

Written Statement of Shellie Pfohl

Before the House Committee on Energy & Commerce: Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Wednesday, May 23, 2018

I. The State of Play

Chairman Harper, Ranking Member DeGette, and other members of this Committee:

Thank you for shedding light on this important topic and for recognizing the U.S. Center for SafeSport's role in protecting athletes from all forms of abuse.

It is my privilege to serve as the President and CEO of the U.S. Center for SafeSport ("the Center"), an independent non-profit in Denver, Colorado dedicated to making athlete well-being the centerpiece of our nation's sports culture through abuse prevention, education and accountability.

Far too many of our nation's athletes have suffered abuse at the hands of perpetrators who take advantage of a sports environment where athletes form an important bond with their coaches, trusting that they have their best interest at heart. Most of the time those relationships prove to be hugely beneficial, as sport at its core builds character, promotes healthy lifestyles and pushes participants in ways that help them develop self-confidence.

We are here today to discuss when sport, and those entrusted to uphold all that's good about participating in organized athletics, betrays its values and causes harm to its participants by exploiting the power imbalances that exist, especially as it pertains to elite sports such as national and international competition. Imagine a scenario where an athlete's dream was to represent Team USA. Thousands of hours of training, blood, sweat and tears invested in his or her sport, only to run across an abusive coach or person in authority who has the power to turn that dream into a nightmare.

That is why the U.S. Center for SafeSport's work is so critical. We believe athletes of all levels deserve to participate in sports that are free from bullying, hazing, sexual misconduct or any form of emotional or physical abuse. Anything less is unacceptable.

Last year, the Center was established as an entity independent from the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) to address these issues with a full solution that includes education, training and professional response and resolution.

We execute our work through a two-pronged approach:

- 1) By providing training and educational services on abuse prevention and policies to sport entities and participants (Education & Outreach Office), and,

2) By serving as the designated organization for individuals to report sexual abuse within the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movements and its 49 National Governing Bodies (NGBs) (Response & Resolution Office).

II. Where we started

On March 3, 2017, we opened our doors as an independent entity, complete with a nine-member board and four full-time employees. The Center started receiving cases on day one.

The SafeSport Code establishes the rules that govern conduct and recognizes the Center's exclusive authority to investigate and resolve allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct within the Olympic and Paralympic Movements, including its 49 national governing bodies. The Center also has discretionary authority over prohibited conduct such as forms of emotional abuse.

The Code specifically outlines and prohibits forms of abuse and misconduct, including sexual, emotional, physical, bullying, harassment and hazing and defines the processes surrounding who must report, how to report and the procedures for investigating and resolving allegations of sexual misconduct under the Response and Resolution Office. Reports can be made through the Center's downloadable app, our website or by calling our hotline. There is no statute of limitations and reports can be made anonymously.

The Center is empowered to issue sanctions for policy violations ranging from a warning to permanent ineligibility i.e. a lifetime ban. Sanctions issued against adults are posted in a publicly searchable database, allowing anyone to find out if a coach, athlete, trainer or other adult within the Movements is sanctioned.

When the Office receives a report that falls within our exclusive authority, or accepts a matter within its discretionary authority, the investigation process is as follows:

Our response and resolution team undertakes a preliminary inquiry to determine if there is (a) reason to believe (b) a Covered Individual (c) violated the Code.

If, after a preliminary inquiry, the Office concludes there is reason to believe a Covered Individual has violated the Code, an investigation is initiated.

III. One Year Update

Congress recently passed the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017. The law, signed in February, expands the list of people who are required to report abuse of a minor to law enforcement and adds tougher penalties for not reporting. The Center was fully supportive of the law and grateful for the bipartisan recognition of our work and the importance of our mission.

Specifically, the section of the bill that amended the Amateur Sports Act of 1978, designates the Center to serve as the independent national safe sport organization, with the responsibility to

develop policies and procedures to prevent the emotional, physical and sexual abuse of amateur athletes. It outlines that the policies and procedures we develop must include:

- A requirement that (a) all adult members of a national governing body or a facility under the jurisdiction of a national governing body or at any event sanctioned by a national governing body, and (b) all adults authorized by such members to interact with an amateur athlete, immediately report an allegation of child abuse of an amateur athlete who is a minor to: (i) the Center, and (ii) to law enforcement
- A mechanism that allows a complainant to easily report child abuse
- Reasonable procedures to limit one-on-one interactions between a minor and an adult
- Procedures to prohibit retaliation
- Oversight procedures, including:
 - Audits, to ensure the policies and procedures are followed correctly
 - Consistent training is offered
- A mechanism for national governing bodies to share reports of suspected child abuse

Today, we are rapidly expanding our team to accommodate for the growing demand and use of our services.

