



RISK MANAGEMENT INFORMATION  
**POLICE EMPLOYEE SAFETY ISSUES**

*Police work, by nature, is hazardous. Some injuries are difficult to prevent. However, studying what went wrong and what contributed to the accident can help reduce many injuries. The goal is to find out what can be done differently to prevent similar accidents from happening in the future, and is the focus of the following information.*

**Most Common Injuries/Situations**

The following are some of the most common police officer injuries in the LMCIT workers' compensation program. Variations of these injuries are repeated in most police agencies throughout the state.

- A police officer is injured while chasing and tackling a suspect.
- A police officer backs his squad car into a stationary object and injures his neck.
- A police officer injures his back while attempting to lift a heavy object from the trunk of his squad.
- A police officer is injured in a slip and fall.

The focus of this information is minimizing the most common and costly LMCIT workers' compensation injuries to police employees.

**Police Workers' Compensation Claims**

For the 2002-2003 policy period, police work comp injuries accounted for a significant portion of the LMCIT overall claims loss: approximately 22 percent of all LMCIT work comp claim costs.

These claim costs can be further broken down by where the dollars are being spent. A breakdown of overall dollars paid on police claims reveals:

- 44 percent is paid for medical assistance.
- 27 percent is for medical reserve.
- 18 percent is for compensation.
- 6 percent is expenses.

If we look more closely at how police officers are being injured, interesting and perhaps predictable trends are noted. For the 2002-2003 policy period, a total of 1,776 police injuries were reported. Most of these injuries occurred in four general categories:

This material is provided as general information and is not a substitute for legal advice.  
Consult your attorney for advice concerning specific situations.

- 1) Strain injuries
- 2) Persons in the act of crime/arrests

- 3) Struck/injured by
- 4) Slip and falls

Other frequent police injuries noted include:

- Auto accidents.
- Ergonomic injuries.
- Back injuries.
- Animal bites.
- Needle stick/blood exposures.
- Chemical exposures from things such as methamphetamine labs.

### **Office Ergonomics**

Through good ergonomic workplace design, cities can help to minimize employee injuries and exposures.

The office work station is one of the first places to start. Ensure the employee's chair is adjusted properly, the desk or work surface height is adjustable to accommodate both short and tall employees, and the keyboard and monitor are at the correct height and distance from the employee.

**Definition**

*Ergonomics*: Involves designing the workstation to fit the individual.

An ergonomic review of workstations may be necessary to help identify problem areas. Ergonomic problems become more complex when more than one employee shares a workstation. This is often the case for police agencies.

Working in awkward positions can put undue strain on the employees' wrists, back, neck, and various other body parts. Therefore, employees should strive to maintain a "neutral" position in all work areas. Employees should also recognize the need for mixing up tasks and rotating between sitting and standing positions.

### **Minimize Lifting Exposures**

Ergonomics also involves proper lifting techniques to help minimize injuries. Look at the required field equipment for squad cars and how this equipment is transferred to the squad cars. It may be possible for the agency to reduce lifting out of the job or reduce the weight of equipment bags to help minimize potential injury.

Records retention areas are good examples of workspaces that can typically be improved through good workplace design. Often, storage boxes are very large and difficult for the average employee to handle. Storage shelves may be high and present awkward lift exposures. Smaller, lightweight, more easily manageable boxes can be used. Another solution would be to use shelves adjustable to the correct height and to develop administrative procedures for how and when items should be lifted.

### **Weighted Equipment Belts**

One of the more frequent ergonomic problems encountered by police involves wearing the required equipment belt. In most situations, the belt is leather and can be somewhat heavy when

fully loaded with equipment. Many police officers have reported lower back pain as a result of wearing the equipment belt, particularly when driving a squad car.

Some police agencies throughout the country have looked into using a lighter style nylon belt. Agencies encourage officers to reduce the amount of items stored on the belt.

One of the suspected causes of the lower back pain is the awkward sitting position the belt forces officers in while driving.

Some police agencies have looked at moving the equipment from the back of the belt to the front or sides to minimize this exposure. Still, others have installed customized seats, which have a section of the seat's back "cut out." This allows officers to sit back while wearing the belt.

## **Vehicle Ergonomics**

Since the majority of police officers' time is spent driving the squad car, the squad car, in turn, becomes their office. The squad car requires attention to help minimize back and other ergonomic injuries.

At a minimum, vehicle seats should offer solid back support and have adjustability built into them. Officers should take the necessary time to adjust the seat to properly fit them. Some agencies have installed the newer style "Pro-Copper" seats and other variations, which offer back, head, and neck support. They have reported very positive feedback regarding their ergonomic effectiveness.

Computer use in squads can also present some ergonomic issues if not properly set-up. It is very difficult to make an ergonomically friendly computer environment in a vehicle. However, there are some things that can be done to minimize officers' exposure to potential injuries:

- The monitor should be adjusted properly for easy viewing.
- The keyboard should be kept at arm's length from the user.
- Lengthy report writing in the squads should be discouraged.

## **Driving Safety**

Although the dangers of police pursuits are well documented, we're focusing on typical, non-pursuit, driving situations because they result in the majority of police injuries and lost time. Four areas need some additional attention to safety:

- Inattentive Driving.
- Backing.
- Intersections.
- Traffic Stops.

