

**Senate Committee on Health Care**  
**Informational Hearing – Impact of COVID-19 Public Health Measures on Business**  
**Virtual Testimony by Tate Metcalf**  
**February 10, 2021**

Chair Patterson, Vice-Chair Knopp, Members of the Committee:

My name is Tate Metcalf and I live in Sisters, Oregon. I own and operate the Sisters Athletic Club, which serves over 1500 members in our little town. I also serve as a member of the Board of Directors for the Oregon Health & Fitness Alliance, which advocates on behalf of the more than 450 health and fitness clubs in Oregon.

While I understand that we are here today to discuss the impact of COVID-19 public health measures on businesses, the health and fitness industry is unique in that these closures and long-term restrictions have had a significant impact not only on our businesses and our thousands of employees, but also on the social, emotional and physical health of our club members, which is one of the key elements I want to focus on today.

My facility in Sisters serves a broad population, including much of the area's elderly population that relies on our specialized equipment and training resources to maintain their mobility and their overall health. Since the beginning of the pandemic, I have seen firsthand the impact of these closures on the overall health of my members, most of whom are unable to safely exercise outdoors in the winter due to Central Oregon's climate. (especially with the big snow storm coming this weekend)

I have also seen the significant impacts that these closures have had on the mental health of club members. I spoke recently with a fellow club owner who provides access to his facility to an elderly veteran who suffers from severe PTSD who has been unable to cope throughout the course of the pandemic without access to his gym. This individual, like many others, is suffering without access to the services and tools he has come to rely on to maintain his mental health, especially during such a challenging time. At my club, I also serve a group of older men that have lost their wives. These widows seek not only the positive impacts of physical activity at my facility, but also the camaraderie shared over a cup of coffee.

These are not trivial health impacts we are here today to discuss.

As a health and wellness professional, I strongly support virus mitigation efforts based on scientific data. From the beginning of the pandemic, our Alliance has reached out to partner with the Governor's office to attempt to collaboratively develop guidelines that follow proven scientific methods to protect public health while safely allowing businesses to operate.

We, as leaders in the health and wellness industry, take every precaution we can to ensure the health and safety of our members. Facilities like mine have implemented strict social distancing, increased sanitization, invested heavily in top-of-the-line ventilation systems and air scrubbers that are proven to kill COVID-19, and have the capability to ensure detailed contact tracing of all member visits.

Yet the guidance for operating facilities in both Extreme and High Risk counties does not take into account any of these precautions and instead offers facilities – which vary drastically in size, – a one size fits all approach. The current Extreme Risk guidance allows facilities larger than 500 square feet to segment their operations into four different spaces, each with a maximum of six people, while ensuring that each person remains 25 feet away from others. In High Risk counties, facilities are limited to 25% capacity or 50 people – whichever is smaller, regardless of the size of the facility.

These arbitrary occupancy numbers do not take in account the size of a facility or the ability of larger facilities to adequately space members. It is completely illogical to mandate the same maximum occupancy limitations on a facility like mine of 19,000 square feet as compared to a facility that is 290,000 square feet. Similarly, it is illogical to think that any smaller fitness facilities or studios would be able to open their doors while maintaining 25 feet between each individual in the facility, especially when that distance is not based on any public health data or recommendations for extreme social distancing.

To date, the health and fitness industry has received no information or scientific justification from OHA as to why our occupancy is based on these arbitrary numbers. The maximum capacity for big box retail stores is 50% occupancy, yet

fitness facilities, which provide vital health benefits, are limited to these extremely small, arbitrary occupancy limitations, regardless of their size.

Data has shown that COVID-19 is not spreading at health and fitness facilities. We haven't seen a single Workplace Outbreak due to a fitness facility in Oregon. And data out of New York from this Fall attributed only 0.06% of 46,000 COVID-19 cases to gyms. In fact, Director Pat Allen recently shared data showing that COVID-19 cases tied to Oregon gyms represent 0.00093% of all COVID cases in the state. Our facilities are not a part of the problem, but they can be a part of the solution.

I know that we are here today to talk about the business impacts of these restrictions and, yes, there are facilities that have permanently closed their doors or are hanging on by a thread after months of prolonged, mandated closures and illogical restrictions. There are also thousands of industry employees who have been laid off and fighting Oregon's archaic unemployment system for the better part of a year due to the mandates. There has been real, quantifiable economic harm to so many of us in the industry over the course of the pandemic, but just as great of concern to so many of my colleagues is the long-term, irreparable harm to the physical and emotional health of our club members.

Even with many counties moving into the high risk phase on Friday, the arbitrary 50 person occupancy limit continues to severely restrict access to health and fitness facilities like mine.

We cannot continue to prohibit access to these vital services that so many Oregonians rely on to maintain their physical and emotional health. The cost is simply too great. So, I am asking you today to please help us find a way to reopen in a reasonable, responsible and safe manner. Thank you for your time and your consideration.