

# Coalition for Active Living

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BY FACSIMILE (613) 995-9926

April 8, 2004

The Hon. Pierre Pettigrew, P.C., B.A., M.Phil.  
Minister of Health  
House of Commons  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0A6

Dear Ministers Pettigrew, Bennett, and Keyes:

As the national voice for physical activity in Canada, the Coalition for Active Living, a network of over 40 organizations, is writing to raise our concerns with the current confusion around federal government leadership in addressing the national crisis in physical activity.

The health impacts of the crisis are profound. Lack of direction, and jurisdictional questions within the federal government are delaying the actions needed to confront the crisis. Lack of priority, confusion around lead federal departments, and reduced resources for physical activity nationally have coincided with increased rates of physical inactivity in certain populations, and increased rates of obesity.

Announcements this week regarding ParticipAction, and participation in competitive sport, have raised even more questions.

There are several issues, which urgently need your attention in order to make an assault on obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic diseases caused by physical inactivity.

**1. Where does the physical inactivity crisis fit in the federal government agenda? We note the following:**

- Ministry staff in the departments of Health, Public Health and Sport cannot confirm which department will have responsibility for physical activity in the new government.
- The Minister of Health has been responsible for physical activity over the past several years. The Healthy Living Strategy identifies physical activity as one of 2 new areas of emphasis, but has no strategy or resources to support action for physical activity.
- The new Physical and Sport Act identifies the Sport Minister as having some national responsibilities for physical activity and sport, but has no resources or infrastructure to act on those physical activity responsibilities.
- The new Public Health agency has responsibility for the prevention of chronic disease, but currently has no mandate in physical activity, one of the most significant risk factors for chronic disease affecting over half the Canadian population.

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*The Coalition for Active Living is a national action group of more than 45 organizations that focus on health promotion and disease prevention through physical activity. The goal of the Coalition is to ensure that the environments where Canadians live, learn, commute, work and play support regular physical activity. [www.activeliving.ca](http://www.activeliving.ca)*

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## 2. Where will the money come from to invest significant resources in physical activity, for the purpose on saving billions of dollars in health care costs, and to enhance the quality of life for Canadians?

- \$2.1 billion, or about 2.5% of the total direct health-care costs, can be attributed to physical inactivity. This figure mirrors results reported for the United States. (Katzmarzyk, Gledhill, Shepard, CMAJ 2000 November 28;163 (11): 1435-1440)
- Conservative estimates suggest that reducing the prevalence of physical inactivity by 10% would save \$150 million annually. This saving does not include indirect costs such as lost productivity due to illness, premature death, or a range of other health conditions, including mental illness and poor quality of life. (Katzmarzyk, Gledhill, & Shephard, 2000)
- The Coalition for Active Living has recommended that the Government of Canada, through key Ministries, makes a strategic investment of \$500 million dollars over 5 years, similar to the investment to reduce Tobacco consumption<sup>1</sup>, to undertake an aggressive strategy to address the physical inactivity epidemic in Canada.
- Health Canada's investment in physical activity has declined from over \$10 million dollars to about \$3 million dollars annually over the past 8 years.
- The vast majority of Sport Canada's \$100 million budget is dedicated to elite sport, and all of it to competitive sport.

## 3. Who will provide the leadership in creating a physically active Canada?

- The national voluntary sector leadership is in place through the membership of the Coalition for Active Living. The Coalition has developed a Pan-Canadian Strategy for Physical Activity that is being widely acclaimed.
- The 13 Provincial/Territorial Ministers responsible for Physical Activity in Canada have committed to an increase in physical activity of 10 percentage points in each province and territory by 2010. Many provinces and territories are beginning to make significant investments in physical activity, but federal efforts are lacking.
- **There is a profound need for a Federal Minister to champion a physically active Canada.**

On Wednesday April 8, 2004 Minister Keyes announced the government of Canada will "provide funding of up to \$250,000 to ParticipAction to conduct a feasibility study on how to increase participation in organized sport by Canadians." We commend Minister Keyes for this action, especially in the absence of any other federal action on this issue. Investment and national leadership is needed to support all means of engaging Canadians in physical activity, and organized sport contributes to this. However, the Globe and Mail reports "Stan Keyes, the Minister of State for Sport, said yesterday the federal government will put \$250,000 into reviving the ParticipAction name in the **health and physical activity marketplace**." This has led to more confusion.

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<sup>1</sup> Health Canada's Tobacco Strategy currently invests \$480 million over 5 years. An even greater percentage of Canadians are at risk from physically inactive lifestyles.

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The Physical Activity and Sport systems are interconnected and mutually supportive, but different.

Physical Activity begins its work with the **inactive**, and encourages participation of each and every Canadian in physical activity both within and beyond a sport perspective. It embraces physical activity as an essential ingredient in a healthy and balanced life. Its most important focus, from a health perspective, is to move Canadians from being sedentary to being at least moderately active.

Interventions to achieve a more physically active lifestyle may include culture, transportation, play, sport, nature, recreation, and education. Physically active lifestyles begin with activities as important as walking, gardening, wheeling, skating, and taking the stairs. These activities are part of our physical culture and are important to the well being of every Canadian.

The membership of the Coalition for Active Living urges you to define the leadership of the Government of Canada for physical activity quickly and to act in partnership with the CAL membership to implement a new, aggressive and well-resourced Physical Activity Strategy for Canadians.

The membership of the Coalition for Active Living is well positioned to make a significant contribution to reducing physical inactivity in Canada and raising the profile of physical activity on the public agenda. It looks forward to working in close cooperation with Government to maximize current and future opportunities, and find creative solutions to reduce current barriers and obstacles to a healthy, active Canada.

Sincerely,

Dr. Rick Bell  
Chair,  
Coalition for Active Living

Cc Membership of the Coalition for Active Living

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