Physical Fitness Requirements in Law Enforcement Agencies
Research Paper

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Law enforcement and other public safety organizations often require their applicants, trainees, and incumbents to maintain a certain level of physical fitness to be “fit for duty.” Job-related duties require an individual to be prepared to perform optimally in certain situations with strength, stamina, speed and power.

There is no governing body that dictates to organizations how they are to implement fitness tests, choose their fitness standards, or implement their fitness programs. Some organizations have voluntary fitness testing with recommended standards that are not enforced (voluntary compliance). Other organizations have mandatory compliance for fitness tests and standards, meaning that the individual will not be hired or will be fired if fitness standards are not met or maintained. Still others have mandatory testing but voluntary compliance to fitness standards.

Furthermore, organizations often differ in fitness requirements for applicants, trainees and incumbents. For example, some law enforcement departments require their academy graduates to meet a fitness standard, but the incumbent officer is never tested for fitness again (The Cooper Institute 2005: Overview p.1).

The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, in its information to The Bureau of Justice Statistics, Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics for Local Police Department 2000 Census, shows that 44% of agencies of all sizes reported Physical Agility testing during the recruitment of new officers.

Agencies with a population of one million or more reported: 87%.
Populations between 500,000 to 999,999: 88%.
Populations between 250,000 and 499,999: 90%.
Populations between 100,000 and 249,999: 83%. 
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(Hickman and Reaves 2003).

The beginning point for establishing life long wellness habits for those in law enforcement starts with incorporating “best practices” into entrance level physical training programs. The training should complement other mandated physically demanding classes – defensive tactics for example – and directly align with the physical skills needed of the beat officer. This can best be accomplished through contemporary exercise-science instructions and by mandating physical training standards accordingly. As an example, contemporary exercise science includes fitness screening, fitness testing and designing individual exercise prescriptions linked to other physical demands of the law enforcement academy.

As stated in many general order manuals, “a police officer must be physically, emotionally and mentally prepared to do the job, on and off duty.” The short-term product of academies are young officers who can run and lift weights but have little knowledge of how to maintain true fitness and wellness throughout their careers (National Sheriff 2002).

Agencies are legally responsible for hiring and retaining officers who are physically capable of performing the emergency function. Physical fitness in law enforcement professionals cannot be justified in terms of frequency, but can easily be
justified in terms of criticality. The objective of a test and standard is that they predict who can and who cannot perform the essential job function. The issue is very simple: As long as a standard can be validated as being job related, it can be upheld.

Law enforcement professionals should have a level of physical fitness which ensures that they are capable to perform the emergency function effectively. The purpose of fitness testing is to discriminate who can effectively perform the physical job tasks versus who cannot effectively perform the physical job tasks (Cooper – Physical Standards 2005 p. 1,2,3,&6).


The ADA prohibits discrimination in employment-related matters against qualified individuals with a disability because of the disability. (Labor Relations Information System, 1998).

The ADA does not broadly prohibit employment-related discrimination against all individuals with a disability. Rather, the law protects only “qualified individuals with a disability” when the employer’s decisions have been based on the individual’s disability (Deckert v. City of Ulysses, 4 AD Cases 1569 (D.Kan. 1995).
To be a “qualified individual with a disability,” the employee must be able to perform the essential functions of the job either with or without reasonable accommodation. (Mincey v. City of Bremerton, 38 Fed.Appx. 402 (9th Cir. 2002).

Ordinarily, the disabled employee must request an accommodation under the ADA, beginning an interactive discussion between the employer and the employee as to potential accommodations (Coley v. Grant County, 36 Fed.Appx. 242 (9th Cir. 2002).

Under the ADA, an employer is not required to modify an essential function of the job by way of an accommodation (Hoskins v. Oakland County, 227 F.3d 719 (6th Cir. 2000).

The ADA prohibits discrimination in employment-related matters against qualified individuals with a disability. The ADA lists a variety of employment decisions which might constitute illegal discrimination, including discrimination in job application procedures; the hiring, advancement, or discharge of employees; employee compensation; job training; and other terms, conditions, and privileges of employment (39 ADA §102(a).

