

COVID-19 RECOVERY OUTLOOK: PUBLIC USE OF FACILITIES

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Additional OLO research on COVID-19 recovery is available here: <https://montgomerycountymd.gov/OLO/Reports/CurrentOLOReports.html>

The sheltering in place requirements throughout the COVID-19 pandemic have not only kept people from going to work, children going to school, or sports activities taking place, but it has prevented the use of government and school buildings for public use. This has especially affected the largest users of public facilities in Montgomery County: (1) childcare, (2) indoor/outdoor sports, (3) day camps, classes/cultural schools, and (4) gatherings/meetings/faith-based activities. This paper explores FY20 County public facility use, the current and long-term trends for public facility use, and topics for County consideration.

SUMMARY OF KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Current trends for the biggest areas of public use – childcare, sports, camps/classes, and gatherings – point to limited participation, limited contact, training for staff/participants, social distancing, and constant cleaning/sanitizing.
- Long-term trends for these areas include limiting non-essential visitors; modifying sports programming to local, smaller groups; installing “defensive design” measures such as plastic dividers and sneeze guards, and using outdoor space for more activities.
- When facilities return for public use, the County will need to consider whether (a) childcare operations are feasible at schools; (b) additional resources are required for staffing, maintenance, and supplies; (c) additional COVID-19 related insurance is needed; and (d) facility users will need to sign waivers..

FY20 COUNTY PUBLIC FACILITY USE

During the first two quarters of FY20, the Community Use of Public Facilities (CUPF) had 358,330 hours booked for public use in County government facilities and in schools. Within that total, 286,850 hours (80%) was for (1) childcare, (2) indoor/outdoor sports, (3) camps, classes/cultural school, and (4) gatherings/meetings/faith-based activities. When use of public facilities was suspended in March due to COVID-19, public use for the third and fourth quarters dropped 55% (162,322 hours). Hours for the four most common uses decreased to 130,101, also a 55% decrease. CUPF cancelled 10,631 permits for the third and fourth quarters for a revenue loss of \$2.4 million or 20% of the revenue collected for facility rental fees in FY19.

\$2.4 Million
Revenue Loss ↓

Q1 & Q2 Use
358,330 Hrs.

Q3 & Q4 Use
162,322 Hrs.

TRENDS FOR MAJOR PUBLIC USES OF GOVERNMENT AND SCHOOL FACILITIES

The COVID-19 pandemic will most likely have lasting changes on the public use of government and school facilities; the summaries on the following pages illustrate the current trends (while facility use is limited) and long-term trends (when facilities are in full use) for major public activities.

Current Trends

- Employees receiving CDC COVID-19 training and wearing personal protective equipment
- Implementing social distancing strategies, such as staggering arrival and drop off times
- Only using one point of entry
- Conducting screening procedures, including staff or parents taking children's temperatures and asking questions about children's health
- Keeping children with the same childcare staff and group of children each day; no "floating" staff to fill gaps
- Maximum of 15 individuals in one room
- In addition to cleaning high-contact surfaces every two hours, cleaning items that normally would not be cleaned regularly such as doorknobs, light switches, desks, chairs, playground structures, etc.
- Cleaning and sanitizing toys often; having separate bins with "clean" and "soiled toys"
- Taking care of fewer children and decreased income for providers due to new guidelines and less demand
- Requiring children to stay home longer when they have a fever or other symptoms (e.g., 72 hours)
- Temporary funding from the Child Care Development Block Grant providing aid to childcare providers and supporting childcare costs for essential workers

Long-Term Trends

- Constant communication with government officials to understand local COVID-19 cases and mitigation efforts
- Protecting and supporting staff, children, and family members at higher risk for severe illness
- Ensuring that other community or government groups that use the same facilities as childcare follow the CDC's guidance for childcare programs
- Maintaining strict rules for cleanliness
- Continuing to limit nonessential visitors
- Allow minimal mixing between groups
- Limit gatherings, events, and extracurricular activities to those that can maintain social distancing
- Additional investments, grants, or funding will likely be required to keep childcare business solvent with lower enrollment and the same fixed costs
- With updated guidelines and spacing requirements, a potential loss in childcare slots
- Additional employer-sponsored childcare to help attract and retain employees



Sports²

Current Trends

- Allowing youth and high school sports in “low-contact” or “low-risk” practices in limited groups (usually 10) focused on skill building, not competition
- Only allowing supervised youth sports for indoor courts/facilities
- Allowing more than one group of 10 to use large fields and courts, as long as groups are 20 feet apart
- Closing locker and indoor common rooms
- Prohibiting games or scrimmages – unless regular play does not bring players into close contact (e.g., tennis)
- Limiting nonessential visitors (e.g., parents)
- Screening and taking players’ temperatures before practice begins
- Limiting touching of shared equipment
- Keeping personal equipment (e.g., bags) ten feet apart so that players maintain social distancing during breaks
- Suggesting players bring and frequently use hand sanitizer
- Practicing social distancing when not engaged in play
- Ensuring that employees have training to recognize the symptoms of COVID-19
- Using facial coverings for players and coaches; athletes allowed to remove face masks during drills
- Maintaining social distancing, especially at entrances/exits, queues, bottlenecks
- Posting adequate signage for hygiene and safety protocols
- Sanitizing all equipment before each practice

