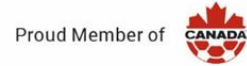




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March 25, 2021

Attn: Dr. David Williams, Chief Medical Officer of Ontario
Cc: Lisa MacLeod, Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries
Cc: Christine Elliott, Minister of Health
Cc: Michael Tibollo, Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions

Request of Support for Ontario Soccer to safely enhance the Health of Ontarians

Dear Dr. Williams,

I am contacting you today, on behalf of Ontario Soccer, the largest provincial sport organization in Canada and the 500,000+ Ontarians under our care and stewardship.

Throughout the challenging last twelve months, we have been proud and staunch supporters of the commendable leadership provided by the Government of Ontario under the expert guidance from you and your colleagues of the Provincial Health Table.

In concert with our 600+ sanctioned member Districts, Leagues, Clubs and Academies all across Ontario, we have proactively developed, implemented and refined comprehensive strategies to mitigate risks related to the Covid-19 Pandemic, while ensuring safe soccer activities are practiced across our Province.

As a cornerstone of this strategy to keep Ontarians active and safe, Ontario Soccer developed a sophisticated "[Return to Play Guide](#)" in collaboration with our National Governing Body, the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries and Public Health officials.

This guide has enabled our Clubs and Academies in partnership with their local Public Health Units to create and impose strict protocols to address vital safety and hygiene aspects for all participants and equipment both on and off the field of play, keeping transmission rates at an absolute minimum in the process.


Furthermore, through ongoing Ontario Soccer webinars we have educated our technical and administrative membership leaders on the best practices for training sessions and games, while adhering to Provincial Orders and the Local Public Health Units' requirements.



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Like you, we are committed to evidence-based decision making and would like to highlight some critically important data points to you, to underscore the efficacy of the Return to Play framework that has been put in place.

Since launching our Return to Play Guide on June 11th, 2020, only 29 cases of Covid-19 have been reported across our entire soccer community last year – among which only 17 youth cases had no identifiable origin outside the field of play. Any further spread was contained thanks to the use of our Emergency Response Plan contained within our Return to Play Guide, which requires reporting infections or suspected infections to multiple levels of sport and health authorities, as well an action protocol to be followed at the Club/Academy and community level.

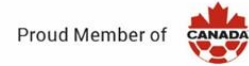
The case rate of 3.4 per 100,000 witnessed across the population of active soccer players in Ontario is much lower than the case rate in the overall population in Ontario, even when comparing to the case rate for youth. This mirrors the data published earlier this year by Watson et al. in their study, "[COVID-19 in Youth Soccer](#)", who showed that the incidence of COVID-19 among youth soccer athletes is relatively low when compared to the background incidence among children across the country, and when compared to the incidence within the local general population.

The lead researcher is further quoted in a [Postmedia article](#), *"In terms of truly documented transmission between athletes during participation, I'm not aware of anything," says Dr. Drew Watson, lead author on three University of Wisconsin studies that investigated COVID-19 risks in sports, and senior author on three other UW studies on the mental-health effects of sports shutdowns. "I know researchers who are struggling to find even a single case among outdoor-sports participants, in particular."*

When combined with the results of an [additional study](#) conducted among over 30,000 high school sport participants from ~200 schools, the current scientific **consensus is that there is no scientific justification for restrictions in the overwhelming majority of youth sports (including contact sports), and especially in cases where those sports are played outdoors.**



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Soccer in Ontario: A vital platform to restoring Ontario's health

As great strides continue to be made to overcome the generational conundrum that Covid-19 has presented us with, the Soccer community is ready and eager to play a significant role in the re-opening and re-building of a healthy Ontario.

Through ongoing survey research with our own members, as well as using data from the aforementioned expert sources, it has become shockingly apparent that beyond the Covid-19 Pandemic, the volatile changes and massive restrictions to Ontarians' lives are creating another "hidden" Pandemic, attacking mental health and physical well-being, especially of our youngest, most vulnerable participants. In a recently completed [Ipsos survey](#), 69% of parents of kids aged 4-18, stated that the pandemic has had a negative affect on their child's health. 74% of kids alone have felt or are still feeling high levels of stress due to this crisis.

In the same way that 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, we argue that Soccer as a safe outdoor activity similarly forms a quintessential element of that same remedial strategy for Ontario's youth.

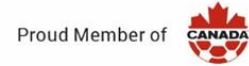
In addition, in 2020, 57% of our Clubs/Academies were either restricted to offering only skeleton programming to our participants or forced to shutter altogether for the spring/summer season to the great detriment of both the organizations, as well as their participants.

We fear that our member organizations will collapse economically, if another outdoor season passes by in 2021 without them being able to return to more robust programing. In the same Ipsos survey, 10% of amateur sport organizations are bankrupt and 26% are facing bankruptcy. 18% will close over the next 6 months and 44% within a year, if we cannot get our youth back playing organized sports again.

These are profound indicators and we are witnessing first hand, the erosion of our infrastructure at every level. Losing these organizations, as community hubs of safe sport activity, would have a devastating ripple effect on soccer's ability to contribute to improved health outcomes for Ontarians.



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Our request to help our sport safely recover and service our youth

It is in the above context that we respectfully ask for your support and consideration of the following two key requests to help soccer 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 our strict Return to Play protocols still in effect.

1) Increase of Competitive Bubbles from 50 to 100 players in the Orange, Yellow and Green Zones:

This will allow a minimum of four (4) teams to participate in competitive league play.

2) Increase participant limit from 100 to 200 people:

We are requesting the limit for participants to be increased to 200, which would include players, coaches, match officials and volunteers. At this minimum bubble size, a four (4) team league would allow participants to safely return to more meaningful competition this summer. Spectators will be limited to two (2) per player at this time, still requiring physical distancing and facemasks to participate.

Ontario Soccer and its members wholeheartedly embrace the responsibility of helping Ontarians to safely return to a physically active lifestyle, restoring the mental wellness of all involved in our beautiful game and rebuilding the sporting community across the province.


In support of the Government of Ontario's effort, we will leverage our communications tools to keep our members informed on changes to public health directives. Employing regular action and information bulletins regarding changes to the public health directives. We will also explain these changes through a newsletter to parents and by regularly updating our Return to Play Guide with the latest government directives. Additionally, we will deploy robust social media campaigns to ensure broader awareness in the soccer community takes place.



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In closing, we would like to pledge our continued support to you to implement a holistic solution to dealing with the insidiously damaging effects Covid-19 has had on Ontarians and will rally our grassroots community to overcome this challenge through the kind of resolve and resilience only sport can offer.

Ontario Soccer is ready to **Pitch In. Play ON!**

Yours in Soccer,

Johnny R. Misley
Chief Executive Officer
Ontario Soccer

Peter Augruso
President/Chair, Board of Directors
Ontario Soccer