

SPORT MATTERS 
Where Canadian sport connects

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Sport Matters Group

Pre-Budget Submission to the Standing Committee on Finance

From Playground to Podium

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Executive Summary

Federal investments in the Vancouver Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games of 2010 made possible the successful hosting of those Games and Canada's best ever podium finish by our athletes. Equally there are grounds for optimism in believing that Ottawa's support of the 2015 Pan American and Para-Pan Am Games in Toronto and the GTA will lever an impressive performance from the Canadian team and the host cities as Canada, once again, welcomes countries from our hemisphere to participate in a major multi-sport event. The national pride, unity and support that these gatherings engender are as real as the economic benefits they drive to the host community.

While there is much to celebrate in respect of our recent accomplishments and plans for the future - the London Olympic and Paralympic Games is less than a year away - there is important work that remains to be completed in respect of the sport and physical activity file. The book, in other words, is not yet fully written when it comes to our high performance preparations, the health and physical fitness of our school-aged children and youth, and the levels of participation by younger Canadians in organized sport and recreation. This submission makes the case for three modest sets of initiatives that would result over time in a substantial curtailment in public expenditure on health care costs and contribute over the medium term to a balanced budget. We submit that there is urgency in addressing all three and that they are key components of the physical fitness and sport continuum that runs from *Playground to Podium*.

In summary, the Sport Matters Group is requesting federal support for the following initiatives:

- 1. The development of Canadian Sport Institutes that would see a recurring \$12 M annual federal investment in these centres of excellence matched by provincial governments and the corporate sector;**
- 2. An investment of \$13.5 M over six years in the creation of a national Children's Physical Literacy Achievement Award Initiative; and**
- 3. Making the existing Children's Fitness Tax Credit fully refundable for disadvantaged families.**

The initiatives that the sport and physical activity sector is proposing are modest in nature and do not involve a massive re-assertion of federal government activity in this domain. In fact they build upon existing facilities and programs and rely largely on the efforts of Canadian families, school systems, provincial & municipal governments and sports clubs to improve the overall fitness and health of Canadian children through their promotion of both in-school and out-of-school sport and recreational programming.

Background

Canada is becoming a sedentary society with more and more Canadians receiving less than the daily recommended amount of physical activity for their age group.

Increasingly, sedentary activity relates to screen time (i.e. time spent watching television, videos, gaming and using a computer or other handheld devices). A high level of screen time is, as *Obesity in Canada* notes, associated with a greater likelihood of being obese for Canadian adults and children. **Canada has thus become one of the fattest rich countries in the world.** Surveys now tell us that approximately 59% of adult Canadians are overweight and 23% of us are officially obese. This should be of concern to us as public health physicians have noted that this development will bring with it a virtual tsunami of obesity-related heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer and respiratory problems that quite simply will overwhelm our public healthcare system. **More than one-in-four children and youth in Canada are overweight or obese.** Disturbingly between 1978 and 2004, the combined prevalence of overweight and obesity among those aged two to 17 increased from 15 per cent to 26 per cent.

An additional cause for concern, and one that contributes to the statistics above, is the fact that **many Canadian children and youth are not receiving quality physical education programming in schools.** Over the past few decades, we have seen significant cuts in the amount of time scheduled for physical education, a move from qualified physical education specialists to the subject being taught by generalists with little or no training, and a decline in resources available to fund equipment purchases and facilities upgrades.

While many schools have a formal policy endorsing the importance of daily physical education classes to students, in 2001 only 16% of schools were actually doing so. As a result, we are living in a generation where children lack fundamental movement skills and an understanding of the importance of daily physical activity and healthy living, as well as declining fitness levels resulting from the sedentary living phenomenon described above. In other words, **many Canadian children today are physically illiterate.** The results are predictable; a generation of children who fail to develop habits that support daily physical activity, resulting in decreased fitness that is likely to persist throughout their lives. This is not just an education problem; **in fact, it is a health problem of national dimensions.**

All of this behaviour has both direct and indirect costs which governments, businesses and families are increasingly forced to bear. These costs figure in our national accounts in terms of health remediation expenditures, lost productivity to businesses as a result of sickness, absenteeism, and premature death, and increased burdens for families who must care for loved ones who suffer from preventable ailments and illnesses. The *Obesity in Canada* report from the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Canadian Institute for Health Information (2011) is worth quoting on this point:

“It has been estimated that obesity cost the Canadian economy approximately \$4.6 billion in 2008, up \$735 million or about 19% from \$3.9 billion in 2000. This is a conservative estimate, as it is limited to those costs associated with the eight chronic diseases most consistently linked to obesity.

The dollars that are spent treating preventable illnesses that result from sedentary behaviours and inactive lifestyles are consuming the discretionary budgets of governments in Canada. This problem will be aggravated markedly as the baby boom generation enters its golden years. We submit that physical activity, active lifestyles and healthy living are key components in a culture of prevention that could potentially save the national and provincial governments billions in health care spending.

