

Statement of Damien Lehfelddt
Chair of the Board of Directors of USA Fencing
Subcommittee on Delivering on Government Efficiency (DOGE)
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives

May 7, 2025

Thank you, Chairwoman Greene, Ranking Member Stansbury, and other Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Damien Lehfelddt, and I am the Chair of the Board of Directors for USA Fencing.

USA Fencing is the National Governing Body (“NGB”) that oversees and regulates the sport of fencing in the United States, although USA Fencing does not receive any federal funding. It is responsible for the development and selection of our U.S. national fencing teams who represent the United States internationally, including at the Olympics and Paralympics. But USA Fencing does much more than choose Olympians. It supports over 700 affiliated clubs and over 45,000 members from coast to coast. We have members of all ages and all skill levels. Ensuring the safety, fairness, and integrity of the sport for *all* our fencers is a critical part of USA Fencing’s mission.

Like so many other sports, fencing allows competitors to experience the benefits of physical exercise and to develop critical mental skills such as concentration, strategic thinking, and focus. It promotes confidence and respect. And it encourages hard work, training, and discipline. These skills serve fencers well not only on the strip—as we call the field of play—but in the challenges of everyday life.

I have been the grateful recipient of fencing’s benefits for over 30 years—as an “A”-rated competitor, a referee, and a coach. The sport has taught me lessons that I carry with me in all other aspects of my life, and it has helped me excel outside the sport, too.

In September 2023, I was honored to be elected by our membership to the Board of Directors, and, since September 2024, to serve as the Chair of the Board. As a Board member and, now, Chair, it has been my mission to bring fencing’s benefits to as many Americans as possible from all walks of life.

Although it was adopted before I joined the Board, USA Fencing’s transgender participation policy had that same goal. At the same time, USA Fencing recognizes that the subject of transgender participation is complex and requires consideration of the viewpoints of numerous stakeholders. At all times, considerations of safety and fairness are paramount.

I understand that, in developing its transgender participation policy, USA Fencing took stock of those diverse viewpoints and considerations and that it examined the scientific research and literature. It drew on its long experience with mixed-gender competition, where men and women

have safely and fairly competed against each other for decades. And it consulted the practices and policies of other NGBs as well as those of the International Olympic Committee (“IOC”), the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (“USOPC”), and fencing’s international federation (“FIE”).

The policies of the IOC, the USOPC, and the FIE were particularly important. As an NGB, USA Fencing is governed by the Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act. That law includes provisions that forbid NGBs like USA Fencing from adopting participation requirements that are more strict than the requirements of their sport’s international federation. Fencing’s international federation, the FIE, permits transgender participation, consistent with the IOC framework. As a result, USA Fencing understands that it cannot ban transgender participation without the risk of violating the Ted Stevens Act.

In October 2022, USA Fencing ultimately adopted a transgender participation policy that closely tracked those of other NGBs. That policy allows transgender female fencers to compete in the division that corresponds with their gender identity assuming certain conditions are met. Chief among these conditions is that the transgender athlete has undergone hormone therapy for at least a year. USA Fencing requests medical documentation of such therapy and reviews that documentation before allowing transgender fencers to fence in a division that does not correspond to their sex assigned at birth.

That policy has the support of USA Fencing’s Athlete Council. Comprised of male and female representatives for each of fencing’s weapons, the members of the Athlete Council are elected by their peers and are responsible for representing the interests of competing fencers to USA Fencing’s Board of Directors. The current Athlete Council includes multiple Olympic gold medalists, world champions, Olympians, and Paralympians.

I want to emphasize USA Fencing’s commitment to safety and fairness. USA Fencing has long sponsored mixed-gender competitions in which men and women freely compete against each other. Indeed, the majority of USA Fencing tournaments—particularly at the local level—are mixed-gender competitions. That significant body of experience has taught us that mixed-gender competition, in fencing at least, does not pose any significant safety risks above and beyond single-gender fencing competition. The same is true for fencing involving transgender participation.

Additionally, while some attributes more common in men—such as height and physical strength—can certainly confer an advantage in a fencing bout, women more commonly exhibit other advantageous traits—such as flexibility and agility—that can give them a competitive edge when competing against men. Ultimately, fencing is a sport of strategy and technique. More than anything else, those elements will most frequently determine who prevails. And when it comes to strategy and technique, neither sex has any inherent advantage. For that reason, among others, transgender status does not confer any inherent advantage over a cisgender fencer.

Indeed, cisgender women have beaten transgender women in 55% of the bouts for which USA Fencing has data.

I understand that some fencers feel otherwise. The response to Stephanie Turner's bout at the Cherry Blossom Tournament last month only underscores the importance of this issue and the need for reasoned discussion. I was disappointed to learn that Ms. Turner has decided to take a break from fencing. I hope she will reconsider. Fencers like Ms. Turner, who make fencing an integral part of the fabric of their lives, are exactly what USA Fencing seeks to encourage. But I would briefly like to address the rules that led to Ms. Turner being placed on probation. Under the rules, a fencer cannot refuse to compete against another fencer who was qualified under the rules and appropriately entered into the tournament. If a fencer violates this rule, for whatever reason, they are automatically placed on one year of probation. To be clear, USA Fencing has not banned Ms. Turner. She remains free to enter tournaments and to compete.

Finally, USA Fencing recognizes that transgender participation has been the subject of great debate in recent years. USA Fencing welcomes that discussion. There can never be too much conversation about how to make our sport better.

And so, I want to be crystal clear—with both the Subcommittee and with our fencing community—that if the research or the international consensus concerning transgender participation changes, USA Fencing is prepared to amend its participation requirements to reflect those new realities. Similarly, USA Fencing will always abide by its governing statute, the Ted Stevens Act. If Congress amends that statute in ways that affect USA Fencing's transgender participation policy, USA Fencing will of course amend its policies to ensure compliance.

Indeed, USA Fencing has been proactive in this area. After months of discussion, USA Fencing recently adopted a contingent transgender participation policy that will go into effect if Congress amends the Ted Stevens Act to ban transgender participation. It will also take effect if the bodies that regulate fencing and Olympic-Paralympic competition—such as the FIE, the IOC, or the USOPC—amend their regulations to ban transgender participation.

USA Fencing is committed to fairness, safety, and integrity. Those remain the organization's guiding principles. USA Fencing also is committed to complying with its obligations under the law. If the law and evidence around this issue change, so, too, will USA Fencing's policies.

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