

Fitness and Policies Therein

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Living healthy is hard. Burning calories is barely a requirement of everyday living. Adding calories is almost as easy as breathing. The substances labeled "food" are more marketing than nutrition oriented. Sedentary activities are as enthralling as ever, especially if (a.) air-conditioning and (b.) Internet access are present. Everybody's getting bigger, except in the fictional world. Movies, magazines, television, etc. They're still showing thin people. Thin and beautiful people, for that matter.

Of course, fitness isn't exclusively about size. Big people can be healthy, and small people can be sickly. The calculus of which body goes which way includes those pesky genes. In first responder services, fitness is a job requirement. For firefighters, it mandatory. They are the human machinery of the fireground. Someone smarter than myself has equated firefighters to professional athletes. The analogy seems appropriate.

How then to promote and effect fitness in emergency services? That's the first discussion topic. What are better versus worse ways to compel firefighters, paramedics, and law enforcement officers in healthy directions? Ditto plus-size bloggers, for that matter!

[Yesterday News & Observer](#) reported on a fitness policy at Raleigh-Durham International Airport for their police and fire-rescue workers. They've been tested for fitness since 1996. Three years ago, their merit raises were tied to the test. They could be declined a raise if they failed. In 2008, their actual employment became a condition of the test. They could be fired if they failed.

In March, a veteran police officer was terminated for a poor fitness testing score. Two others resigned, and before they could be fired. There are 48 police and fire-rescue workers who must pass four tests each year. Three employees are exempt, two chiefs and one assistant chief. Their employer, the Airport Authority, also provides pathways to maintain and improve the fitness that the tests are measuring. The article cites the availability of "workout rooms, dietary and wellness experts and personal trainers."

The story includes details on the tests, perspectives on the policy, and personal reactions from those who are affected. There are also three dozen reader comments, so far. That's the second discussion topic. What's the public's perception on fitness of first responders? Both in the physical form of the people serving them, and the infrastructure to support healthier firefighters, medics, and officers?

[Read the News & Observer story.](#) Discuss as desired.

Alright, let's start it off. I would say that I think the requirement is good. Fitness and personal health is not something that should be neglected after getting through the academy. It not only affects how you do the job, but how you are able to help your fellow firefighter/police officer. I will say firing on the first failure is a little tough and I don't know the exact policy that they use, but it would seem to me that an evaluation(fitness evaluation) every two years would be a little more realistic.

rookie - 04/12/10 - 12:24

At my gig, they have made just about every opportunity available for the member to exercise. Fitness equipment is in every house, you can work out in the morning or afternoon, and fitness trainers on shift who you can ask for advice.

Personally, I enjoy going to a gym for an uninterrupted workout. But, for those that don't want to pay for a gym membership, you have all the tools. The only thing you need is will power.

"Doing the right thing" is expected by the public, as we are the ones' they call when the "you know what" hits the fan. Now if we can just get ol' Barry Obama to let us deduct our gym dues on our taxes, we'd be in good shape...no pun intended.

Silver - 04/12/10 - 12:34

I feel that firefighters online should be held to yearly fitness testing to make sure that they can preform there jobs and not put anyone in danger.I would love to see a bodyfat % range to go with the fitness standard. I don't really care for BMI but Bodyfat % range 19-25%. I think you would see a hugh drop in heart related illness. Its not all about you but think of your love ones. Wake County Fire Depts should led the

way. Lead by example.

Firehose - 04/17/10 - 18:59

For you young(er) ladies and gents. I have a question for you to ponder on. If you only have one year to put your back or accidental injury back together would you ever consider going on a ski trip? You blow a knee and not get well as promised by the doc? You are fired. Yes...your boss will come to you and say I'm sorry but you are no longer needed. You did not recover fast enough. Now as you know women are the ones that God chose to have babies. You have a problem pregnancy and you will be fired if you don't pass the fitness exam within one year of your return to duty. There are no provisions in this policy for having babies.

As a woman would you have second thoughts about having a child? Sure you would. How about if you were 40 and having a baby? You want to get back in shape and back on the force. You did not pass the pt assesment due to medical reasons. You can always be the go to gal at WalMart but that is not what you want to do for the rest of your life. I truly doubt the ones who make comments here have ever had to face a life threat on the operating table. Have you had your belly cut open from center sternum down to as far as you can see? Well at 50 years old sit ups may not happen within 12 months from surgery. I am open for more comments and challenge anyone to convince me that all women can do 22 sit ups shortly after coming back from having her third c section.

Please convince me that every woman can do this.

lucky - 04/17/10 - 19:04

That's certainly one of the more interesting comments that we've had in a while. I think you're attempting to initiate a discussion on the effects of pregnancy— or multiple pregnancies— on the physical capabilities of women in emergency services (or perhaps any physically demanding profession). And perhaps value or ethical judgments therein? Or is this simply misogyny hiding in plain sight?