Declining fitness levels of the youth and adult population and diminished physical literacy in the early years inevitably results in a smaller pool of potential high performance athletes from which to draw upon. While the egregious consequences of our inability to provide quality physical education and sport instruction in the school system have become national in scope, there are equally broad-based challenges confronting the way in which we prepare and train our high performance athletes. As Canadian youth strive for sporting excellence they often find themselves lacking critical supports in the form of coaching resources, training facilities and sport science staff. There has been a conspicuous lack of integrated athlete development pathways to assist promising developmental athletes to transition from provincial to national teams and to compete at the highest international levels.

Canada’s performance in the Summer Olympic Games has become emblematic of this inability to marshal effectively our scarce institutional assets and resources in the service of athletic achievement. Games after Games, our Olympic teams have delivered honest and determined performances but the fact is we have punched below our weight, and rival countries have moved into the ascendancy in terms of medals and podium performances. Some may say this doesn’t matter but they would be wrong. **Sport matters. Our athletes and para-athletes are hugely important role models for Canadians of all ages.** Their achievements are a source of pride, inspiration and national unity. Their embodiment of the values of sacrifice, hard work, integrity and discipline are the kinds of things that we would want our children and youth to emulate. We need to foster a culture of sporting excellence, to build upon the legacy of the Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, and to implement those final reforms that will instil in our nation a genuine commitment to physical fitness and healthy living.

Budgetary Requests

This budget is an opportunity to address in a modest way some of the shortcomings identified above and, in doing so, to get us off the escalator of ever rising health care costs and transfer payments, and declining participation rates and fitness levels of Canadian youth.

1. **Canadian Sport Institutes (CSIs)** – The Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) and Own the Podium (OTP) have identified that the lack of fully operational CSIs puts Canada at a disadvantage in comparison to the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Australia, Japan, Norway, the United States and China which all have well established institute programs. The idea behind the CSI is to develop sites which will become focal points for our national team and development programs which are committed to providing sport specific and general training facilities for world leading training for national team and future national team athletes and coaches on a daily basis. Although the current individual Canadian Sport Centres (CSCs) have been exploring opportunities to become more facility based operations, they lack the critical mass of podium level athletes, coaches and training groups all situated in dedicated high performance facilities.

A recurring annual investment from the federal government of \$12 million is being sought which will be matched by provincial and local partners to create a total of \$24 million. The proposal is to make an efficient, incremental investment that will create world leading CSIs in each of the following identified locations:

| | |
|----------|---------------|
| Montreal | \$3.7 million |
| Calgary | \$3.0 million |
| Toronto | \$3.5 million |
| B.C. | \$1.8 million |

Total \$12.0 million

2. Canada needs a national **Physical Literacy Achievement Award Initiative**. The initiative will be designed to support educators (as well as coaches and parents) in assessing the fitness levels and healthy living practices of their students, including knowledge and awareness of the importance and practice of regular participation in physical activity and sport, and healthy lifestyle choices. It will be structured to teach children and youth why it is important to be physically literate, to raise awareness of their own fitness level, and to help them set goals and work towards their own improvement. The new initiative, once developed, will be available to schools across Canada for students in Grades K-12 in a phased in approach. Emphasis will be placed on providing supports for families, including instructions on interpreting the results and on creating individual and

family goals. The program will include awards/rewards/certificates of achievement to motivate participation or performance, and a long term strategy to track the progress of our children and the impact the program is having at reversing the negative health trends we see today. Federal assistance in the following configuration is being sought in support of this initiative:

Initial Development costs - \$1.5 million

Year 1 - \$1.5 million

Year 2 - \$2 million

Year 3 - \$2.5 million

Year 4 - \$3 million

Year 5 - \$3 million

Total - \$13.5 million (six year commitment)

- 3. Refundable Children's Fitness Tax Credit (CFTC).** To its credit, Canada is the only country to have a nation-wide fitness tax credit program – the CFTC established in 2007. In its current design, the CFTC tends to favour those families who enjoy sufficient wealth to afford to register their children in organized physical activity programs and cover the associated costs of participation. Families at the lower end of the income continuum cannot afford the costs associated with organized sport and recreation and hence are less likely to take advantage of the CFTC. We contend that, if the CFTC were made fully refundable for low income families, it would have the potential of becoming a highly effective policy instrument for encouraging physical activity amongst children from disadvantaged families whom, the evidence suggests, are most likely to be overweight or obese.

Conclusion

It is important that support for the initiatives described above does not come at the expense of any existing funding for sport and physical activity. Any effort to trim support for physical activity, anti-obesity or high performance sport initiatives would be a false economy and condemn us to further remedial expenditures down the road.

About the Sport Matters Group

The Sport Matters Group is a voluntary group of leaders who have come together to talk about the important contribution that sport makes to society and to collaborate in advancing the cause of sport and physical activity as it relates to public policy.