Section 102(b)(6) requires employers to carefully scrutinize all physical fitness and agility requirements to ensure that the requirements are both job-related and consistent with business necessity; in response, many law enforcement employers discarded physical standards which had been used for years either at the entrance level or as part of an incentive plan or continuing requirement for employment, including standards for uncorrected eyesight, aerobic capacity, blood pressure, and cardiovascular capacity.
Section 102(b)(2) had at least three significant areas of impact:

• Law enforcement agencies are no longer able to blindly rely on physical fitness standards established by a statewide peace officer standards and training commission, for if those standards are discriminatory, the agency is liable if it uses the standards to make employment decisions.

• Law enforcement agencies and labor organizations have had to examine their collective bargaining agreements to ensure that the agreements do not discriminate on the basis of a disability. If a contractual provision such as a physical fitness plan or sick leave incentive program is illegally discriminatory, both the agency and the labor organization may be liable for the discrimination.

• Law enforcement agencies have had to take care that physicians and psychological professionals with whom they contract to examine employees and applicants are aware of the requirements of the ADA and comply with those requirements. If a professional violates the ADA by, for example, breaching the strict confidentiality requirements of the ADA, the law enforcement agency may be liable for the breach.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has indicated that it does not consider a physical agility test to be a “medical examination.” Even if the EEOC’s opinion on this matter is upheld by the courts, a legitimate question arises as to whether a prudent employer would want to give a physical agility test to an individual about whom it has no medical information. In response, many employers have now only required physical agility tests after they have made a conditional offer of employment to an applicant, and after they have had the opportunity to obtain the results of a medical examination of the applicant (Aitchison 2004).
According to the Civil Rights Act of 1991, separate standards are against the law. The principle is expressed as Same Job = Same Standard. Consequently, age and gender standards are in conflict with this law if applied as mandatory standards for selection (academy entrance), completion of training (academy exit) or maintenance programs (for incumbents). This legal problem is not as serious when using age and gender standards as voluntary standards. Furthermore, the data indicates that one’s percentile rank on age and gender based norms is not predictive of their ability to perform physical tasks. That is another major reason for not using age and gender standards.

The age and gender based norms were used in the past to set standards because there was no data to suggest a single standard cutpoint (or absolute standard). Likewise, agencies and the court accepted age and gender based norms because they did appear reasonable and they minimized adverse impact against protected classes. However, with a required emphasis on job relatedness brought about by the Civil Rights Act of 1991 and the ADA, the age and gender based norms (as mandatory standards) are currently not recommended.

Absolute standards (or single cutpoints) are recommended. Same Job = Same Standard makes the most sense. Absolute standards, however, will probably demonstrate adverse impact especially against females. Consequently, it is important that the standards be validated and that the test cutpoints predict who can and cannot do the job. Even if adverse impact is shown and the standards have evidence for their criterion validity, they should be upheld if challenged in court (Cooper – Commonly Asked Questions p. 7).
Physical Fitness is the organic condition of the body which enables an individual to use his/her body activities requiring strength, muscular endurance, cardiorespiratory fitness, flexibility, coordination, agility, power, balance, speed and accuracy – without undue experience of fatigue and exhaustion (Cooper – Wellness p. 2).

It is the ability to carry out daily tasks with vigor and alertness, without undue fatigue and with ample energy to engage in leisure time pursuits and to meet the above average physical stresses encountered in emergency situations.

Some people still choose not to exercise even thought they are aware of the social, emotional and health benefits of regular exercise. The four major reasons that many people choose not to exercise.

1. Lack of time. 2. Lack of Knowledge. 3. Lack of Facilities/Opportunities. 4. Fatigue (Kentucky Law Enforcement Council).

What follows are basic definitions often used to implement fitness tests & standards and a chart to indicate some of the options or scenarios currently used by different organizations:

**Definitions**

**Fitness Norms:** a representation of how individuals compare to one another with regard to performance on physical fitness tests. The Cooper Institute has one of the largest and most valid databases in the world with respect to fitness norms for age and gender.

