

May 4, 2021

Premier Doug Ford
Queen's Park
Main Legislative Building
Toronto ON M7A 1A1

Dear Premier Ford:

Re: Allow Ontario's Youth to Return to Athletics to Fortify Provincial Physical and Mental Health

At Athletics Ontario, we understand the challenges that navigating during a pandemic brings to all organizations, particularly the Provincial Government, which holds the responsibility to keep more than 14 million of its citizens safe. There is no straight line to normal. Every day requires flexibility and pivot. We applaud the courage your government demonstrated in course-correcting the April 16 decision to close all playgrounds across Ontario, given the resulting significant negative impact this restriction would have had on our youth.

Given the current ongoing pandemic in Ontario, it is our belief that we need to take another critical step to safeguard the mental and physical health of our youth, giving them a safe space to play – and allowing them to continue learning life lessons not taught in any other setting.

As such – on behalf of our youth, who are the future leaders of Ontario – we request that the Government of Ontario take another prudent, measured step forward and allow all organized and controlled sports to return to play, reversing the prior decision that shut them down.

Our youth continue to struggle through the pandemic – including in under-served communities. They have lost – and continue to lose – so much, from social interaction to school clubs to field trips, picture days and graduation ceremonies. The opening of controlled sports will allow our youth (and adult) participants a space to remain healthy and fit – mentally and physically – with a demonstrated minimal risk of community transmission. This is not just our opinion.

This week is *Mental Health Week*, a week perhaps more needed than ever as the mental well-being of so many is at a tipping point. As you know, immediately following the announcement of April 16, numerous doctors and scientists spoke out against the restriction, including through the Canadian Pediatric Society of Canada [*open letter by Kimberly Dow and Eddy Lau*](#) dated April 17, 2021. In their letter, they state:

- There is an unprecedented surge of mental health problems among children and youth attributed to recurring uncertainties, lockdowns, restrictions, and school disruptions;
- Outdoor and physical activities in a fresh air environment are critical elements of health preservation and development;
- The Mental Health support infrastructure in Ontario is not ready to handle this present surge, let alone any additional rise in cases; and
- Closing or severely limiting outdoor sports for our youth is not an evidence-based measure that will help curb COVID-19 community spread.

The current scientific consensus is that there is no justification for restrictions in the overwhelming majority of youth sports (including contact sports), and especially in cases where those sports are played outdoors ([Covid-19 Incidence in High School Athletes](#)).

It is worth noting that athletics is not a contact sport, which further reduces risk as athletes can easily maintain physical distance during both training and competition ([Special Report: Are All Sports Shutdowns Necessary](#)).

A study ([available to read in full here](#)) by Queen Mary University of London, Professor Clive Beggs, an expert in the transmission and control of infectious disease, and an advisor to the Department of Health and Social Care, ran a computer model through 10,000 simulations of an average 263-person parkrun event, using worst-reasonable-case estimates for number and duration of human contacts, which resulted in only **0.015% of runners potentially acquiring a COVID-19 infection.**

Over the past thirteen months our understanding of the virus has improved significantly with every academic paper, scientific study, and expert report. We know far more about Coronavirus now than we did last year, and we should use that knowledge to make appropriate fact-based decisions about how and when we transition to normal life.

In concert with our membership all across Ontario, Athletics Ontario has proactively developed, implemented and refined comprehensive strategies to mitigate risks related to the COVID-19 pandemic, while ensuring safe athletics activities are practiced across our province – always in concert with the local Public Health Units.

- A total of 120 clubs with over 7,000 participants training in outdoor groups: zero reported cases of Covid-19.
- Over 40 track meets and cross-country events took place in summer/fall 2020, with 2,000 competitors: zero reported cases of Covid-19.
- 2021 indoor season, training and competitions took place for high performance athletes: zero reported cases of Covid-19.
- In accordance with the National Back On Track guidelines - developed in collaboration with Athletics Canada and other Provincial Sport Organizations – there have been NO reported cases Canada-wide following these guidelines.
- Athletics Ontario experienced a 20% increase in membership over the past year, due to athletics being shut down by schools last spring and fall – and showing the need for a safe sport outlet for youth.
- Athletics enjoys a diverse demographic – including people of colour, underserved economic communities (member clubs offer scholarships for those in need of assistance) and women.
- Females make up over 40% of our membership, with all categories between the ages of 6-16 having higher female participation as compared to male participation.

With the ongoing ramp-up of vaccine availability and a willingness of Ontarians to be vaccinated, and the now very slowly decreasing levels of infection, it is our belief - one supported by doctors and scientists - that outdoor athletics activities will be safe with the proper protocols in place and adhered to by all.

