



**BRIEF  
SUBMITTED TO:**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON CANADIAN HERITAGE**

Challenges and Issues Faced by the Arts, Culture, Heritage and Sport Sectors  
During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## **ParticipACTION**

Since 1971 ParticipACTION has been working toward a Canada where physical activity is a vital part of everyday life. As Canada's leading physical activity organization, we deliver innovative engagement initiatives and thought leadership activities that help Canadians be more physically active and less sedentary, no matter where they live, work or play.

## **The Sport, Physical Activity and Recreation Sector**

ParticipACTION is part of what is often referred to as the SPAR sector (sport, physical activity and recreation). This includes organizations at the national, provincial/ territorial, and municipal levels working together to promote participation in physical activity and sport.

There are 33,650 SPAR organizations in Canada,<sup>1</sup> of which 71% are community organizations such as the local YMCA, hockey association or curling club that are such an essential part of our collective social fabric, delivering programs and helping build strong communities.

Sport and recreation play a significant role in the social as well as the economic life of communities, providing jobs, boosting tourism, and contributing to cultural and economic renewal in neighbourhoods across the country. Canada's sport sector accounts for 1.2% of GDP and provides 2% of all jobs, employing 262,324 Canadians.<sup>2</sup> In 2004 alone, Canadians spent \$15.8 billion on sport.<sup>2</sup>

Approximately 50% of children and youth participate directly in sport, while 18% of Canadians belong to a local sport club, league or organization.<sup>3</sup> SPAR organizations make up 21% of Canada's nonprofit sector and engage 28% of all volunteers,<sup>4</sup> roughly 5.3 million people, more than any other sector. Nearly 73% of organizations are entirely volunteer run without any paid employees at all.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Impact of COVID-19 on Organizations**

The pandemic has left its mark on virtually every aspect of our lives, and the thousands of organizations referred to above are no exception. From the 2020 Olympic Games to the local soccer league, there have been widespread cancellations and suspensions of programs and events, affecting not only revenues but the ability for Canadians to participate and take advantage of the many physical and mental health benefits that come with being active.

The results from a recent national survey of SPAR organizations with 1,300 respondents representing 56 organizations with 4 million members confirm a dire need for support; 99% of these organizations have been affected by COVID-19, 50% will be

negatively impacted into 2021, and 21% may not recover without additional support resulting in less opportunities for community programming.<sup>6</sup>

Programs that once may have had thousands of eager Canadians waiting to join are now running at an average capacity of 45%, and almost a quarter of the organizations in the sector are not currently delivering any programming at all.

The relief measures provided to date have been pivotal to the continued survival of so many organizations in the sector. However, 65% of local community clubs and associations have not been able to access emergency funding.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Impact of COVID-19 on Canadians**

As important as it is to consider the impact of COVID on organizations, we must not forget its overwhelming effect on individual Canadians.

Physical activity levels have endured significant and sustained declines since the pandemic was declared, an unintended consequence of abiding by necessary public health guidelines and the resulting closure and suspension of facilities and programs across the country.

This past April, in the midst of the pandemic surge, less than 3% of Canadian children were meeting recommendations for physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and sleep - a stark contrast to the already low 15% doing so before the health crisis.<sup>7</sup>

Canadian adults are not faring any better. Since March, many of the daily rituals that were the foundation for much of our incidental movement, like commuting, grabbing a coffee or walking to a meeting have been reduced or eliminated, resulting in incidental physical activity, which is the majority of activity we get, remaining alarmingly low.

And not surprisingly, more than 60% of Canadians report spending more time using the internet and watching TV during the pandemic, a significant increase in unhealthy sedentary behaviours.<sup>8</sup>

The pandemic and its resulting restrictions on social and economic life have also had a widely reported impact on mental health. In 2018, 68% of Canadians age 15 years and older reported excellent or very good self-perceived mental health.<sup>9</sup> This figure dropped to 54 per cent in late March and early April before going lower still to 48% in early May.

There is well-documented evidence linking the benefits of physical activity to mental health, including decreased anxiety and depression, improved resiliency and lower stress.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, most Canadians are not engaging in physical activity and sport participation as an effective coping strategy.<sup>11</sup>

The pandemic is also deepening pre-existing inequities. Significantly fewer individuals belonging to visible minority groups are physically active compared to those identifying as Caucasian.<sup>12</sup> Further, only 26% of girls versus 52% of boys are meeting physical activity guidelines.<sup>13</sup> Indigenous people, people with disabilities and low-income Canadians have reported experiencing more suicidal thoughts since the pandemic was declared.<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately, and in line with the UN Secretary General's recent policy brief,<sup>15</sup> physical activity can play an important role in 'leveling the playing field', offering equal and equitable access to important physical and mental health benefits.

## **Recommendations**

Considering that research overwhelmingly supports the positive association between physical activity and various facets of health, including mental health, it is essential for the Government of Canada to recognize the powerful role that physical activity and sport participation can play in our collective efforts to help Canadians recover from the impacts of COVID-19.

ParticipACTION therefore recommends two key initiatives:

### **Public Education Campaign**

The first is to support the delivery of a national **Public Education Campaign** to motivate and support Canadians, especially under-represented and equity seeking groups, to get outdoors and be active while still abiding by public health guidelines.

Different jurisdictions are finding it challenging to navigate public health requirements of distancing while promoting the importance of staying active. There is a need for consistent and clear messaging on how physical activity can be done safely, while highlighting its mental health benefits.

Our proposed public education campaign will include a robust national media strategy with a focus on families, older adults and underrepresented groups. Our request is for **\$20 million over three years** to create and implement this campaign, which would result in increased physical activity and sport participation alongside heightened awareness of the important role physical activity can play in our mental health.

### **“Canada Moves” Month**

The second recommendation would be to declare June 2021 as **Canada Moves Month** where sport, physical activity and recreation organizations at the community level are encouraged, and resourced, to provide free programming during the month as part of ParticipACTION's existing *Community Better Challenge* - an annual initiative to find and recognize the most active communities in Canada.

June will be an ideal time to bring the country together, connect with one another and celebrate our communities while charting a path forward beyond COVID-19. It is also ParticipACTION's 50th anniversary, an ideal opportunity to help celebrate an iconic Canadian brand by helping us do what we do best, encouraging Canadians to get healthy by getting active.

**Canada Moves** would allow families and vulnerable groups to experience sport and physical activity programs without having affordability as a barrier to participation. It would also help stimulate safe re-engagement in local sport and physical activity programs, enabling community organizations to retain members and continue to deliver essential programming.

Our request is a **one-time commitment of \$25 million** that will go towards approximately **2,500 community organizations providing each with up to a \$10,000 grant** to offer free programming to Canadians with a focus on under-represented and equity seeking groups.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 is more than a generational health and economic crisis. Our government should be commended for its efforts in mitigating the spread of the virus while protecting the livelihood of everyday Canadians. But we need to work just as hard to address the enormous social impact this pandemic has had on our communities.

Now, more than ever, physical activity and sport participation needs to be promoted and prioritized to help Canadians stay healthy in **mind, body, and community spirit**.

ParticipACTION, alongside the thousands of organizations across the country representing our sector, with the endorsement and support of the Government of Canada, can be essential partners in the nation's road to recovery.

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