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Improving Fitness in Georgia Police

April 8, 2022

Members of the Georgia Southern University Tactical Athlete Readiness and Preparedness Program (TARP) have guided state policy makers in revising the fitness training standards for police cadets in Georgia to focus on functional fitness, mental resilience and injury prevention. Furthermore, the program has formed a partnership with the Georgia Public Safety Training Center (GPSTC), Georgia's premier training facility for all state and local public safety related units to include police, fire and communication.

"We are pleased to form a partnership with the GPSTC and the Tactical Athlete Readiness and Preparedness Program," stated Chris Wigginton, director of GPSTC. "This partnership will allow public safety professionals to be better prepared in their personal and professional lives. Some of the many benefits will include a reduction in injuries, being better prepared to use needed skills in rapidly evolving situations, and the resiliency and mental health components. As word has gotten out of the possibility of the GPSTC implementing this program, we have already been contacted by several states regarding the initiative." The partnership was made possible due to a sub grant GPSTC was awarded from the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council to fund TARP at their facilities due to the program's comprehensive view of officer wellness, which is aimed at improving de-escalation skills among recruits through mental and physical training.

TARP is part of Georgia Southern's Tactical Athlete Initiative, which aims to reduce the number of injuries and increase readiness and preparedness of tactical athletes. The interdisciplinary team consists of the following faculty members:

- Bridget Melton, Ed.D.,-Professor Georgia Southern University
- Richard Cleveland, Ed.D.,-Associate Professor Georgia Southern University
- Greg Ryan, Ph.D.-Associate Professor Piedmont University
- Greg Grosicki, Ph.D.-Assistant Professor Georgia Southern University
- Haresh Rochani, DrPH-Associate Professor Georgia Southern University
- Mary Beth Yarbrough, M.S.-Lecturer Georgia Southern University
- Sarah Davis, M.S.-Lecturer Georgia Southern University
- Savannah McLain, M.S.-Visiting Instructor Georgia Southern University

Team members recently conducted instructor training with law enforcement officers at the main GPSTC academy facility in Forsyth County, Georgia.

"Police work can be deadly, due to a combination of high-stress and overweightness, which can lead to cardiovascular disease," said Melton, lead faculty member of TARP. "Our program provides state academies with fitness exercises that increase overall cadet fitness, focuses on injury prevention, and presents it as functional fitness to hopefully encourage a more positive view of exercise that will stick with cadets even after academy is done."

Melton's research on the topic, along with her leadership has grown the program's outreach across not only the region but the nation.

"Tactical athletes need training and support for resilience and mental health, but too often it's only presented as a one-time workshop or seminar," said Cleveland. Cleveland heads resilience and mental health for the TARP team, and has created a Mindfulness-Based Tactical Instruction curriculum for the state of Georgia.

"Our program dove-tails into the state's resilience curriculum for officers, but provides 'bite-sized' mindfulness practices within the fitness program. This gives cadets repeated practice at using mindfulness and embeds it within their context using police language, actions, and behaviors."

Additionally, the program utilizes graduate students in the Department of Health Sciences and Kinesiology to provide both training and assessment for state instructors. This hands-on experience allows the students to gain practical experience.

TARP is just one example of the work coming from Georgia Southern University's Tactical Athlete Initiative. The Tactical Athlete Initiative is a multidiscipline collaboration providing research, training, and support for military, police, fire, and EMS workers. The Tactical Athlete Initiative has partnered with multiple agencies including the Statesboro Police Department, Statesboro Fire Department, Bulloch County Sheriff's Office, Forsyth County Sheriff's Office, Waycross Fire Department, Georgia Public Safety Training Centers, Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers and the United States Army.

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