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A POLICE CHIEF COMMENTS: FITNESS AS A BONA FIDE OCCUPATIONAL QUALIFICATION AT ANY AGE

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Most communities throughout our country have established safety services with the hope that by so doing they could enjoy a reasonable feeling of security. In the name of security, these communities have gone so far as to establish certain requirements of applicants. Both fire and police service require that applicants be subject to the following types of tests: written; physical aptitude; medical examination; background investigation; and oral interview.

Once the applicant has successfully completed these tests, the applicant is appointed and is expected to be able to perform effectively until that individual reaches retirement age. As in the case of the Milwaukee Police Department, an officer may retire at age fifty-two provided that that officer has served for at least twenty-five years. An officer may retire earlier on ordinary or duty disability provided a medical panel and the pension board determine that the officer is entitled to such disability retirement.

It is interesting to note that in the past not much was done to ensure that officers maintain their ability to perform their duties. It is certainly true that officers were encouraged to engage in athletic activities and in physical exercise programs so that they could maintain their physical fitness prowess, but there was no effective follow-up for each individual. This situation is rapidly changing. The consensus is that an individual engaged in law enforcement should maintain a high level of physical fitness. Good physical condition is a necessity for a law enforcement officer; many situations that an officer faces place a high demand on the officer's capacity to perform. With this in mind law enforcement agencies are starting to consider the significance of fitness and medical health status. It has become necessary for law enforcement agencies to address the need for fitness, not just from a health cost stand-

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point, but also from the perspective of nonperformance of duties.

Low fitness and poor medical status may contribute considerably to the development of diseases of the heart. We train our officers to protect themselves against the risks associated with firearms. Why do we not have equally good standards and programs for known high risk areas such as physical fitness and medical standards? A law enforcement officer is at significantly greater risk of cardiovascular disease than of being in a shooting situation or of being shot.

It is my belief, based upon the information available, that a physical fitness program is in reality a disability avoidance program. Such a program certainly would avail the municipality of monetary savings by providing an incentive for high risk public safety employees to improve their physical health, thereby reducing the incidence of job-incurred injury and disability. Along with a concern for the officers' physical well-being there must also be a concern for mental well-being. Employee assistance on these matters would certainly be in the best interests of the city.

In addressing the physical and mental fitness needs of law enforcement, we must necessarily address the question of age discrimination. I do not believe that we can deny that as we grow older we become less capable of meeting the physical demands required in law enforcement. However, I recognize that the physical effects of growing older vary from individual to individual. For example, at the age of fifty some officers may be physically unable to meet the rigorous physical demands of law enforcement while others the same age, who, through individual or group physical fitness regimens, have maintained their physical condition may actually be in better physical shape than some officers ten years younger.

Another point at issue is the fact that as an officer spends more time on the job, that officer becomes more valuable by virtue of his experience. It is argued that experience does in a way compensate for lack of physical agility.

Although much can be said in favor of experience, a physical and mental fitness program will provide us with officers who will be able to perform in a capable manner for a greater part of their careers. There can be no question that our of-

fficers would be more fit. This would result in less sick time, less injury time, and all around savings to the employer.