**Fitness Standards:** minimal scores that must be attained on each physical fitness or job task simulation test to indicate that an individual can perform his/her job. Organizations generally determine which standards they choose to use.
**Percentile Rankings**: a number that tells individuals what percentage of the group scored worse than them. For example, if someone scores at the 40th percentile, then 40% of the group scored worse and 60% of the group scored better.

**Age and Gender Norms**: a representation of how individuals in a specific age and gender group compare to one another with regard to performance on physical fitness tests. Example: a norm chart of Males 20-29 years old will contain fitness scores for individuals into his age and gender group and indicate if they have scored Superior, Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor or Very Poor and will give percentile rankings for each category as well.

**Single Norms**: use of percentile rankings after all ages and both genders are combined into a single norm.

**Absolute Standards**: minimal scores or “cutpoints” that have been determined in law enforcement validation studies as the fitness standard that must be attained by everyone regardless of age, gender or handicapping conditions for the person to be considered “fit for duty.” Note: Organizations determine absolute standards by three methods: 1) they conduct a “validation study” for their own department; 2) they perform a “transferability study” by comparing their commonalities to an organization that has completed a validation study and (if comparable) they adopt or “transfer” those absolute standards; or 3) they informally adopt absolute standards conducted by other organizations if they perceive their organization to be similar in job tasks.

**Job Task Simulation**: a test that incorporates specific physical tasks that an individual is likely to perform on the job. In law enforcement, such a test might include tasks such as
climbing a wall, pushing a vehicle, dragging a dummy, and so on. These tests are often called obstacle courses or agility tests (Cooper – Overview p. 1-2).

The nature of police work can contribute to lack of fitness. There are no national databases to comprehensively assess fitness levels. A 1977 International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) study of 203 officers comparing law enforcement performance showed cardiorespiratory endurance and percent of body fat approached only the 25th percentile of the general population. Upper body and abdominal strength were between the 30th and 35th percentiles. Flexibility scores at the 45th percentile. These figures suggest that the officers studied were fatter and weaker and had less stamina and flexibility than the general population.

In 1992, Penn State University conducted a study of between 5,000 and 10,000 officers in six large agencies. Their results suggest that officers were below average in aerobic fitness and body fat, but somewhat above average in strength and lower-back flexibility.

The Cooper Institute has gathered data on over 30,000 subjects, generally representing the U.S. population and used as a point of reference when evaluating physical performance. A study from 1982-1993 showed law enforcement officers aerobic fitness approached the 35th percentile. Fat at the 30th percentile. Upper body strength and flexibility at the 50th percentile, and abdominal strength at the 40th percentile.

For all of these studies, officers over 35 years old scored worse against their civilian peers than did younger officers. Special units such as SWAT teams had the highest fitness levels.
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Hampshire states “Heart disease is still the biggest killer of cops.” Data suggest that officers are generally in poorer physical condition than civilian counterparts and officers compare even less favorably the longer they are on the force.

Some of the reasons suggest little day-to-day physical activity in jobs. Irregular hours and unpredictable meal schedules and poor nutrition. Stress factors from potential danger, quick switch from inactivity to activity, dealing with people who are upset may lead to overeating, smoking and or abusing alcohol.

Consistent research findings show a link between lifestyle and disease. What you eat, whether you smoke, how much you drink, how you deal with stress and your physical fitness all have direct bearing on health as well as job performance.

Most studies indicate officers die at earlier ages for all causes of death, and diabetes, colon cancer and cardiovascular disease. Studies show higher suicide rates—may be related to job stress.

The Cooper Institute studies indicate that 80% of officers reach scheduled retirement. 14% take early retirement due to medical problems. 6% die while employed as officers.

The National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals recommends that every police agency establish fitness standards that will ensure physical fitness and satisfactory job performances.

Functions of today’s officer require a level of fitness better than the average person. Physical fitness is a proven component of law enforcement readiness and one of the officer’s prime street encounter survival tools (Cooper – Overview p.1-7).
The majority of police work is done with a pad, pencil and radio, until the lid comes off and all hell breaks loose, at which time the officer may need the physical attributes of an athlete to survive (Law enforcement technology, August 1993).

