

## Op-Ed: Weakening Requirements for Hiring Police Officers – Forget It

By: Chief Thomas Weitzel (Ret.)

There is an alarming trend in law enforcement these days, and it is a push nationwide to *reduce* entry-level requirements - if not eliminate them entirely.

For decades, law enforcement agencies have had a very comprehensive entry-level process for hiring police officers, and they should have. However, after what happened in Minneapolis, Minnesota, there seems to be a full-court press nationwide by many chiefs, sheriffs, and elected officials to loosen these requirements. This has already been done in Memphis, Tennessee, and some states, want to eliminate some of the requirements!

Recently, New Hampshire lawmakers proposed legislation, House Bill 113, to eliminate physical fitness standards at the entry level. Standards for physical fitness are set for a reason; law enforcement is physically demanding and, often, dangerous work. I believe eliminating basic physical fitness standards is a bad idea and opens departments to many problems, including increased officer injuries. In addition, more use of force situations could escalate because some officers would need more physical ability and techniques to control subjects quickly due to being out of shape.

There is a push amongst some to eliminate physical fitness standards and establish entry standards for criminal backgrounds. For example, some police executives have discussed allowing employment for non-violent felony convictions if you get your record expunged (Illinois still does not allow felons to be hired as officers). Many police agencies have also loosened educational requirements or eliminated them.

Many other agencies nationwide have already lowered the standards, including those in Chicago, Florida, and Tennessee. According to an article from Fox News, several of the officers indicted in Memphis, Tennessee, for the murder of Tyre Nichols were hired during a time when the police department loosened hiring requirements because it had difficulty recruiting new officers. I believe this process was *never* a promising idea and it has proven to be a disaster, but agencies are still embracing it.

While there is no doubt that there is a shortage of police officers, some departments overlook the necessity to recruit and retain qualified individuals who pass minimum standards - physical and otherwise.

Typically, law enforcement agencies have had a lengthy process to get hired. In most communities, the process is as follows: candidates take a written test, go through interview boards, and then their

names are put on an eligibility list, and they are ready for the next hiring stage. First, an intense background investigation includes a medical exam, psychological exam, and, in some cases, voice analyzer testing and polygraph. In addition, nearly all agencies require some psychological exam by a licensed psychologist. Then, all that information is compiled, and a board makes a recommendation to the chief for hire. Typically, the chief will also do a final interview with candidates.

A former lieutenant in charge of recruiting for the Memphis, Tennessee Police Department told the Associated Press earlier this year that they would allow anyone to be a police officer because they wanted to increase their numbers and fill slots. The lieutenant stated that the candidates were not ready for the job, but he was told to hire them anyway. In addition, the department gave new recruits a \$15,000 signing bonus and a \$10,000 relocation allowance, all the while phasing out requirements to have their college credits, military service, or previous police work not count for anything.

In almost all police departments, culture eats policy for lunch. If you do not have checks and balances, you will have problems. It would be best to have strict supervision and a comprehensive hiring process, especially for recruits.

Once again, the decision to lower police hiring requirements to increase the candidate pool because municipalities are suffering in police recruiting areas is just the latest attempt to diminish the professionalism and integrity of the profession.

I find this very disturbing and quite troublesome. Police recruitment and entry-level standards *must* be upheld and pursued urgently.

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