

POWER *of* PREVENTION

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PROGRAM HELPS POLICE, FIREFIGHTERS IDENTIFY HEART ATTACK RISK EARLY

When John Violanti, Ph.D., started analyzing the causes of death among police officers, he already had a pretty good idea about what he was going to find. Dr. Violanti, after all, was a 23-year veteran of the New York State Police Department. Now an associate professor of social and preventive medicine at the University at Buffalo, he has been studying the police force in Buffalo, N.Y., for the past 10 years trying to determine why police officers have a higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

Dr. Violanti began an initial study on the topic in 1999, which led to a larger effort funded by the National Institutes of Health to look at a sample of 500 police officers. "We will begin analyzing the data this fall, but we are finding good indications that police officers are at higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease," he said. "And we believe stress is the main culprit."

Some estimates put a police officer's risk of developing cardiovascular disease at twice that of the general population. Similar studies have expanded their scope to include other professions, such as firefighters. One such analysis conducted by Harvard researchers indicates that over the past 30 years, 45 percent of firefighters' on-duty deaths are attributed to heart disease.

Locally, Elmhurst Memorial Healthcare (EMHC) has developed a program designed to curb the grim statistics and help protect those people who dedicate their lives to protecting their communities. Offered in conjunction with Midwest Heart Specialists, the Healthy Hearts for Police & Firefighters program provides free heart scans to area first responders, giving them access to the most accurate way to detect heart attack risk early – while there is still time to improve heart health.

"This is a very important program that has the potential to save lives," said DuPage County Sheriff John Zaruba, whose office is participating in the program. "I want to do everything I can to protect our deputies. This program is about protecting and caring for those who keep our communities safe every day."

The heart scan offered by Elmhurst Memorial Healthcare is a simple, painless test that takes only a few minutes to complete. Using advanced CT technology, the scan reveals the amount of calcified plaque that has built up on the artery walls, which can lessen the flow of blood to the heart. This calcium build-up is the underlying cause of the majority of cardiovascular disease events and may be present for decades before the onset of a heart attack.

"Being at increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease is something we are acutely aware of as police officers," said Steve Neubauer, Chief of the Elmhurst Police Department. "The statistics are alarming, but this program gives our officers the information they need to either continue doing what they are doing or make lifestyle changes to improve their heart health before it's too late."

"I scheduled my appointment immediately," added Mike Kopp, Chief of the Elmhurst Fire Department. "I am in good shape and stay physically active, but I have a family history of heart disease and wanted to be reassured that I was not at significant risk. I encouraged my department to take advantage of this unique opportunity."

