that 100 percent of his officers are on track to pass it within the state standard by 2018.

He has already seen life-changing transformations. One employee shed 50 pounds, and others who were struggling have been doing much better since recommitting to a fitness plan.



Although Garner is not the only department to implement this kind of fitness standard for sworn officers, it is one of the first in North Carolina to do so. "We are far ahead of the curve in terms of doing it as part of the job requirement, as opposed to those who make it incentive-based. That only encourages folks who are already in shape and those departments that don't do anything at all." **M**

Ana Kennedy, a 2012 graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, found that in a 2010 study by Police Executive Research Forum Executive Director Chuck Wexler, **68 PERCENT** of departments nationwide have reduced or discontinued physical fitness training as a result of strained budgets. The main concern for many agencies during the economic downturn has been keeping officers employed and on the streets rather than directing that money toward other areas. The factor that needs to be emphasized is that officers who are in good overall health can actually reduce the financial strain on a department.

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