### **Inattentive Driving**

Officers not paying attention to their surroundings cause numerous police driving accidents. Sometimes, this can be understandable due to other extenuating circumstances that seem to take priority at the time. Consequently, not all of these vehicle accidents should be merely passed off as unpreventable.

Police need to be aware of their surroundings. Weather conditions, such as snow and ice, affect how the squad handles. Increasing distance between the car in front is recommended. Officers should also be:

- Aware of where the squad can safely be turned around to make a traffic stop.
- Looking for hidden hazards.
- Looking for hazards in the road median.
- Looking for road signs in the way.

Another consideration is whether the officer is trying to do too many things at once; for instance, typing on the computer and not paying attention to the driving.

### **Preventing Back Up Accidents**

When it comes to back up accidents, the police are no different from any other city department. Police have their share of backing accidents, which are almost always preventable. The best possible solution is to try to eliminate backing whenever possible.

To minimize the accident potential, when backing:

- Properly adjust the mirrors.
- Use a spotter.
- Take an observation walk around the vehicle.

In addition, parking areas can be made more driver-friendly by eliminating potential hazards and by installing additional mirrors. Hazards, such as posts, should be marked with highly visible colors or reflective tape. Also, police vehicles can be equipped with back-up cameras to help reduce these types of accidents.

### **Watch Those Intersections**

Extreme caution needs to be used when crossing uncontrolled intersections using only lights and siren. Sometimes, this is not enough warning to prevent other vehicles from approaching the intersection at the same time. Many police agencies and communities have installed traffic preemption systems, such as Opticon™, in their squads and emergency vehicles to help minimize this accident potential. These systems allow the police vehicle and emergency vehicles to control the intersection traffic light; thereby reducing the potential of cross traffic vehicles hitting their vehicles.

### **Safer Traffic Stops**

One of the more hazardous activities a police officer is involved with is the routine traffic stop. Anytime an officer is exposed to nearby vehicular traffic there is a possibility for danger. Police agencies should develop procedures for safely making traffic stops. There are a couple items to consider in relation to traffic stops.

The first item is the location of the squad car. Usually, the squad car is parked behind the stopped vehicle at a minimum distance of 15 feet. The steering wheel should be turned toward the shoulder of the road to minimize the potential of the squad being pushed into the officer if it were to be hit.

Also, the squad car should be slightly offset in relation to the stopped vehicle to help provide additional protection to the officer. Officers should use good judgment in determining where traffic stops are conducted.

All police vehicles should be provided with good reflective decals and lighting systems. Some innovative agencies have installed additional lighting systems on the underside of the trunk. This lighting system provides emergency lighting when the trunk is open. Previously, officers were exposed because the open trunk door would block the more traditional rooftop emergency lighting.

Every squad should be provided with reflective vests, such as ANSI Class II, for those instances when officers must control traffic at an emergency or accident scene. Some agencies have even looked at incorporating reflectivity into the police uniform.

### **Slip & Fall Accidents**

Slip and fall accidents are one of the leading causes of police injuries. Unfortunately, most of these injuries are difficult to control due to the work environment. Proper footwear, including regular boot inspections and timely replacement, can help in reducing slip and falls. Also, an understanding of the surrounding conditions, especially in foot pursuits, can go a long way in preventing some of these injuries.

For those areas more easily controlled, such as the police station or parking area, there are practices that can be implemented to help minimize injuries, such as good snow and ice removal practices and the use of non-slip mats.

### **Blood-borne Pathogens**

All squads should be provided with the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) to deal with exposures to blood and bodily fluids. This includes:

- Masks.
- Gloves.
- Face shields.
- Protective cover-ups.

Officers should be instructed in using universal precautions whenever the exposure presents itself.

Vehicle partitions can provide general protection from unruly prisoners, as well as protection from saliva or other bodily fluids directed at the officer. Composite molded back seats provide safety advantages to police officers. They are easier to clean up, reduce the spread of bloodborne pathogens, and finally, make it more difficult to hide contraband, including needles.

### **Chemical Exposures**

Besides blood and bodily fluid exposures, police are also seeing chemical exposures from clandestine methamphetamine labs. Police officers should be trained in recognizing these potential exposures and how to safely deal with them when confronted. Many of these chemicals are highly toxic and can cause severe injuries and illnesses.

## **Training Injuries**

Training is a necessary part of police work. Unfortunately, every year officers are injured during training exercises. Some of these injuries can be prevented by having a proper training facility with quality exercise mats. Some police agencies look to local health clubs and aerobic facilities for training purposes. If your agency does not have the proper type of training facility, this is an option to consider. Using body protection, such as the Redman training suit and padded batons, are other methods used to minimize potential injuries.

## **Soft Body Armor**

Some police agencies have adopted a mandatory use policy for soft body armor or bullet resistance vests. The soft body armor has proven to be effective at minimizing injuries from gunshots, stabbings, and even motor vehicle accidents. Be sure to choose the appropriate level of body armor for both the officer and its application. Your agency may want to consider adopting a mandatory use policy to help save lives and minimize injuries.

## **Summary**

By better understanding the nature of police injuries, it becomes easier to manage them. Police work is a hazardous occupation; however, as discussed throughout the above paragraphs, steps can be taken to increase police officer safety and reduce the chances of injury on the job.

Josh Fitch 07/09