A given agency has the latitude to implement physical fitness testing, standards and programs. No one can legitimately argue that physical fitness is not job related. The key issue and the one necessitating considerable planning, thought, research and effort is what level of physical fitness is required to do the job? In other words, which fitness cutpoints or standards will be chosen and implemented. The standards your agency selects for applicants, recruits and incumbents have legal, scientific and practical issues (Cooper – Commonly Asked Questions p. 10).

Legal Issues

Parker Vs. DC (850, F. 2nd 708, DC Cir. 1988)

“Officer Hayes was not in adequate physical shape. This condition posed a forcible risk of harm to others….concluded that Officer Hayes conduct was the result of deliberate indifference on the part of the District with respect to the physical training of its police officers.” Court ruled for the plaintiff, as the agency was negligent for failure to train. District of Columbia did not have a fitness requirement. Officer Hayes had not been required in four years to undergo physical training. During a confrontation with an armed robbery suspect, the suspect was shot. Plaintiff sued based on if the officer was fitter he would not have to resort to using his weapon.
Coski v. City and County of Denver, (1990) 795 P.2d 1364

“The infrequency with which a particular officer fires a gun and makes an arrest in furtherance of her duty does not eliminate the need to be capable of performing that duty. Thus, we conclude that the ability to fire a weapon and to make a forceful arrest is an essential job junction because it is reasonable to require this of all police officers.”


“The Americans with Disabilities Act…forbid courts from requiring a fundamental alteration in a defendant’s program to accommodate a handicapped individual.” Nothing in ADA requires an entity to accommodate an individual “where such individual poses a direct threat to the health or safety of others. “The finding of the direct threat requires “individualized inquiry.”


Where police department’s policies require that a supervisor provide a written basis for requesting a fitness-for-duty test, and the police department fails to do so, an officer cannot be found insubordinate for failing to submit to a fitness-for-duty test (Mayer 2003).

Athletic Business Magazine, (March 2003), article on “Striving to break down donuts-and-coffee stereotypes, some law enforcement agencies are placing new emphasis on fitness assessments, wellness programs and healthy living.” The Palm Beach (Florida) Sheriff’s Office has 3,100 employees. New Sheriff Edward Bieluch has a strong emphasis on fitness. The agency’s “Get Fit-Stay Fit” plan, a multifaceted education program for sworn and non-sworn employees and their families. Components of the
program include a smoking ban for all employees, free physicals for deputies over 35 years old, and new or remodeled fitness centers at the department’s five locations.

“We’re in the business of public service, and it’s our responsibility to be physically fit. That’s just as important as teaching someone how to go in pursuit,” Says Cpl. Stan Bullard, training officer and fitness specialist at the sheriff’s office.

Cpl. Bullard states, “If we get a deputy fit, then his or her spouse will want to get fit, then their kids will want to get involved. We simply have to be physically fit. We have to slow down the aging process. We have to prevent diabetes and cardiovascular disease. And the only way someone can do that is to know how to do it. We now have the ability to do it.”

In April of 2003, the State of New York implemented standard Medical and Physical Fitness Standards and Procedures for Police Officer Candidates. Section 600.8 states as follows:

A qualified trainer will administer the physical fitness-screening test to determine the underlying physiological capacity of a candidate to learn and perform the essential job functions of an entry-level police officer. Such test shall be administered prior to the making of a conditional offer of employment with a local police agency. The municipal civil service commission may ask the candidate to assume legal responsibility and release such commission of liability for injuries resulting from any physical or mental disorders.

Although the elements may not be directly representative of essential job function to be performed by an entry-level police officer, such elements do measure the candidate’s physiological capacity to learn and perform the essential job functions. The minimum scores for employment as an entry-level police officer as set forth below
represent the 40th percentile of fitness. If a candidate does not successfully score to the 40th percentile of fitness for each of the elements of the test battery, the candidate shall not be deemed to have successfully completed the physical fitness-screening test.