We increased our team from four to 14 full-time employees which includes nine full-time staff supporting response and resolution, including five staff investigators. We plan on bringing on an additional 4-5 investigators this year to accommodate for the increase in reports.

Caseloads vary depending on the complexity and scope of the matter, but on average our staff investigators currently handle around 18 cases each.

We also utilize contract investigators, with approximately 19% of our work outsourced to seven contractors.

This year we brought on a Director of Education and Outreach, who is leading our efforts to provide consultation and educational services on abuse-prevention strategies and policies to our country's sport entities and participants.

We integrate trauma-informed communication into all aspects of our work. This is one of the reasons why we try not to take on previously adjudicated or open matters from the USOC or NGBs, as preventing the re-traumatization of victims is vitally important. The safety and well-being of victims and athletes are our priorities.

Just last month we issued data from our first year that outlines some of the Center's organizational benchmarks.

These metrics from our Response and Resolution Office are critical to establishing a gold standard, monitoring progress, spotting trends, and ensuring our ability to refine best practices and strengthen our prevention efforts.

Know that we never lose sight of the fact that behind these statistics are people – hundreds of men, women, boys and girls dealing with the lingering impacts of abuse.

In our first year, we responded to more than 500 reports and inquiries spanning 38 of the 49 national governing bodies, 70% of which fell into our exclusive authority. As of last week, our total number of reports since March 3, 2017 exceeded 840.

To date, we have issued more than 169 sanctions, including 142 “lifetime bans.”

These numbers indicate the importance of our mission and highlight the need for a trusted place to report sexual misconduct within the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movements.

We know we still have a long way to go. Our data shows that the third most common reason cases are closed is because victims are reluctant to come forward.

It is vitally important to continue building a national sports culture where victims feel safe, supported and empowered to report. Our work will not be done until we prevent misconduct from happening in the first place.

Education and Awareness

One way we can create such a culture is through education and training, which are at the heart of the Center’s abuse-prevention efforts.

In our first year, more than 367,000 people completed our online training, with more coaches, officials and administrators projected to finish it in 2018. Recently, we made our training available to individuals and organizations outside the Olympic and Paralympic Movements. More than 250 sport organizations have expressed interest in accessing this training for their constituents and we heard directly from parents requesting resources and support on how to prevent and respond to abuse.

Part of our comprehensive prevention efforts is to make sure parents and children have the tools they need to identify appropriate and inappropriate behavior from their coaches and trainers.

Parents should be empowered to ask 3 simple questions of sport organizations:

- Do you provide quality training for your coaches, managers, trainers and volunteers to protect the well-being of athletes?
- What policies and best practices do you employ to protect my child and how do you enforce them?
- If there is a concern, where do I report an issue?

Coaches and organizations must be able to answer these questions. If not, the Center can help by offering consultation services. To address this need, we developed a parent toolkit and training to

equip parents with resources. And, in July, the Center will publish sample policies to begin helping sport organizations implement policies and procedures to address topics like: limiting one-on-one interactions, electronic communications, travel, locker room safety and other important, organization-level prevention strategies to safeguard athletes.

We are also proud to announce our Champions Program, which will seek out advocates and ambassadors for our organization. Our “champions” will have the opportunity to become engaged with sports communities by sharing their story, volunteering their time or getting involved in other ways. This will create a network of those in the community – whether they are a current or former athlete or coach, trainer or public figure committed to ending abuse in sports. The more people we involve in creating a culture of transparency, safety and awareness, the closer we are to our goal.

IV. In summary

Promoting the safety and well-being of athletes is at the core of everything we do. And for the Center’s work to be effective, it is imperative that moving forward we keep talking about accountability, education and prevention.

Sports have the power to be an incredibly positive influence on the lives of participants. Our job is to ensure that athletes can enjoy the many benefits of sport, free from all forms of abuse, including sexual misconduct -- it is important work.

I look forward to continuing the discussion on how we can work together to strengthen abuse-prevention efforts through education, training and awareness.