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# Officer Safety Corner

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a Successful Police Fitness Program

## Officer Safety Corner: Building a Successful Police Fitness Program

**Kevin Meyer, Chief of Police, Cranberry Township, Pennsylvania, Police  
Department**

Chief Kevin Meyer, of the Cranberry Township, Pennsylvania, Police Department, has been doing police work for more than 20 years. During his years of service, Chief Meyer has been fitness conscious and has found that keeping in shape has made him a more effective police officer and a better

person. Other officers have likely felt the same effects of fitness, but despite these common sentiments among law enforcement officers, a glaring disconnect exists between the need for police officers to be physically fit and the availability of fitness programs specifically focused on police work. Police work has distinctive physical challenges that are unlike those of conventional sports or fitness. The expectation of fit police officers in the absence of police-specific fitness training is akin to the notion of issuing firearms to officers, but not providing an opportunity to train or practice using them.

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Last year, when Chief Meyer was named the chief of police in Cranberry Township, a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with around 30,000 residents, he decided to see if he could narrow the gap between what was needed and what was offered at his department in terms of officer fitness. Chief Meyer's first step was to look at other police departments to learn whether they saw the same

disconnect and, if so, how they were responding to it. Chief Meyer found that, while many agencies felt that a physical fitness program would be helpful, implementing a successful program was a struggle. In most cases, those struggles involved challenges with the police departments' bargaining units. In many regions around the United States, agencies cannot require officers to do something as demanding as a fitness regimen without including it in the collective bargaining process, and it is very complicated to get a fitness plan into a contract. In addition to the complications of a fitness program contract, there are U.S. federal laws designed to protect workers'

privacy, which makes securing most personal health information that could help to custom-tailor fitness programs out of bounds.

## **Talk It Over**

Due to the challenges involved in establishing a fitness program that would be acceptable to the collective bargaining unit, Chief Meyer's next step was to sit down with the president of his department's police union. That officer and Chief Meyer discussed the possibility of building an officer fitness program that would be completely voluntary. A completely voluntary fitness program would mean that officers could choose to sign up and become eligible for incentives or to opt out without penalty.

The Cranberry Township Police Department has an advantage in that the officer who is the president of the police union is also an advocate for physical fitness. That officer agreed that a police-centric health and fitness program was a great idea. Together, Chief Meyer and the officer organized the Elite Police Fitness Incentive Training (FIT) program.

Working with the president of the department's police union also helped to get the early and enthusiastic backing of the town's five-member elected governing body and its township manager, the chief of staff. The local government's support and willingness to offer incentives and absorb most of the program's out-of-pocket costs were instrumental in the success of the program.

## **Partner Up**

Chief Meyer then took a closer look at some of the other health and wellness initiatives out there to learn what worked, what didn't, and what he could adapt to work for his department. His research led him to the Cooper

Institute, a nonprofit research and education organization that focuses on preventative medicine with a particular interest in the role of exercise in health. The institute's work in developing fitness standards for police is considered the industry's gold standard.



With these standards in mind, Chief Meyer crafted the Elite Police FIT program around the Cooper Institute's benchmarks and then added in a wellness element to complement the physical fitness element. In addition to the physical fitness portion, the program focuses on nutrition, stress, medical exams, tobacco cessation, weight management, and other fitness and wellness components.

Chief Meyer also welcomed the help of local businesses who shared the department's view about the importance of fitness in police work. One of the local businesses, a nearby athletic training organization run by a veteran National Football League (NFL) player, provides individualized coaching, along with a fitness facility that supplements the police department's weight room. A business that makes sports nutrition supplements was also instrumental in getting the Elite Police FIT program off the ground. Support from outside organizations was important and greatly appreciated to help implement and sustain the program.

In December 2016, the Elite Police FIT program was officially rolled out. By then, most of the department's 27 officers had made a voluntary commitment to join the program and prepare themselves for an official assessment event, which was held in April, using criteria from the Cooper Institute, modified to accommodate the age and gender of each officer. Fitness metrics included a bench press, a leg press, a 300-meter run, a 1.5-mile run, sit-ups, and push-ups. The officers did extremely well, and a number of them hit the incentive levels that were defined, earning

commendations, uniform pins, and paid time off. The next cycle of program incentives began shortly after that assessment event.

## Early Indications

It might be too soon to fly a “mission accomplished” banner, but the early results of the program have all been positive. One result has been a heightened sense of camaraderie and accomplishment. Although it’s a difficult quality to measure, an indicator of this was that four of the officers wanted to enter the National LawFit Challenge competition held in Pearl, Mississippi. It’s a demanding test of physical stamina combined with mental focus that uses exercises specific to police work. Performance Inspired, the program’s sports nutrition partner, paid the officers’ expenses to be able to participate in the competition.

### More Information

[The Cooper Institute Fitness Standards for Law Enforcement](#)

[LawFIT Challenge Components](#)

For first-time participants, the agency’s team did well. Many of the competition’s challenges—remembering a suspect’s description, climbing over a wall, crawling under wickets, running stairs, jumping through windows, carrying an adult-sized dummy, handcuffing a suspect, using a laser pistol, and more—were unlike the more generic fitness

elements of the department’s program. The teams that did best at the LawFit competition had practiced using many of those maneuvers, and it showed. The competition revealed that the Elite Police FIT program needs to be adjusted to really fulfill more police-specific fitness skills.

The Cranberry Township Police Department's Elite Police FIT program will continue to evolve. While it might never be a perfect fit for everyone, it offers a great beginning at modest cost to the department. Law enforcement agencies everywhere are welcome to borrow from and implement a form of the program at their own workplace. For those considering such a program, consider the following, all of which were key to getting the Elite Police FIT program off to a strong start:

- Secure support of elected officials
- Identify an inside champion
- Make it completely voluntary
- Don't ask for medical information
- Provide meaningful incentives
- Individualize goals for gender and age
- Welcome outside partners

By following these steps, police-specific fitness programs can become a reality for many departments to their officers' and communities' benefit. ♦

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