**The Three tests administered are as follows:**

**Sit – up.** Muscular endurance (Core Body) number of bent-leg sit-ups performed in one minute.

**Push-up.** Muscular endurance (Upper Body) Maximum number of full body repetitions without breaks.

**1.5 Mile Run.** Cardiovascular capacity.

The Common Wealth of Pennsylvania, Municipal Police Officers Education and Training commission Academy (2002). Recruits are expected to achieve score in the 50th percentile of the general population in five assessment areas. The five assessment areas and what these areas test are: (information based on law enforcement standards recommended by the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research in Dallas, TX)

1. **Bench Press** (measures upper body muscular strength).
2. **Sit and Reach** (measures flexibility in the lower back and hamstrings).
3. **Sit Ups** (measure muscular endurance).
4. **1.5 mile run** (measures cardiovascular, aerobic capacity).
5. **300- meter run** (measures anaerobic capacity).

The decision to require the assessment areas named was not arbitrary; but in fact results from a job task analysis or survey of basic police officers with less than five years police experience.
St. Louis County and St. Louis Municipal Police Academy Physical Agility Assessment, (2004). All police applicants are required to take a physical agility assessment examination. Recruits are required to pass the physical agility examination at mid-term and at graduation as a condition of attendance and graduation. Run 1.5 Miles. Trunk Flex. Sit-ups and Push-ups.

New Jersey State Police. (2004). Failure of any aspect of the physical qualification test will result in your removal from the selection process.

1.5 Mile run in 13 minutes.
Timed Push-ups. 32 repetitions in 2 minutes
Timed Sit-ups. 34 repetitions in 2 minutes


The Oklahoma Police Corps (2002) – promotes “Fitness as a way of life” and aims to attract applicants who embody this goal. Proper conditioning and physical training result in police officers who are physically fit, and who are more likely to be confident and self-disciplined.

A cadet is expected to enter the Oklahoma Police Corps at the 35th percentile of fitness to establish trainability. Each of the tests must be conducted and scored within the established parameters. The 35th percentile, as established by the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research, has been widely accepted as an industry standard and must be met in each of the identified tests. By graduation, cadets are expected to achieve e 15-
percentage point increase from their baseline application score, or a minimum of 50 percent in each exercise.

Physical Ability Testing For Peace Officers was conducted for the Nevada Commission on Peace Officers’ Standards and Training and the Nevada Public Agency Insurance Pool, September 2000, to identify agencies with programs and experiences which could benefit the State of Nevada Commission on Peace Officer’ Standards and Training as it seeks to establish validated standards for certified peace officers in Nevada.

Surveys were sent to Peace Officers’ Standards and Training Commissions or training academies in each of the 50 states. A total of 34 agencies responded.

**Overview of the Survey Results**

While 22 (65%) of the respondents reported physical ability/fitness/agility standards either for entry to or graduation from their Category 1 academy, only 13 (38%) have apparently completed either job analysis or validation studies.

Only 3 (9%) of the respondents reported physical ability/fitness/agility standards for re-certification of existing peace officers.

Only 4 (12%) of the respondents reported physical ability/fitness/agility standard for graduation from their Category 3 academy.

Only 7 (21%) of the respondents reported studies in progress.
Only 3 (9%) of the respondents reported any litigation regarding physical ability/fitness/agility standards testing.

Six states reported that were in the vicinity of this writer: Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, Arkansas, Oklahoma. Of the above, Iowa was the only state that had ability/fitness/agility standards for entry into POST academies and for graduation. 18 of 27 agencies responded that they use Cooper Institute standards in setting physical ability/fitness/agility standards.

These words are engraved on a bell left as a legacy from the 195th session at the FBI NA Academy. President Thomas Jefferson wrote: Exercise and recreation are as necessary as reading; I will say, rather, more necessary because health is worth more than learning.

In developing fitness programs, agencies should stress the idea of accomplishing each officer’s personal best, not competing against others who are younger or have greater athletic abilities. This foundation must exist in physical fitness programs; otherwise, they become fraught with problems inherent in competitions. If agencies emphasize competition over teamwork, they will create an atmosphere where officers push themselves beyond their limits, resulting in physical injuries and emotional traumas from competition-induced peer pressure.

Today, everyone knows the importance of a healthy, active lifestyle. However, physical fitness for law enforcement officers is important not only for their personal well being but also their survival in a profession fraught with dangers and high levels of stress. To help officers remain physically strong and mentally alert to perform their duties and
protect their communities, law enforcement agencies should encourage their officers to exercise and maintain a healthy diet (FBI Magazine 2002).

