Athletic Trainers in Police Departments: Cost Efficiency and Risk Mitigation

By A.S. Woody Goffinett, MBA, ATC, EMT-P, Member, National Athletic Trainers’ Association, Manager, Sports Medicine, Wilson Health

Every day, law enforcement officers may be required to perform responsibilities that test their physical ability, endurance, and strength. They are often required to carry heavy loads, including body armor or equipment belts that can affect balance, lead to muscle fatigue, alter gait patterns, affect positive alignment, and increase their risk of injury. While law enforcement officers, along with other tactical personnel—“tactical athletes”—work in very physically demanding settings as they protect the general public, they are also exposed to various occupational dangers every day. As a result, their physical health and wellness are paramount to their readiness to perform on the job.

Recent research has shown that a sports medicine model approach to care has been effective in minimizing injury and ensuring that these individuals are prepared for the mental and physical challenges of their work. Athletic trainers, among other sports medicine team members, can play an integral role in their success.

Athletic trainers (ATs) are health care professionals who collaborate with physicians. They are part of the sports medicine team found at every level of professional, collegiate, and high school sports, and they also work in occupational and military settings, among others. Due to their expertise in injury prevention, clinical evaluation and diagnosis, immediate and emergency care, treatment and rehabilitation, and organizational and professional health and well-being, full-time ATs have been hired by public safety organizations such as Fairfax County, Virginia, Police Department and San Antonio, Texas, Fire Department to help care for their employees.

Top left: Athletic trainer Woody Goffinett provides ultrasound treatment on Captain Bill Shoemaker, Sidney Police Department, as part of rehabilitating a lower leg injury.

Bottom left: Athletic trainer Woody Goffinett monitors Captain Bill Shoemaker, Sidney Police Department, as part of post-surgical shoulder rehabilitation.
Impact of an AT
The National Athletic Trainers’ Association (NATA) conducted a survey of industrial companies in the United States that utilize the services of an AT.1
- Of the companies surveyed, 100 percent reported that an AT provides a favorable return on investment (ROI).
- For companies that knew the specific ROI amount, 30 percent indicated the ROI was at least $7/employee per $1 invested, and 83 percent indicated the ROI was more than $3/employee per $1 invested.
- Of the companies that provided on-site physical rehabilitation, 46 percent indicated that health care costs had decreased by more than 50 percent after incorporating ATs.
- Of the companies that tracked workers’ compensation, 63 percent reported that the AT made an impact on their workers’ compensation costs within six months, and 96 percent reported that the AT made an impact on their workers’ compensation costs within one year.

Sidney, Ohio, Police Department Model of Care Shows Strong Return on Investment
The Sidney Police Department (SPD) is a 36-member law enforcement agency covering a population of 21,000 residents located in west central Ohio. Wilson Health, a full-service community hospital serving residents of Shelby County, Ohio, and the surrounding communities, has a sports medicine program covering 12 local school districts, the local YMCA, and community events.

The city entered into an agreement with Wilson Health to provide athletic training services for the police department during the fall of 2015. The contract allows for an AT to evaluate and treat police officers during convenient times. Personnel can either contact the AT directly or have a prescription from their health care provider to schedule an evaluation.

Department members are allowed to be seen in the athletic training room both on duty and off duty. Personnel are also seen for off-duty injuries. The goal is to identify and treat injuries quickly so they don’t become major chronic injuries. Whether the injury happens on or off duty, the goal is the same: get personnel healthy safely and efficiently to minimize time loss at work and life activity.

Rehabilitation time is factored into light-duty time for officers injured on the job. Injuries sustained by police department personnel on duty and off duty mimic those seen in contact sports. These injuries include concussions, spine strains, rib contusions, and upper and lower extremity strains and sprains.

Return on Investment
Cost savings associated with an AT working with the SPD for 2016 exceeded $120,000. A total of 224 police department visits, 78 injury evaluations, and 408 modality treatments were rendered in 2016. There were no charges or cost to employees for these services.

To calculate ROI, the agency examined the physical therapy reimbursement rate per procedure—not what was billed—to get a truer picture of cost savings. (See Table 1.)

The ROI estimate did not include other observable costs such as overtime for injured workers, missed time, cost of off-duty expenses such as injury treatment to an outside facility, or workers’ compensation savings. Decreasing time loss and maintaining productivity simply because personnel were not having to miss work increased morale for both administration and employees.

### Table 1. Procedures and Reimbursement Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedures</th>
<th>Reimbursement Rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluations</td>
<td>$28,158</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therapeutic Exercise Savings</td>
<td>$50,042</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therapeutic Modality Savings</td>
<td>$45,074</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total cost savings</td>
<td>$123,274</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Since the SPD AT works only part-time, the ROI follows a similar trend of $7/$1 as previously discussed.

The SPD designed the athletic training program using a model similar to that of the Fairfax County, Virginia, Police Department’s AT. The department’s AT—Nancy Burke, MS, VATL, ATC—has proven that using an AT within the academy setting at Fairfax County has reduced “overall medical costs by 49.5 percent and musculoskeletal injury treatment “costs by 86.3 percent.” Similarly, “by treating sworn and civilian employees in a large county police force,” Burke has demonstrated reductions “of overall medical costs by 22.05 percent and reductions in musculoskeletal medical costs by 21.2 percent.”

Case Study

SPD requires its officers to meet annual fitness standards. Employees are measured in five areas of performance: 300m sprint, bench press or push-ups, sit-ups, standing high jump, and 1.5 mile run. Employees who meet the benchmarks earn different levels of financial awards, but those who do not meet the benchmarks may be disciplined. The presence of an AT has assisted personnel in meeting these standards, as seen in the example of a 38-year-old, athletic, 15-year veteran patrol officer who injured his hamstring while participating in the 300m sprint. He was immediately seen by the AT and evaluated by a physician who wrote out an athletic training rehabilitation script, after which treatment began. An ultrasound confirmed a diagnosis of a second-degree hamstring strain. He was assigned to light duty, and two rehabilitation treatment times per day were included in his schedule. He came in for treatment on his own during off-duty days, and rehab progressed quickly. He returned to full-duty work in 12 days—half the time normally expected for a second-degree hamstring strain.4 Four weeks after the initial injury, the officer completed the five fitness standard tests and achieved top tier on all five benchmarks.

Summary

Police work is physically and psychologically challenging. The availability of an AT to provide injury evaluation, treatment, and rehabilitation reduces the lost work time, helps ensure immediate and convenient treatment schedules, and boosts morale by showing the additional measures the administration is taking to improve employee health and well-being.

Notes:
5. Ibid.