



February 26, 2021

## An Open Letter to the Community from Ottawa Public Health

Ottawa Public Health's (OPH) role is to promote and protect the health of our community. We recognize the important role that sport plays in our overall health and well-being. Considering our ongoing transmission rates, it is important to remind everyone involved in organized sports that they have a role to play and should know the risks, choose safer options and remain aligned with the regulations and public health measures to help keep us in the game.

**The purpose of this letter is to provide direction on the return to play plans specifically related to the structure of your leagues and game play organization when permitted within the [COVID-19 Response Framework](#).** Please share this message with all branches and levels of your organization including coaches, trainers, officials, team managers, safety officers and participants.

OPH has received a number of return to play plan proposals from various sport associations and organizations, many of which include a diversion from the traditional season and propose a version of showcases, mini-tournaments and scrimmage formats for various reasons, including but not limited to, providing a mechanism for exposure to development and scouting for professional level career opportunities.

After careful review and consultation, we have several concerns associated with these types of proposals. **OPH does not support in any circumstance a structure which allows for competitive games or scrimmages where any form of resetting of leagues (teams or cohorts) occurs as this does not preserve the integrity of the league and greatly increases the risk of exposure through close contacts.**

As you know, [O. Reg. 364/20: RULES FOR AREAS IN STAGE 3](#) under the [Reopening Ontario \(A Flexible Response to COVID-19\) Act, 2020](#) states that organized team sports that are practised or played by players in a league may only be practised or played within the facility if the league either:

- contains no more than 50 players and does not permit its teams to play against teams outside of the league, or
- divides its teams into groups of 50 or fewer players and does not permit teams in different groups to play against one another or against teams outside of the league.

After consultation, our understanding of the above noted regulation is that once teams begin play within their league/group of maximum 50 players, they cannot play against any other



teams (e.g., no periodic reset of opponents, even with a 2-week break period in between games). The purpose of this is to limit the number of close contacts and overall exposure that any one person has because close contact is one of the main drivers of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We empathize with the challenges and impacts associated with navigating a return to sport during a pandemic. We recognize the impact the restrictions have in relation to your ability to showcase the players who are seeking exposure for possible opportunities at a more elite level. The restrictions within the provincial regulations are in place to protect everyone by reducing the spread and transmission of COVID-19.

Organizations and their leadership are responsible for ensuring all participants including players, coaches and officials comply with applicable regulatory requirements. This includes having a return to play plan and a safety plan which achieve the public health measures such as screenings, physical distancing, modification of sport, masks and proper hygiene and sanitization.”

Facility owners/operators also have a responsibility to follow provincial legislation and help protect their communities. Posting signage, providing safety guidelines around capacity for amenities, adhering to gathering limits, and proper cleaning and sanitization.

All individuals participating in team sport activities including players, coaches, officials, trainers and parents have a responsibility to be knowledgeable of their risks, the provincial regulations and the safety measures for their organization. They are also required to adhere to the public health measures which play an important role in decreasing the spread and transmission of COVID-19 to themselves, their household and team.

Ottawa Public Health will continue to provide guidance, support and resources for the sport sector. As we have done from the beginning of the pandemic, we will continue to work with you to help you stay informed and have a safer return to your sports. Additionally, we will continue to collaborate with the East Region Health Units to be as consistent as possible in our messaging and communication.

**The risk of COVID-19 transmission associated with sport related activities cannot be fully eliminated. Following public health measures helps to reduce the likelihood of exposure to COVID-19 but does not make it zero.**

In closing, it is important to remember that even with COVID-19 safety precautions in place, participating in sports and recreation activities is still considered a higher risk activity for transmission due to many factors (e.g., physical exertion with heavier breathing, movement that interferes with physical distancing, etc.) Being [COVID Wise](#) and [sport SMART](#) can help to reduce the risk.

If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact Ottawa Public Health at 613-580-6744 or via email [healthsante@ottawa.ca](mailto:healthsante@ottawa.ca).