The benefits, particularly now, of getting active together, far outweigh the extremely low risk of virus transmission in outdoor settings. As we look toward the summer, it is vital that we do everything we can to welcome back athletics training and events, and get the province back on its feet, positively impacting the health and happiness of ourselves, our friends, our families, and those around us.

Numerous doctors and infectious disease specialists ([Dr. Andrew Morris](#), [Dr. Zac Feilchenfeld](#), [Dr. Isaac Bogoch](#) and [Dr. Peter Juni](#)) have also stated that outdoor activities and sports should stay open, as they are *vital for mental and physical health* – particularly now with school closures and ongoing stay-at-home orders.

It is not just doctors and scientists advocating for the mental health of youth. Parents are also gravely concerned about their children, as they too navigate the challenges of the pandemic. Through membership feedback and using data from expert sources, it has become glaringly apparent that beyond the pandemic, the drastic changes and huge restrictions to Ontarians' lives are creating another "hidden" pandemic, attacking mental health and physical well-being, especially of our youngest, most vulnerable participants. In fact, in a recently completed [Ipsos survey](#), 69% of parents of kids aged 4-18, stated that the pandemic has had a negative effect on their child's health – while 74% of kids alone have felt or are still feeling high levels of stress due to this crisis.

It is widely accepted that Ontario children and youth need to be in school (wherever possible) to reap the myriad of well-documented benefits to their social, emotional, mental and physical health – further reinforced by the Government of Ontario smartly stating that schools are to be designated the last to close and the first to open. It is our position that athletics – with the protocols in place for all member clubs - is a safe outdoor activity that can step in to fill one of the gaps that the necessary school closures and lockdowns have created.

Much like small businesses, our member sporting clubs are also potential casualties for permanent closure. There is concern that member clubs may face financial demise if the 2021 outdoor season prevents clubs from returning to more robust, comprehensive programming. The same Ipsos survey found that if we cannot get our youth back to participating in organized sports:

- 10% of amateur sport organizations are bankrupt
- 26% are facing bankruptcy
- An estimated 18% will close over the next 6 months
- Up to 44% will wind down operations within a year

These organizations are the lifeblood for many youth in small towns, where resources are limited. They are community hubs of safe sport activity – where parents can feel secure about the well-being of their kids. Losing them would have a devastating ripple effect on our ability to contribute to improved health outcomes for Ontarians, many of which can be achieved through participation in organized sport.

Understanding the above, we would like to respectfully solicit your support and consideration of the following two key requests to help athletics by responsibly adjusting the gathering limits

currently laid out by the Provincial Health Table. Of course, this would only pertain to outdoor venues with all of our strict Back To Track protocols still in effect.

1. **Work with municipal and federal governments and school boards to ensure that track and field facilities are not closed off, amid exaggerated liability concerns and bureaucratic red tape.**
2. **Add Athletic tracks & fields to the approved list of allowable, permitted recreational amenities.**
3. **Increase of outdoor training groups to:**
 - a) **10 athletes, while under the Stay At Home Order;**
 - b) **25 athletes, while under Grey or Red zones and;**
 - c) **100 athletes under Orange, Yellow or Green zones.**

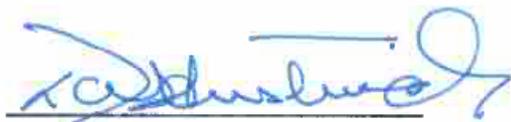
In support of the Government of Ontario's effort, we will continue to leverage our broad and frequent communications with our membership to ensure a wide-reaching awareness across the sector of the changes to government and public health directives and to provide regular updates on our Back To Track procedures.

Athletics Ontario welcomes the chance to partner with the Government of Ontario and be an agent of change, supporting Ontarians safe return to a healthy, active lifestyle (when kids are healthier, so are their entire families and communities) and partnering to restore the mental wellbeing of our community. We will continue to implement an all-encompassing approach to dealing with the devastating effects Covid-19 has had on all Ontarians – in particular our vulnerable youth - and will collaborate with our membership and grassroots community to overcome this challenge through the resolve, resilience and teamwork that only sport can offer.

The time to act is NOW. The well-being of our youth depends on it. Today's youth are the future of Ontario. They will be our leaders, our policy makers and our scientists. This is our chance to make it right for them and to provide them – right now – with the best chance to emerge from this pandemic with strong minds and bodies – and hope for the future.

We hope that you will consider these recommendations and reverse the decision on outdoor sports immediately.

Best regards,



Dean A. Hustwick
President and Board Chair



Paul Osland
Chief Executive Officer

Cc: Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Ontario
Cc: Lisa MacLeod, Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries
Cc: Christine Elliot, Minister of Health