

# MILITARY PUTS NEW FOCUS ON BODY COMPOSITION BEYOND THE GYM

By: Marcus Walton

TO THE UNINITIATED, body assessments like body fat percentages and muscle tone measurements are for the gym rats, body builders and marathon runners of the world. But those measurements are increasingly replacing the archaic height and weight charts as the standard by which physical fitness and health are measured.

Body fat percentage, not height and weight, has long been the standard by which the U.S. Army determines if a soldier or recruit meets its physical standards. Too much body fat and that promotion or even the bus ride to basic training can be delayed or rescinded. The Department of Defense says 47,447 recruits failed physicals during the past four years because they were overweight or obese. "The body fat percentage of the American people just continues to grow," Command Sgt. Major Chris Schroeder of the U.S. Army Sacramento Recruiting Battalion said.

For the military, body fat percentage is

a matter of losing potential soldiers. But for many of the nation's law enforcement and public safety agencies, it can literally be a matter of life and death. Nearly 1 out of every 2 firefighters who die in the line of duty do so from a heart attack – not from flames. Police officers have only slightly better rates with more than 1 out of 5 officers dying from heart attacks while on duty.

Police officers are probably out of shape "for the same reasons that so many Americans are: Busy with job, overtime, raising a family, its too expensive to join a gym; it takes effort to work out and count calories, and it's not as pleasant eating a healthy diet when high fat, high calorie, fast food options are plentiful and easy to access," said Kathleen D. Vonk, a fitness instructor for the Washtenaw Community College Police Academy in Ann Arbor, MI. "I think that most officers and Americans do care about their health, weight, calorie intake, and fitness levels—they just have absolutely no idea how much

they eat every day."

The lost recruits and lost lives have more people and organizations taking note of how to best sustain, and measure, physical fitness. "The corporate world is coming to the realization that a dollar spent on health and fitness now equates to 10 dollars saved in years to come per employee. They realize the return on investment is worth the money spent," Vonk said. "Not so for the public sector. Fitness programs are seen as frivolous expenses. In a struggling economy it is even more difficult to convince those who hold the purse strings to spend money on a fitness program for officers."

The Army is not waiting idly for the country to get on a health kick, or leaving its recruits physical conditioning in the hands of recruiters. Instead, Maj. Gen. Thomas Bostick, the head of the service's recruiting command, has proposed creating a fitness camp for potential recruits. "It took them 18 years to get to where they are at, so it's very difficult for them to lose the kind of weight that they need to on their own," Bostick told the Associated Press in January. "The Army is aware there are many recruits who would be eligible to serve their country if not for their weight," added Schroeder. "We do everything we can to help people who want to serve their country."

That help includes voluntary physical fitness training, and workouts with recruiters. Schroeder said his battalion is active in schools, giving athletic coaches the Army physical fitness test to train athletes, and being as involved in the community as possible. "We absolutely try to help as many American youth as we can," Schroeder said. "But education has been cut in most states. That means physical activities like band and other extracurriculars have been cut."

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