



December 13, 2020

To whom it may concern,

This letter is to express my support for the limited and safe re-opening of Washington State's climbing gyms. As a Research Associate Professor within the University of Washington's Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine, I have been actively involved in studying the deleterious impacts of the COVID-19 response on our population's mental health. As an avid climber for 15 years, I have a deep understanding of the workings of climbing gyms and the community network of climbers. **Climbing gyms offer positive mental health, family, and community impacts that are not provided by conventional fitness facilities.** From an infectious disease standpoint, climbing gyms are greatly safer alternatives to conventional fitness facilities due to their differences in structure, usage patterns, and clientele.

Climbing gyms promote the mental health of individuals, families, and the community, as they often function more as a community center than a fitness center. The importance of climbing gyms in promoting mental health cannot be overstated. In my research, we have seen rates of isolation, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation skyrocket since the pandemic began. *Physical activity (often termed "behavioral activation" in our research on depression) is one of the most effective methods of reducing depression, without the side effects of medication.* This is of particular importance during Washington's rainy and dark winter months. Additionally, conventional fitness facilities rarely if ever feature an element that is commonplace in climbing gyms: family pods of all ages from toddler through grandparents. It is not uncommon that a large percentage of clientele in any climbing gym are families who are already exposed to each other, and therefore they bring much smaller proportional risk of infection.

Climbing gyms provide a critical social safety net to their communities. Climbers tend to create strong relationships with others in their community as safety, trust, and respect are core elements which must exist between climbing partners. Likewise, the staff of climbing gyms are not simply employees, they are foundational to the social networks created in climbing gyms, and play a large role in building strong community connections. Research has consistently shown how important social connections and peer-to-peer support are in promoting mental health and functioning.

Climbing gyms minimize COVID-19 spread via their unique attendance patterns, heavy use of chalk, and anaerobic activities. Climbers engage in anaerobic activities, short bursts of activity that do not result in long periods of heavy breathing and are conducive to mask wearing. The use of chalk to dry the hands has been scientifically shown to dramatically reduce virus concentrations. Therefore, as compared to conventional gyms, in climbing gyms individuals are exposed to each other for much shorter periods of time, are less likely to breathe heavily, are more likely to consistently wear masks, and regularly apply chalk which reduces virus concentrations.

Climbing gyms are safer than conventional facilities because they are much larger, with taller ceilings, excellent ventilation, and well-spread clientele. Due to the copious chalk dust that would otherwise result, climbing gyms feature large ceiling fans and floor fans to keep air circulated, and impressive ventilation and filtration systems that are much more powerful than conventional facilities. Rather than

being spaced in two dimensions along a floor, such as rows of fitness machines in a conventional gym, clientele at climbing gyms use three dimensions of space, resulting in greater possibilities of distancing.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with questions,



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