

Thank you for the opportunity to write the Council today. I'm Wendy Hookman, a physician and founding psychiatrist of Washington Center for Women's and Children's Wellness, a mental health practice in Bethesda. I'm also the mother of 3 teenagers, all of whom have been learning virtually since the beginning of the Pandemic. Two of my children are hockey players, so I consider myself close to an authority on mental health and its relationship to hockey.

COVID-19 is a terrible disease and it of course can be transmitted by any person. That said, the benefits of hockey, when evidence-based precautions are taken – as they have in our county – far outweigh the risks to children and their families - and we can't wait much longer. The consequences to our children are becoming overwhelming.

My practice is seeing the consequences of the pandemic; **weight gain**, motivation loss, insomnia, widely-reported school failure, depression, anxiety, and suicidality. We as Montgomery County will be dealing with these for years to come. Team sports in particular lead to improved mental health because of their social nature and support. We can't wait any longer to take action. We have to allow the children to play.

Hockey has been the only outlet for hundreds of Montgomery County children in winter, mine included. They're at home, staring at their computers all day, every day and weekends aren't all that different. Going to their hockey practices and games is the only normalcy in their lives. It's the only time they get to see their friends and participate safely in the sport they love. But the truth is, my kids play travel hockey. I'm not thrilled about it but they have opportunities to play outside Montgomery County. As the Council and Executive may or may not be aware, keeping them from playing and practicing as a team has the counterproductive effect of causing travel players to play outside the county more - in far less safe counties and states – while eliminating games for the least-risky younger and “house” players. That's a big reduction in positive, low-risk interaction for over 1200 children in Montgomery County, for what seems like little apparent benefit.

I'm most concerned about one of my nephews. He is a 5th grader and plays M Y H A “house.” Other than a once-weekly gym class and zoom time with friends, the lack of normal activity and social interaction have had a dramatic impact on his overall well being. After hours of sitting in front of his computer the one positive thing that he has looked forward to is his time playing hockey with his friends. Since the lockdown we've sadly watched as the impact has been noticeable in terms of weight gain, feelings of frustration, lack of focus and a general lethargy which he's never displayed before.

M Y H A and Rockville Ice Arena have done a phenomenal job proactively developing state and local standards which are stricter and more effective than any rinks I have been to in any other county or state, and I understand they have been coordinating with state and county officials to help keep the staff, players and families safe. As scary as this virus is, my experience as a medical expert is that the effects on children of continued isolation and lack of exercise – especially the younger ones who are lower risk – are much worse than the COVID risk to themselves or family members. If the Council is not able to tailor specific rules to keep our communities safe mentally and physically, I strongly urge the executive to approve the proposals I understand MYHA has made to address COVID risk areas they and the County have jointly identified, while keeping our kids – the vast majority of whom are not in school – seeing their friends in the safe environment those organizations have built.

Sincerely,

Wendy Hookman, MD  
Founder and Medical Director, Washington Center for Women's & Children's Wellness