Legeros - 04/17/10 - 19:45

Well, maybe not pregnancies specifically, but maybe the effects of age on the healing process. Yes the examples cited specifically apply to pregnancy, but imagine a lot of different scenarios. Knees, hips, hearts, shoulders, and backs (oh my!) can cause a lot of problems for folks after an injury, especially since in this day and time the 'healing process' is 'accelerated' by various cost factors.

DJ - 04/17/10 - 20:27

Mr Legeros please understand that I have never had any ill feelings for any women that want to be on any emergency services department. (police, fire, ems,) They earn their spot and they should get the same opportunity to keep it for as long as they see fit. My point again is they are not given equal opportunity if they have 3 children and all by C Section. This policy may not have provisions for women that want to return to work after the 2nd or 3rd child. After one year & you don't pass the PT test you are back home with the kids according to the N & O. Equally so if a male officer gets hit by an oncoming vehicle on the street and suffers a broken hip he may never be an officer again with this rule. He can't draw 100 percent disability due to his "new" ability to sit in a chair and answer the phone for the ad agency that he had to go to work for at \$6.50 per hr. His career as an officer is now over because he can't run 300 meters in just over one minute. The same rules for 62 year old officers are the same as the 21 year old officers. The same fitness test apply to all. Does it not seem a little strange that a 62 year old female officer has to run the same distance and the same speed as the 21 year old male or female officer just out of BLET Training? There has to be a better way or more thought to this. Sympathy is not the word. Empathy better fits.

Empathy means to have a complete understanding of everyone that these rules or situations apply. I do have empathy for women that want to keep the once in a lifetime job that they love. A job that they did and as reported by the N & O the woman always had a good job performance & was promoted on her good job performance. There is a good reason that women gain weight during pregnancy. It's natures way to slow you down just a bit to take care of yourself. Load up on Vitamins and eat for the two of you now. There have been few women to carry a child for 9 months and not gain more than the weight of the baby. After the baby is born you start to worry about the extra pounds you added the previous year. You start to pay more attention to your waist line than you do the formula. Who looses in the battle here. The child looses too. I read and understand that the Police officer man or woman has to perform the PT test at the same time each year. A 30 year old female is 2 months pregnant and is not very comfortable with running and doing this push up or sit up activity. She is advised by her doctor to hold off and postpone it until after the delivery. Before you know it you have a 3 month old child and no job. You did not do the PT exam within the 1 year allocated. Women of any age that do the work in emergency services have to carry a heavier load than the male will ever know. I respect them and take up for them for their courage and ability to do all the things necessary to hold the job. The question is, are they being treated fairly? Are any of these people treated fairly if an accident falls on their plate tomorrow? I hope to see more comments on this. We need to raise the question and the awareness of what our brave men and women are doing here and on foreign soil.

lucky (Email) - 04/18/10 - 21:26

Thanks for the clarification, Lucky.

Legeros - 04/18/10 - 22:01

The army has PT requirements according to age, since they recognize that the older you get, well, the less capable you are. Yep, there it is. Whereas an 18 y/o must run the two miles in 13-14 minutes or so, as a 40 y/o, I had 22 minutes (although I could do it in 14:47!). I did not have to do as many push ups and sit ups. Also, there was a different set of requirements for the females. Of course, if you wanted to go to Special Forces or Ranger School, you had to pass the 18 y/o standard.

Lucky makes several good points. Blow out a knee or a shoulder or a back and you could be done with your career. Like she says, you can't get disability because you can sit at a desk and make telemarketer calls for \$6.50 an hour, but you can't work at the job you sank 20 years of your life into.

If the Army can figure out a way to maintain a fighting force and still keep the "experience" that made that force what it is today, then so can local agencies.

To me, the standards referenced in the N&O are nothing more than "let's get rid of the older folks before they retire" because we can get younger folks cheaper."

Wow. Did I just say that out loud?

Yep.

DJ - 04/19/10 - 17:36

Everyone makes good points. DJ, you bring up the army which seems to have a good grasp on how to do this with leeway for "seasoned" troops. And Lucky has a new twist on postpartum issues. One thing that is difficult for public safety agencies is the application of meaningful standard tests. Many agencies tried and got away from athletic event-based testing due to complaints. Even job-related performance tests such as CPAT have been challenged. While we may disagree with the elements of a given agency's test I admire the courage to challenge the "elephant in the room".

We all want increased safety in the form of more crash-resistant vehicles, better PPE, robust incident rehab and the like. But, if we are obese/sedentary we are far more likely to die from a heart attack or other chronic cause. We as public safety folks stop at nothing when it comes to taking care of others. Often we do so while neglecting ourselves.