Research over the past 50 years has shown that participation in fitness programs resulted in increases in strength, aerobic capacity, and flexibility and decreases in the percentage of body fat, these benefits were not directly linked to the reduction of Cardiac Heart Disease. However, the research from 1960 to 1980 showed that the outcomes of exercise and healthy life-style practices reduced an individual’s cardiac risk factors (e.g., high blood pressure, high cholesterol).

Participation in fitness and health promotion programs has been shown to be beneficial in increasing fitness and reducing risk factors from Cardiovascular Heart Disease. These programs tend to reduce absenteeism, injuries, and health care costs. (Gebhardt and Crump 1990).

Although officers are ultimately responsible for their own fitness, many job-related factors make it difficult to become fit. Being an officer entails unusual physical and mental stresses, and lack of agency fitness programs compounds the problem. Law enforcement work often is a mixture of enforced sitting and sudden physical activity. It’s the worst possible combination for officers’ bodies, because sitting for long periods reduces fitness, yet the job demands quick strenuous efforts at a moment’s notice.

Running, lifting, pushing, and using force may be necessary, sometimes when the outcome is crucial to apprehending a suspect or saving someone from injury or death. Yet the job itself doesn’t offer conditions that promote the needed strength, endurance or flexibility for these tasks. Total fitness includes both performance and health (Collingwood 1995).
As of 2000, just 4% of departments operated a training academy: however, nearly all of those serving a population of 250,000 or more did so. Nationwide, 47% of all officers were employed by a department that operated an academy (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2000 p.6).

Many states have multiple layers of standards for police officer basic training. In the State of Kansas, the Kansas Law Enforcement Training Center (KLETC) is the main police recruit training academy in the state. There are 6 regional academies that teach, follow and comply with KLETC’s curriculum and 560 minimum hours of recruit training. Throughout the U.S., state mandated field and academy training requirements for new officers averaged about 750 hours combined. Additional training beyond state requirements averaged about 300 hours (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2000 p. iii)

Kansas basic recruit hours on a scale with other states are in the middle of the pack. Although, Louisiana at 320, Oklahoma 326, Wisconsin, South Carolina, Tennessee, Oregon, Mississippi, Illinois and Georgia, all at 400. Minnesota is at 280 but requires a 2-year degree in law enforcement. Texas has the highest minimum standard of 1060 hours, and Hawaii is close behind at 1032 hours. Many State Troopers and State Police around the country are required to have a variation of college and or law enforcement experience. The State of Delaware requires 60 semester hours or 30-semester hours and 2 years prior law enforcement experience to be a Trooper.

2000 Bureau of Justice Statistics of law enforcement agencies, nearly 98% local police departments had an education requirement for new officer recruits. The typical minimum requirement was a high school diploma (83%). Fifteen percent of departments had some type of college requirement, usually a 2-year degree (8%). Just
1% required new recruits have a 4-year degree. From 1990 to 2000 the percentage of officers employed by a department with a degree requirement increased from 3% to 9%. In 2000, 15% of departments, employing 32% of all officers, required new recruits to have completed at least some college, up from 6% of departments, employing 10% of officers in 1990 (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2000 p.6).

According to U.S. Census bureau estimated statistics, the population of the United States was 290,809,777 in 2003. Working in one of 17,784 law enforcement agencies, there were 708,022 sworn police officers 88.7% male and 11.3% female. In June, 2000 statistics, racial and ethnic minorities comprised 22.7% of full-time sworn personnel (BJS Census 2000 p.1)

In 2000, Kansas’s population was 2,723,507. There are 433 law enforcement agencies in the state employing 7,133 state and local officers, and 649 part-time officers (Kansas Law Enforcement Training Center 2004).

According to the 2000 Bureau of Justice Statistics, 96% of police departments required personal interviews in screening officer applicants. 96% conducted background investigations. 96% criminal records checks, 93% driving records checks, 48% credit record checks, 81% medical exams, 67% drug tests, and psychological evaluations 61%. Physical agility tests were conducted 77% of the time by departments of cities of 25,000 or more, only 24% of the time by cities under 2,500 (BJS Local Police 2000 p.5).

