

TESTIMONY OF
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BEFORE THE

CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

TIMEOUT: EVALUATING SAFETY MEASURES IMPLEMENTED TO PROTECT ATHLETES

March 21, 2024

Thank you, Chairman Griffith, Ranking Member Castor, Chairwoman McMorris Rodgers, and Ranking Member Pallone, for inviting the U.S. Center for SafeSport (the Center) to discuss the progress we're making toward changing sport culture as well as the work ahead of us.

When the Center opened our doors seven years ago, we were faced with a daunting task – to undo years of inaction, restore faith in a movement that had failed too many, and finally hold abusers and the organizations that enabled them accountable.

Our work has been a catalyst for culture change:

- Reports of abuse and misconduct have increased by more than 2000% since opening. People are coming forward with their stories because they know the Center is a resource to them. In our first year, we received roughly 300 reports, and last year we received 7,500. To date, the Center has received more than 25,000 reports.
- The names of more than 2,000 individuals are now listed on our Centralized Disciplinary Database (CDD). It is a first-of-its-kind public resource listing individuals who have been restricted or banned from sport, which any parent, local sports league, youth-serving organization, or employer can easily access on the Center's website.
- We've delivered more than 5 million trainings to nearly 2.5 million participants in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement to prepare the sport community to recognize, prevent, and respond to abuse and misconduct.
- The Center has also established policies to prevent abuse and create safe spaces for athletes across the movement. We audit every single NGB to ensure adherence to these rules and this year have expanded audits to reach deeper into grassroots sports.

There was no blueprint on how to begin this work. There was simply a critical mission and a strong will to show up for America's athletes.

And that's what we've done. We continue to hear from athletes who are grateful to have had us in their court.

Whether we:

- banned an abusive coach when law enforcement declined to prosecute;
- collaborated with law enforcement to bring an abuser to justice;
- acted on allegations of abuse disclosed decades later;
- sanctioned individuals, even leaders in sport, who failed to report abuse; or
- stepped in to seek accountability in countless other situations.

We are working every day to keep athletes safe.

We've made great strides, but we are also clear-eyed about why we are here today.

We have heard the voices of participants in our process who said they were let down. We know change is necessary and are ready to make improvements, particularly as it relates to timeliness of investigations, communication, and trauma sensitivity.

Eight months ago, we embarked on a deliberate top-to-bottom review of our Response and Resolution process as well as other aspects of our work, seeking input from athletes and other stakeholders in the movement along the way.

We've identified an initial set of changes, which included a departmental restructure and realignment; redefining the use of Administrative Closures; enforcing policies around consistent communication; assigning staff and resources to improve process navigation, trauma-sensitivity training, and data collection; as well as other process refinements.

Even with these significant process changes, we acknowledge that we must continue to listen and evolve. We pledge to continue to seek athlete input and keep Congress and the public informed.

This is an inflection point for the Center and for the entire U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement. Changes must be made to ensure America's athletes can thrive, from the practice fields in our neighborhoods to the podium in Paris.

We thank the Commission on the State of the U.S. Olympics and Paralympics for their focus on athlete safety, and we agree that improvements must be made to ensure their protection. We also appreciate the Commission's recognition of the Center's essential role in the movement and the progress we've made in standing up a model that has never existed before.

We share the belief that every athlete, regardless of their level of play, deserves to be safe. Our cases involving high profile athletes and coaches grab headlines, but most revolve around grassroots athletes playing for local affiliated organizations (LAOs). A quick scroll of our CDD shows the impact we're making in small towns and big cities throughout the country.

The Commission aptly points out that the fractured youth and grassroots sports landscape leaves athletes vulnerable to abuse, and we agree. That's why the Center is requesting legislative change to establish a definition for national governing bodies that's inclusive of local affiliated organizations and makes clear that NGBs (and thereby the Center) have oversight over such organizations. We also strongly support requiring youth sports organizations to consider the CDD when making hiring and volunteer decisions.

Expediting cases resolutions, while ensuring thoroughness, fairness, and trauma-sensitivity remains a top priority. Increased resources are necessary to our efforts.

We expect reports to continue to grow exponentially, especially as new sports such as flag football and lacrosse have the potential to add more than a million more individuals to the movement. With additional resources, the Center will move forward with setting maximum ceilings on timeframes for case resolution as well as add additional investigative staff to meet the growing demand.

I thank the committee and my fellow witnesses for the opportunity to shed light on the progress we are making as well as the ways we are showing up to change for the better.