

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement
of**

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Ranking Member Diana DeGette

Examining the Olympic Community's Ability to Protect Athletes from Sexual Abuse

May 23, 2018

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We are here today because there have been warning signs about sexual misconduct in sports for decades. And yet, the systems that were supposed to protect athletes failed.

They failed to stop Larry Nassar from harming more than 250 individuals. They failed to stop a taekwondo coach from abusing three athletes over seven years, a crime for which he eventually was convicted of multiple felonies. And they failed to stop a swim coach from abusing more than a dozen athletes over thirty years. That coach was eventually sentenced to 40 years in prison, but even a lifetime in jail would not erase the damage he has done.

These cases are not anomalies. Far too many athletes from far too many sports have come forward stating that they have been harmed by the very people they trusted to help them achieve their dreams.

Today, I need to know that the Olympic sport community has learned from these survivors, and is using this knowledge to design and implement the new system run by the U.S. Center for SafeSport. I need to be convinced that this new Center has a robust system to investigate and stop bad actors so that situations like these never happen again.

I understand that the U.S. Olympic Committee and the national governing bodies are engaging in their own internal investigations into what went wrong. I hope they are all prepared to explain exactly what they are doing to investigate and learn from past failures so that they can build a system that works.

I also hope that the Center for SafeSport is prepared to explain how these past failures inform its work. This Center does not just investigate misconduct allegations. It also has the extraordinarily important tasks of developing anti-abuse policies and providing education and outreach to promote safe environments for athletes.

I hope that this Center will make real, verifiable progress in creating a culture of safety in sport.

But I must say that I still have considerable concerns about whether SafeSport has sufficient tools and resources and operates with enough independence from the organizations it

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oversees. I want to know that there are formal ongoing assessments of SafeSport's needs and operations to ensure that it can handle its workload effectively.

The Olympic Committee is not operating on a shoestring. Its annual revenue is in the hundreds of millions. I hope we will hear today that if SafeSport needs more money, the U.S. Olympic Committee and governing bodies are prepared to increase substantially the support they provide to the Center.

Similarly, I would like to know how the Center for SafeSport and national governing bodies will ensure that the independent system they have designed is working as intended and meeting the needs of those it is charged with protecting.

For example, will there be ongoing and periodic performance audits to ensure that complaints are properly investigated, that SafeSport's educational component is being implemented, and that its standards are being adopted by the many sports organizations under its jurisdiction? Ongoing audits are critical to evaluating this new system, and I want to know that they will happen and that there are appropriate resources already set aside to make them happen.

I also want to understand that the U.S. Olympic Committee is prepared to enforce consistent anti-abuse policies and procedures across all governing bodies.

For example, some governing bodies post public lists of banned athletes and coaches while others do not. Some governing bodies require SafeSport training for all affiliated individuals, and others only require it for members.

There must be consistency in these policies, and the U.S. Olympic Committee must require the national governing bodies to adopt all changes needed.

Let me conclude by saying that we are not here today to tear down sport. American performances at the Olympics are a source of national pride, and sports benefit children and adults at all levels. But it does us no good for our athletes to stand on a podium if those same athletes have been harmed by the individuals and organizations that helped them get there.

I hope that we are on the road to real change. Today, I want every witness here to convince me that we are, and that the steps taken to date are not just "window dressing." Because every athlete, no matter what sport they play or at what level, deserves to compete in a healthy and safe environment.

Thank you, and I yield back.