Long-Term Trends

- Requiring pre-participation physicals for older youth; likely to create a backlog of requests for doctor visits when sports completely return
- Increasing local, creative sports programming that includes smaller groups and focuses on skills
- Regularly taking temperatures/screening
- Monitoring and asking players about symptoms and contacts
- Cleaning athletic equipment, such as baseball bats and basketballs, intermittently during practices and contests
- More frequent cleaning of locker rooms, weight rooms, shared equipment, courts, etc.
- No sharing of water bottles or other personal items
- Increasing costs to buy new equipment instead of reconditioning and reusing
- Limiting access to hydration stations, such as water fountains, unless they are cleaned regularly



Camps & Classes³

Current Trends

- Keeping children with the same staff and group of children each day
- Maintaining groups of 15 or fewer per group/class
- Not permitting overnight camps
- Closing common areas such as playgrounds
- Limiting gatherings, events, or field trips to those where social distancing possible
- Keep seating/desks six feet apart
- Serving individually plated meals
- Restricting non-essential visitors – parents not allowed inside for classes
- Providing employees CDC COVID-19 training and personal protective equipment
- Conducting screening procedures, including staff or parents taking children’s temperatures and asking questions about children’s health
- Identifying an isolation room/area to separate anyone with COVID-like symptoms
- Immediate closings for cleaning and quarantine if possible COVID-19 case(s) identified
- Difficulty enforcing masks-wearing rules for younger children
- Cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces at facilities and on school buses at least once a day and cleaning shared objects after each use

Long-Term Trends

- Minimal mixing between groups
- Continue to space out seating and bedding six feet apart
- Performing more activities and eating meals at picnic or large tables
- Using plastic screens or sneeze guards to separate campers/classmates for meals and/or activities (“defensive design”)
- Protecting and supporting staff, campers, and class participants who are at a higher risk for severe illness
- Maintaining strict rules for cleanliness
- Continuing to limit nonessential visitors
- Serving individually plated meals instead of buffet or family-style meals
- Staggering use of common areas and disinfecting areas in between uses
- Installing additional hand washing stations
- Potentially reducing available camp/class slots due to updated guidelines and spacing requirements



Gatherings⁴

Current Trends

- Holding gatherings virtually to protect vulnerable constituents
- Limiting gatherings to those who can accommodate social distancing
- Hosting 50% occupancy at venues
- Maintaining a maximum of 50 people or 1 person/family unit per 200 square feet, whichever is lower
- Banning gatherings of 100 or more people
- Holding outdoor gatherings, considering drive-in options
- Using a cloth face covering – unless under two years of age
- Posting signage about protective measures, hand washing, wearing face coverings, etc.
- Cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces at least daily
- Ensuring ventilation systems are properly working
- Spacing out seating to at least six feet; use alternate rows for large venues
- Serving pre-packaged and/or individually plated food

Long-Term Trends

- Potentially requiring organizers to provide added insurance for large events due to increased level of risk
- Requiring attendees to sign a waiver
- Creating social distancing circles or boxes in facilities
- Physically removing seats in large auditoriums or seating areas, keeping remaining seats at a safe distance
- Adding vertical seat dividers between seats at larger venues
- Maximizing the use of outdoor space (including parking lots) at facilities
- Adjusting room layouts to accommodate social distancing
- Using thermal scanning/screening for attendees
- Using timed or staggered entry at gatherings
- Using remotely-controlled camera-equipped robots to estimate the number of people at an outdoor space and monitor social distancing
- Maintaining signage about social distancing and promoting protective measures
- Mathematically determining the appropriate number of people per event to keep risk low



TOPICS FOR COUNTY CONSIDERATION

A number of Montgomery County Public Schools' (MCPS) facilities may not be available for public use in the upcoming school year due to MCPS' need to "prioritize (their) building spaces for school-sponsored instructional activities to a greater extent than previously experienced."¹ MCPS anticipates that it will need more time in school facilities to transition staff and students, and to maintain social distancing and other health requirements.² For the remaining school facilities and County facilities that may reopen in the next year, stakeholders may want to consider the following, based on the current and long term trends for the most common public facility uses:

- If childcare is limited at some MCPS schools because of public health requirements, will there be alternatives spaces for providers at other sites?
- For MCPS schools that will allow childcare, will common area childcare rooms (e.g., all-purpose rooms, classrooms, gyms, playgrounds) be cleaned/sanitized at a level that meets the CDC's recommended guidelines for childcare?
- How will childcare providers at schools maintain profitability if the number of childcare slots is limited? (for a further review of childcare policies in the United States during the COVID-19 emergency and recovery, please see OLO's [COVID-19 Recovery Outlook: Childcare](#))
- Will additional MCPS or CUPF staff be required to attend sports leagues/games to enforce proper social distancing and health requirements and ensure that resources are available for users (e.g., hand sanitizer, single-use items, etc.)? Or will public users be required to enforce standards?
- Will users be required to sign a waiver for public use?
- Will users and/or the County be required to have COVID-related insurance?
- Will space be available for camps and non-MCPS class instruction if MCPS is required to use more space to meet social distancing and health requirements?
- Will "defensive design" measures, such as plastic dividers between seats and spaces, be used?
- Can the Community Use of Public Facilities continue being an enterprise fund and profitable if the public facilities are not in use for an extended period of time?

¹ Memo from MCPS Board of Education President Shebra L. Evans and Superintendent of Schools Jack R. Smith to Ramona Bell-Pearson, Director, Community Use of Public Facilities on June 12,2020.

² Ibid.

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