

September 4, 2020

To: David Ige, Governor of the State of Hawai'i
Kirk Caldwell, Mayor of the City and County of Honolulu
Susan Ballard, Chief of the Honolulu Police Department

RE: Open Public Spaces for Recreation

Hawai'i is at a critical juncture in our fight against COVID-19. Our community, which once experienced the lowest COVID-19 rates in the country, has now become a hotspot with community spread rampant and our healthcare system at risk of being overwhelmed.

While we agree that actions must be taken to mitigate the spread of the virus in our community, we believe that these policies must be evidence-based and data-driven for community buy-in and compliance.

The recent executive order that restricts public access to beaches, parks, trails, and community gardens both ignores the evidence on transmission and is unnecessarily punitive towards those doing otherwise lawful and healthy behaviors. Below are reasons why we believe this order may be counterproductive, and even hurt the health of the people:

- **Exercise, the outdoors, fresh air, and sunshine can boost your immune system - critical during a global pandemic.** Research indicates being outdoors and in the sunshine, in addition to mask-wearing, are factors that help to fight against viral infections¹. In addition, regular, moderate-intensity exercise may help the body fight off infections, including COVID-19.
- **Time spent in nature can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression².** Exercise is also a proven mood booster and can help adults reduce stress levels and build emotional resilience. During such uncertain and stressful times, people need an outlet in order to maintain their mental health and well-being.
- **Children need at least 60 minutes per day of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity to maintain good health³.** Stuck in their homes and spending a large amount of time on devices due to virtual learning, children may have a harder time meeting the recommended amount of physical activity.
- **With limited options for outdoor recreation, law-abiding citizens are forced to crowd into the remaining legal spaces.** This makes it harder for people to practice social distancing, one of the key methods to preventing the spread of COVID-19. Evidence points to the fact that the virus spreads more readily in crowds, so it doesn't make sense to have people fill up the sidewalks

¹Hobday, R. A., & Cason, J. W. (2009). The open-air treatment of pandemic influenza. *American journal of public health, 99 Suppl 2*(Suppl 2), S236–S242. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2008.134627>

²Stanford University. (2016, April 09). *Stanford researchers find mental health prescription: Nature*. Retrieved August 31, 2020, from <https://news.stanford.edu/2015/06/30/hiking-mental-health-063015/>

³American Heart Association. (2018, April 18). *Recommendations for Physical Activity in Adults and Kids*. Retrieved August 31, 2020, from https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/fitness/fitness-basics/aha-recs-for-physical-activity-in-adults?gclid=EAlaQobChMIrbbJtu2-6wIVZRitBh2GcQbdEAAYASAAEgL64vD_BwE

while open spaces like beaches and parks remain empty. In addition, vigorous exercise may cause people to expel more respiratory droplets and can further increase the transmission rate of COVID-19 when people are in close proximity, with a high risk of transmission in indoor spaces with poor ventilation⁴.

- **Community gardens are critical resources for physical activity, psychological health, and nutrition** among the very populations that are most impacted by COVID-19 in Hawai'i, such as immigrant and refugee communities⁵. It makes little sense to actively remove people's access to their usual source of healthy food and physical activity during a time of high food insecurity.

EQUITY IMPLICATIONS

As the nation continues to work toward a more equitable society, we urge you to reconsider policies such as this one that clearly place a disparate burden on the same vulnerable communities that are already over-represented in cases and fatalities. Not all residents on O'ahu have the ability to access outdoor space equitably. Many live in apartments without access to a yard. Some neighborhoods do not have sidewalks or have sidewalks that are in poor condition, making them an unsafe alternative to beaches, parks, and trails. Low-income urban apartment renters and public housing residents are reliant on community spaces for food-growing, while more affluent suburban homeowners are able to garden in their private backyards. Community gardens serve as an important source for food and physical activity, as well as an outlet for their emotional well-being. Considering all the health and wellness benefits, we believe that all residents should be able to access these public resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We understand the urgent need to curb the spread of COVID-19 in our communities. We acknowledge that there were good intentions behind these orders. But neither evidence nor example support these policies, therefore we must ask the Governor, Mayor, and Honolulu Police Department to reassess the current restrictions, and focus our energy and resources on opening these public spaces safely. **At minimum, we recommend that parks, beaches, trails, and community gardens are opened for exercise, recreation, and gardening.** The current order has over 40 pages of exemptions and qualifications for essential businesses, yet there are none allowed for these free, publicly accessible open spaces. We think that there should also be nuances in what areas can be reopened and activities that can be resumed at these public open spaces. For example, gathering limits should be imposed to prevent large social gatherings that were occurring before the shutdown. Enforcement should not be directed at individuals that pose little risk of spreading the virus.

It's been over five months since COVID-19 arrived in the islands, and will be with us for a while. During these times, when health is paramount, it's important that we shift our thinking from "holding our breath" to developing sustainable norms that promote resilience and encourage wellness. It's time to reopen the parks, beaches, trails, and community gardens - safely - so all residents can achieve their best health.

⁴ Ries, J. (2020, June 10). Here's Why COVID-19 Can Spread So Easily at Gyms and Fitness Classes. Retrieved August 31, 2020, from

<https://www.healthline.com/health-news/heres-why-covid-19-can-spread-so-easily-at-gyms-and-fitness-classes>
⁵ Hartwig, K. A., & Mason, M. (2016). Community Gardens for Refugee and Immigrant Communities as a Means of Health Promotion. *Journal of community health*, 41(6), 1153–1159. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-016-0195-5>

Sincerely,

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