Personally, I have seen reward-based systems work, perhaps more so than punitive-based tests. One agency with which I am familiar has their health insurance deductible waived (\$2,000) if the employee (1) doesn't smoke, (2) gets an annual (free) physical, (3) has BP within range with or without meds, and (4) has an acceptable BMI. \$2,000 is a heckuva incentive. Other places provide athletic gear, gift cards, etc for meeting personal goals.

Whether we agree with a given test or not at least this gets us discussing the topic which could lead to us making some positive changes. DJ et al maybe we could look at driving efforts in the Wake County fire and EMS community to enhance our health and safety through similar means. Stay safe.

J.D. McLean - 04/19/10 - 22:08

Lucky-

Not to sound too harsh, BUT the emergency services and those that depend on us DO NOT care about male/female or skin color! What is required though is the ability to do the job, period! While I can understand the point you are trying to make, I honestly don't think it holds water, because when the job needs to be done, it needs to be done then! That is why I am such a fan of the CPAT and POPAT, these two tests measure job related tasks/functions with a reasonable time restraint. As Mr McLean has stated that even these tests are being challenged, mainly from females who feel it is too tough for them. My question or statement to that is, well IT'S A JOB RELATED TEST, what do you expect!?!? If you can't do it, then well maybe this career isn't for you, plain and simple. I can not and will not accept that females need a different set of rules to get/do/keep a job in this field. We need to depend on the folks with us and if you can't do the job, then I can't depend on you. Just my 2 cents worth.

Wayne - 04/19/10 - 22:30

Well put...

Silver - 04/19/10 - 22:42

Dj,

While the Army PT minimums go down the older you get, to achieve the Max score the requirements get harder up till 36. They realize that you should be getting in better shape the longer you have been leading a fit life. FYI the new times for a 40 yr old run (2 miles) 18:18 min and to Max you need a 13:36.

The fire service standards on PT are pretty much nonexistent, just ask all the people over 15, 20 or 30% body fat with a job. Then people wonder why we all die from heart attacks. In the area of health like other areas our traditions are killing us. Hopefully it will all change for the better.

Why not make PT mandatory and structured? If you don't like it, don't join. We would have to worry less about minority and gender quotas. It would kill two birds with one stone.

I agree with wayne 100%

Kermit - 04/21/10 - 06:35

I wonder what firefighter bodies look like in other countries and cultures. We grow folks pretty big/tall in the states. I am guessing the physical capabilities of a 6' 2" crew are a bit different than a 5' 10" crew, 5' 8" crew, etc. Perhaps the biggest, tallest, strongest, fittest are enlisted out of necessity. That would be an interesting anthropological study. FF physiques worldwide. Somebody's probably done it already. Not that it ultimately matters, as we live here and must utilize and serve the people we are, and the culture we have. .

Legeros - 04/21/10 - 08:20

I think they should ban Bojangles...its the devil!

Wayne, very well put.

CTK - 04/22/10 - 09:58

Hey, hey now CTK. Let's not get hasty. Everyone loves a crack-berry biscuit....

Beach ([Email](#)) - 04/22/10 - 14:43

Still mulling a couple of things over, but, hey, while we're on fitness, ban BoJ, Smithfield's, Moe's, etc. No tobacco use with blood tests to confirm. It's proven to contribute to heart disease and heart disease seems to kill more firefighters than anything else.

DJ - 04/22/10 - 16:40

DJ, you realize we'd have over 100 vacancies if they said "no tobacco"? Hahahahaha....don't get me wrong, I enjoy a stoogie here and there. If it meant my job, well, bye-bye Cohiba.

Silver - 04/22/10 - 16:45

Stations are pretty much smoke-free these days. What would happen if they were made tobacco-free?? Makes me think of Charlotte, where their stations have these "tobacco use areas" identified in the far corners of the station lots. Wonder if that includes chew?

Legeros - 04/22/10 - 17:45

Many jurisdictions around the Metro DC area are 100% tobacco free, 100% of the time, on or off duty! You have to sign a form upon hire that you will agree/abide by it and it is a condition of employment. But, I agree, it would be very interesting to see in these parts!

Wayne - 04/22/10 - 18:58

Charlotte's station tobacco ban does include chewing & dipping. As Mike said, tobacco products (all of them) are only allowed in designated areas, usually as far away from the station as you can get on the property. Enforcement is sometimes an issue. The smokers (fewer & fewer these days) for the most part use the designated area, but spit bottles/cups can be found around the stations & in trash cans regularly.

Rides An Engine - 04/22/10 - 19:48

Name: (real name
preferred)

E-mail: (optional)

Web Site: (optional)

Remember personal info?

Yes

No