

## Massachusetts

### Used to Helping Others, Police Officers and Firefighters Are Now Helping Themselves

#### Challenge

Like the rest of the country, Massachusetts suffers from an epidemic of obesity. More than 56% of adults in the state are either overweight or obese, and, of course, public servants are not immune.\* In fact, national research on the health and physical fitness levels of public safety officers, which include police officers and firefighters, has shown they are less fit than the general population.\*\*

Healthier police officers and firefighters are better equipped to do their jobs. But with limited funding, local departments can struggle to provide comprehensive wellness programs for their employees. Compounding the problem is that these employees often work long and irregular hours, which can leave little time for regular physical activity, much less a nutritious meal.

#### Response

In Massachusetts, ongoing local worksite wellness programs aim to help public safety officers improve their long-term health and job performance. In 1999, the state Department of Public Health began funding these efforts in local police and fire departments with mini-grants. The programs are helping departments assess their worksites and then work with their communities to increase employees' healthful food choices and opportunities for physical activity.

In 2005, pilot wellness programs were launched in police departments in Framingham, Lynn, and Mattapoisett as well as in fire departments in Cambridge and Northampton. Each department applied for and received a \$5,000 mini-grant, funded in part by the state's cooperative agreement with CDC's Nutrition and Physical Activity Program to Prevent Obesity and Other Chronic Diseases. They also received technical assistance and support from the state.

#### Results

Each department designed a wellness program to fit its specific needs. In the western Massachusetts town of Northampton, for example, the fire department already had a physical activity program in place, a simple walking plan that had developed into a fitness facility at the department's headquarters. But there was no nutrition program to complement it. Then Deputy Chief William Hurley heard about the mini-grant at a state nutrition workshop.

After Northampton applied for and was awarded the grant, the department was able to partner with a local nutritionist to hold nine food workshops for the firefighters, covering topics such as cooking skills and how to shop for nutritious food. Because firefighters work long hours, the sessions were held in the fire station,

In 2005, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health awarded \$5,000 mini-grants to fire and police departments in five communities to help them develop or expand work site wellness programs. Among other things, the money was used for nutrition and cooking workshops, fitness equipment and programs, and a community wellness video.

while they were on duty, with all but one officer participating. Change has come slowly, Hurley reports, but it is coming. Since starting the program, one officer has reduced his cholesterol by 80 points. Others have begun making simple changes to their diet, like replacing the cream in their coffee with non-fat products.

The department also actively participates in community health-promotion activities. For example, the department used its mini-grant to produce fitness and nutrition videos and air them on cable access channels in Northampton and three nearby communities. The idea is to share the department's efforts with the community and encourage community members to make healthful choices themselves. "The hope," Hurley says, "is that the videos will, in the long run, reduce the burden on emergency medical services by reducing the risk factors associated with heart disease and other chronic illnesses."

On the outskirts of Boston, the Framingham police department has also enlisted the community's help. Through a longstanding partnership with Framingham State College, graduate students have conducted lectures on food and nutrition during the department's annual in-service training. These sessions included cooking demonstrations and information on portion size. The culinary arts department at nearby Keefe Tech Vocational School provided healthful lunches during the lectures.

In addition, the department has replaced much of its vending-machine fare with more healthful options, like granola and power bars instead of candy, potato chips, and soda. The overall change in eating behavior, according to Sergeant Blaise Tersoni, is noticeable. "Now you see more people eating healthy snacks instead of candy bars," he says. "People are coming up to me and saying they've lost weight and are eating better."



*Officer Kathy Esposito works out in the Framingham Police Department gym.*

The mini-grant helped Framingham enhance its existing wellness efforts. For example, the department hired a personal trainer, who has given talks on exercise and fitness and who also developed workout programs designed to fit the needs of each officer. The trainer also assisted the department's Fitness Challenge, which was developed and implemented through the mini-grant. The Fitness Challenge offered officers modest financial incentives for meeting individual health goals like lowering BMI, cholesterol, and blood pressure. (The department has generous fitness facilities and also provides in-house cholesterol and blood pressure screenings.)

“We wanted to challenge everybody,” Tersoni says. “But it’s so hard when you have so many different sorts of people, in different age groups and at different fitness levels. This program enabled officer to challenge themselves as opposed to other officers, creating an even playing field for everyone involved. By setting personal individual goals, officers were able to monitor their progress and adjust their programs accordingly.”

Framingham and Northampton are not the only departments that have made changes. With mini-grant funding, seven officers in the Cambridge Fire Department who are also certified personal trainers have designed exercise programs for their colleagues in the department’s eight firehouses. The Lynn Police Department has recruited nearby Union Hospital to provide free cholesterol screenings at the station, and a doctor from the hospital gave a talk on nutrition. And the Mattapoissett Police Department bought fitness equipment and created an onsite gym, encouraging officers to use it before and after work. At least five officers who previously did not exercise have begun to use the gym.

For Tersoni, the changes he has seen in his own department have been modest but promising. “Initially, we had 30 people who showed a lot of enthusiasm for the Fitness Challenge,” he says. “In the end, only half committed. But I was happy with that, because we’ve never had that much participation in past programs.”

The officers who did not commit at least finished the lecture portion of the Fitness Challenge. “That alone,” Tersoni says, “was a positive change for most of them.”

\**CDC BRFSS, 2005*

\*\**The Cooper Institute for Aerobic Research*

#### What Else is Massachusetts Doing to Address Overweight and Obesity?

- Helped Blue Cross and Blue Shield launch the Healthy Choices initiative in 70 middle schools.
- Collaborated with the YMCA Alliance and the University of Massachusetts Boston to pilot an after-school program for overweight and inactive youth.
- Teamed up with the state offices of elder affairs and elder health to pilot nutrition and physical activity curriculum at nine Council on Aging sites.
- Partnered with the Rails to Trails Conservancy and the National Parks Service on a community physical activity initiative.

For more information, e-mail DPH Program Coordinator Maria Bettencourt ([maria.bettencourt@state.ma.us](mailto:maria.bettencourt@state.ma.us)).