The last statistic is a problem at KLETC as there is no physical abilities standard to be accepted into the academy. Students arrive out of shape and overweight and as long as they can walk up flights of stairs to their dorm room, they are good to participate. With risk management liability and the cost of insurance by departments, employing
agencies should do their best to find applicants that are physically fit to handle the complexities of law enforcement. Surrounding states Oklahoma, Nebraska, Iowa and Colorado all have POST Standards on the Cooper Physical Fitness scale for entry into their police academies.

Officer applicants in small agencies go through a hiring process that is not as rigorous as those of larger agencies, thus the quality of applicant is not up to those in larger agencies. Officers working in large departments seem more likely to serve full careers in their agencies than do their counterparts in small departments. The high representation of short-term officers among departing sworn personnel may suggest that officers who decide to take jobs with other law enforcement agencies and those who choose to leave the profession entirely are most likely to do so early in their careers (Koper and Moore  p. 47).

In the 2004, National Institute of Justice Hiring and Keeping Police Officers Report, research found more than half of the actively hiring agencies had difficulty finding enough qualified applicants. Screening and training new officers typically took 8 to 11 months. Nine out of ten recruits completed their training (DOJ 2004).

The process of screening and testing applicants, basic academy training, and field training averaged 31 weeks in small agencies and 43 weeks in large agencies. One third of agencies said that training time had increased by up to 3 weeks since 1995, while a quarter reported it had increased by a month or more. About 12 percent of recent hires in large agencies and 36 percent in small agencies were exempted from academy training because they had previous experience or approved training at colleges or vocational schools. About 45% of officers who left small agencies and 24 % who left large agencies
continued in law enforcement. Competition is getting stronger for both recruits and experienced officers (DOJ 2004 p.4-5).

How do these recent trends affect KLETC? With an estimate of 25% of Kansas recruit officers leaving law enforcement within the first two years after graduation, it has been a revolving door of hiring and training qualified officers. This puts stress on departments as well as Instructors to handle the increasing training demands and the never-ending turnover of departments with poor recruitment policies. This writer proposes the Kansas Commission on Police Officer Standards and Training (KS C-POST) implement Physical Abilities Standards of at least 40% on the Coopers Physical Fitness Standards. This would present a hardship to many departments that have already hired officers that are waiting to attend KLETC. It would also present a hardship to the smaller departments that are the ones that have the most difficulty in finding qualified applicants. At KLETC we train and certify officers to be Kansas Law Enforcement Officers. Every applicant arriving at KLETC should be physically fit to participate in Physical Fitness Training, Defensive Tactics, Emergency Vehicle Operations and Firearms. Recruits out of shape and overweight overwhelmingly have the most difficulties and are the most prone to injuries during training.

From August 26, 2001 to April 24, 2005, 1123 recruit officers have attended mandatory basic training at the Kansas Law Enforcement Training Center. Statistics were compiled on the last 422 recruits involved in physical fitness testing during the first week of the academy. Cooper Institute tests were conducted according to protocols:

1. Push-Ups. One Minute (Dynamic Strength).
2. Sit and Reach (measures flexibility in the lower back and hamstrings).
3. Sit Ups. One Minute (Dynamic Strength).

4. 1.5 mile run (Cardiorespiratory Fitness).

Using Cooper Institute Physical Assessment Standards at the 40th percentile, which is at the low end of Fair fitness.

Of the 422 officers 57 or 13.5% passed all four test at the 40th percentile.

365 of the 422 students failed at least one of the four tests. 86.5%.

Of the 365 that failed, 80 only failed one of the four tests. 19%.

Of the 365 that failed, 285 students failed 2 or more of the tests. 67.5%.

A one-year period from January 1, 2004 to December 31, 2004. KLETC tracked 49 reported student injuries while at the academy. Forty-three out of forty nine students injured had Cooper Fitness Scores below the 40th percentile and if standards were in place, these students would not have even been admitted to the academy.

Our State POST Boards must do a better job of ensuring those entering police academies are physically ready to train and are able to handle the complexities of the law enforcement profession.
References:


