



**WRITTEN SUBMISSION FOR THE PRE-BUDGET
CONSULTATIONS IN ADVANCE OF THE UPCOMING
FEDERAL BUDGET**

Submitted by: ParticipACTION

AUGUST 2020

Recommendation 1 – That the Government of Canada support the development of a national Public Education Campaign to motivate and support Canadians, especially those most vulnerable, to get outdoors and be active while abiding by COVID-19 public health guidelines.

Recommendation 2 – That the Government of Canada declare June 2021 as *Canada Moves* month, where community sport, physical activity and recreation organizations are encouraged and resourced to provide free programming as part of ParticipACTION's *Community Better Challenge*.

Recommendation 3 – That the Government of Canada support an innovative multi-sectoral approach to health, technology and economic policy whereby Canadians would be offered an incentive from their cellphone provider to increase their physical activity minutes each month in exchange for a decrease in their monthly cellphone bill – the '*Taking Steps*' to reduce Canadian cellular phone bills initiative.

PARTICIPACTION

As Canada's recognized physical activity leader for almost 50 years, ParticipACTION is a national not-for-profit organization that helps Canadians sit less and move more through innovative engagement initiatives and thought leadership.

By working with our partners and stakeholders, which include sport, physical activity and recreation organizations, researchers, government and private sector, we aim to make physical activity a vital part of Canadians' everyday life.

THE UNPRECEDENTED IMPACT OF COVID-19

Impact on Physical Activity

As Canadians collectively adopt public health measures to combat the spread of COVID-19, an unintended consequence has been that our physical activity levels have endured significant and sustained declines.

The ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth provides the most comprehensive assessment of physical activity. The 2020 Report Card (released June 16) assigned children and youth a D+ for overall physical activity. Specific to gender, only 6% of girls versus 13% of boys are meeting national physical activity guidelines of 60 minutes/day.

One month after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the Report Card stated that less than 3% of 5-to-17-year-olds were meeting the Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and sleep – a steep decline from the 15% who were meeting these guidelines before the health crisis took hold.

Restricted access to playgrounds, schools, childcare, and instructions to “stay home” have made it more challenging than ever for children to develop and maintain healthy movement behaviours. Outdoor activities have declined for most children and youth during COVID-19, while screen use has increased.

Among adults, only 16% meet physical activity guidelines and yet overall physical activity levels further declined immediately following the start of the pandemic. Six weeks into the pandemic, moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) levels slowly started to rebound while light physical activity and overall daily step counts remained significantly lower. Although MVPA levels of already active Canadians prior to the pandemic have returned to pre-pandemic levels, the loss of incidental physical activity for all Canadians should be a public health priority in response to the ongoing pandemic. Such findings will likely have significant long-term implications for the physical and mental health of Canadians.

Significantly fewer individuals belonging to visible minority groups are physically active compared to those identifying as Caucasian (49% Caucasian vs. 40% Latin American, 38% Black, 34% South Asian). Further, higher proportions of recent immigrants (60%) are inactive compared to established immigrants (53%), with inactivity being higher among immigrants of visible minorities (59% vs. 47% of white immigrants).

Barriers – not interest or desire – are the primary cause for inactivity among racialized communities. According to the Institute of Canadian Citizenship, many new citizens are not participating in sport, despite a general interest in wanting to, due to financial issues, unfamiliarity with the sport, language and communication barriers, and racism.

Impact on Canadians' Wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of Canadians is directly linked to their social and mental health, their sense of belonging and inclusion, their ability to be productive, and being part of a community, all of which have been significantly impacted by COVID-19. Fortunately, being physically active is a proven way to address many of these issues.

According to the Mental Health Commission, Canadians are four times more likely to report their mental health is worse than before COVID-19. Physical activity helps to minimize depressive symptoms and helps promote feelings of happiness. It also reduces levels of anxiety and builds resiliency to respond to stressful situations.

Research shows that 1 in 5 adults in Canada experience some level of isolation or loneliness, contributing to cognitive decline, depression, and social anxiety. Older adults in particular can become separated from society, friends, and loved ones due to these factors. Physical activity allows people to build social connections and community engagement by providing opportunities to interact with others.

Physical activity also greatly enhances productivity levels. It not only helps increase focus and attention, but enhances creative thinking, problem-solving skills, and executive functions. It also helps improve social integration and provides opportunities to enhance interaction and communication skills, resulting in improved daily functions, health outcomes, and quality of life.

Although racialized communities face additional barriers to getting active, physical activity can be a connector among members of similar cultural or ethnic groups and is a great way for newcomers to integrate into their new communities.

The pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social and economic systems which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic – unfortunately, the impacts of COVID-19 are further exacerbated for women and girls. Fortunately, and in line with the UN Secretary General's recent policy brief, physical activity can play an important role in 'leveling the playing field' offering equal and equitable access to the many noted health benefits.

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY – RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1 – That the Government of Canada support the development of a national Public Education Campaign to motivate and support Canadians, especially those most vulnerable, to get outdoors and be active while abiding by COVID-19 public health guidelines.

As Canada advances towards a phased recovery, there will likely be necessary closures and limits imposed on schools, parks, gyms, community centres and other events that are often conducive to play and activity. This creates a vital need to motivate and support Canadians to stay active, stay healthy and stay informed to take full advantage of the numerous physical and mental benefits that physical activity can provide.

The gradual reopening of communities is also bringing a wide range of often conflicting messaging surrounding being active. Different jurisdictions are challenged to navigate public health distancing requirements while promoting the importance of staying active. There is a need for consistent and clear national messaging that can inspire Canadians by highlighting the evidence on how physical activity can help their wellbeing during this stressful time.

The Public Education Campaign would include a national media strategy including traditional and digital media channels. It will also supplement current ParticipACTION programs and activities to focus on families, older adults and underrepresented groups. And finally, it will support workplaces with practical activities and challenges to engage and support employees, whether working remotely or not, in support of mental health and team building through physical activity.

The financial request is \$20 million over three years to create and implement the Public Education Campaign.

Recommendation 2 – That the Government of Canada declare June 2021 as *Canada Moves* month, where community sport, physical activity and recreation organizations are encouraged and resourced to provide free programming as part of ParticipACTION's *Community Better Challenge*.

Physical activity, sport and recreation are key elements for wellbeing and important components to building social, community and even family ties, which will be essential on our road to recovery.

In a recent survey conducted by Sport for Life on the impact of COVID-19 on community sport organizations, 92% offering summer camp programming have said they may not or will not run them this year as a result of COVID-19 and 65% of clubs and associations cannot access Canadian emergency funding initiatives. Community organizations are concerned about membership retention, long-term operational impacts, and their ability to continue to deliver programming.

Canadians are also worried about their financial wellbeing, with many families not being able to afford registration fees for sport, physical activity, and recreation programs. Others may be concerned about exposure to COVID-19 if they re-engage in local programs.

An investment in *Canada Moves* would provide an opportunity for community organizations to reconnect with and attract community members to their new safe programming. Families would also be empowered to explore physical activity programming in their communities without having affordability as a barrier to participation. *Canada Moves* would be implemented as part of ParticipACTION's current *Community Better Challenge*, an annual challenge to find and recognize the most active community in Canada with a grand prize of \$150,000 to be invested back into community physical activity initiatives.

Canada Moves would stimulate safe re-engagement in local sport and physical activity programs helping to sustain local community organizations and encourage physical activity participation among Canadians in a way that is both fun and safe.

The financial request is a one-time commitment of \$25 million that will go towards approximately 2,500 community organizations across Canada providing each with an average \$10,000 grant to offer free programming to Canadians with a focus on women and girls, and racialized and other vulnerable groups.

Recommendation 3 – That the Government of Canada support an innovative multi-sectoral approach to health, technology and economic policy whereby Canadians would be offered an incentive from their cellphone provider to increase their physical activity minutes each month in exchange for a decrease in their monthly cellphone bill – the '*Taking Steps*' to reduce Canadian cellular phone bills initiative.

By leveraging a trusted brand and utilizing the existing ParticipACTION app, Canadians would be rewarded for getting and staying active. Canadians tracking their physical activity via the ParticipACTION app who achieve their personalized physical activity goal each month would be eligible to receive up to a 25% reduction off their next month's cell phone bill. Subsequently, if the user does not meet their physical activity goal, the percentage discount would lessen. This initiative would leverage federal investments previously made in ParticipACTION and the development of the ParticipACTION app.

This innovative approach will support the federal government's mandate to reduce the average cost of cellular phone bills in Canada by 25%, while simultaneously addressing the physical inactivity crisis in Canada. Further, this may serve as a win for telecommunication companies by creating a corporate social responsibility opportunity that can build engagement and brand affinity with Canadian cellphone users.

The Government of Canada has an opportunity to apply behaviour-based research and insights, currently being used by many governments globally, to make life for Canadians more affordable and healthier. This initiative can help citizens save money during a difficult economic environment while providing an incentive to maintain healthy levels of physical activity each month. As a corporate social responsibility opportunity this would allow telecommunications companies to directly support the health of new and existing smartphone clients at a time when chronic health issues are on the rise.

There is no financial request tied to this recommendation; ParticipACTION's request is that the Government of Canada publicly support this policy.

CONCLUSION

Physical activity has been proven to offer several benefits to Canadians' overall health and wellbeing. Now, more than ever, physical activity needs to be promoted and prioritized to help Canadians stay healthy in mind, body, and community spirit. By focusing investments towards increasing physical activity levels, Canada will see significant and widespread positive outcomes.

ParticipACTION, with the endorsement of the Government of Canada, could provide essential support in our road to recovery while supporting Canadians' wellbeing against the toll that the pandemic has had on individuals, families, and the broader community.

ParticipACTION's recommendations are designed to complement other submissions including the Canadian Parks and Recreation Associations' proposal to provide funding for safe municipal spaces; Sport for Life's submission to support local sport organizations' viability to deliver programs/events in the community; and the Canadian Olympic Committee's recommendations to support national sport organizations.