

**Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Hearing
“Timeout: Evaluating Safety Measures Implemented to
Protect Athletes.”**

**Chair McMorris Rodgers Opening Statement
March 21, 2024**

WE MUST PROTECT YOUNG ATHLETES

Thank you, Chair Griffith.

Nothing is more important than the safety and well-being of our children.

When we place them in the care of coaches and school administrators, we trust they will be protected.

When they are practicing, training, and competing in the sports they love we expect coaches, trainers, and volunteers, are all keeping our children's safety front and center.

When they are on a field, or in the pool, or on the slopes, their only concern should be on competing and being the best athletes they can be.

It is in these environments that they learn important life lessons of hard work, resiliency, mental fortitude, and teamwork.

That is why I was disgusted and heartbroken, like all my colleagues, after learning of the horrifying abuses inflicted on our young Olympic gymnasts.

What these young women went through is unimaginable and should never happen again.

A BROKEN SYSTEM

These unspeakable acts materialized under a system that failed athletes who were talented and privileged enough to compete in the Olympic and Paralympic games.

I remember when former Olympic athletes came before Congress and shared their stories. The hearing was painful to watch and rocked many of us to our cores. But it was necessary, and I am still grateful to those brave women whose courage is a testament to the mission we have before us today.

Congress set out to make sure that abuses against our young athletes competing in the Olympic system never happens again.

Six years ago, we created the U.S. Center for SafeSport—the independent organization responsible for investigating and resolving reported abuses.

The Center has the sole and exclusive authority to investigate and resolve sexual misconduct claims.

Parents across the country are counting on the Center to protect their child so they can compete in a safe and healthy environment.

Today, SafeSport has the scope and authority to investigate any reports of misconduct for the more than 11 million individuals throughout the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement.¹

It is no small feat—as the Center has seen misconduct and abuse reports increase year over year.

¹ U.S. Center for SafeSport, About Us, <https://uscenterforsafesport.org/about/our-story/>

We must put athlete safety first—which means we must find what is working at the Center and fix the issues that are not.

As the Center itself has itself publicly acknowledged at a hearing on the Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics and Paralympics—some of the criticisms against it are “warranted.”²

The Center has stated that at times its process was QUOTE “not trauma informed, that there was poor communication, or it simply took too long.” It also said it is “committed to continuous quality improvement.”³

These were all issues the Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics and Paralympics documented in its report released earlier this month.

Among the Commission’s other findings, it found the Center needs to improve its trust with athletes, clarify its reporting process, and better maintain its Database.

I welcome its commitment to do better and know this subcommittee is equally invested in seeing SafeSport improve for the benefit of our America’s children and young athletes.

² Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics and Paralympics (Sept. 6, 2023) (statement of Ju’Riese Colon) (“As a neutral and independent organization, not beholden to any sport or individual, we recognize that criticism is inherent to this work; *some of the criticism is warranted.*”). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXLF-Gugdg>; Nancy Armour, *U.S. Center for SafeSport was created to protect athletes from abuse. But is it working?*, USA Today (May 22, 2023) <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/olympics/2023/05/22/safesport-goal-protect-athletes-abuse-criticism/70236315007/>

³ Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics and Paralympics (Sept. 6, 2023) (statement of Ju’Riese Colon) (“As a neutral and independent organization, not beholden to any sport or individual, we recognize that criticism is inherent to this work; *some of the criticism is warranted.*”).

FULL SPEED AHEAD

I ask my colleagues to join into today's hearing to bring SafeSport's outstanding issues to light in a productive way, so that we can find solutions.

To the millions of America's athletes and their parents: we hear you and we will work to make sure that all young athletes—from youth sports to the Olympics—are safe, healthy, and thriving. I look forward to today's discussion and I yield back.