

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Ranking Member Kathy Castor
Hearing on “Timeout: Evaluating Safety Measures Implemented to Protect Athletes”

March 21, 2024

Mr. Chairman, you and I have spoken on several occasions about our shared goal to ensure that the Center for SafeSport is fulfilling its critical mission to keep our athletes safe. As the co-chair of the Soccer Caucus, I am strongly committed to expanding opportunities for athletes of all ages to benefit from playing sports. I’m hopeful that this hearing will be a productive and meaningful step toward that goal.

The U.S. Center for SafeSport, authorized by Congress in 2018, receives and responds to reports of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse from participants in sports programs associated with the more than 50 National Governing Bodies and grassroots teams that are part of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic movement. This mandate extends to millions of people – including many children – who deserve the opportunity to play sports in a safe, nurturing environment that allows everyone to participate and thrive.

Unfortunately, we need entities like SafeSport now more than ever. Since its inception, reports of abuse and misconduct made to SafeSport have increased by nearly 2,000%.

SafeSport was created as an independent body to provide victims of abuse with a clear path to report misconduct and a process to hold abusers accountable. However, the Committee has heard serious concerns from stakeholders and just weeks ago from the Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics & Paralympics about whether SafeSport’s processes align with its safety-focused mission. These concerns include: a lack of clarity about SafeSport’s jurisdiction; poor communication with complainants regarding investigation status; the need for trauma-informed, athlete-centered and athlete survivor-centered policies; excessively long investigations; a high percentage of cases closed administratively without clear justification; and uncertainty about the ability of NGBs to establish safety measures concerning individuals involved in active or past SafeSport investigations.

SafeSport has a challenging job to be sure, but it can only succeed if it operates in a way that inspires trust in athletes who are in need of help. And we in Congress want to help it succeed.

I want to acknowledge that we would not be here today, discussing this important issue, without the individuals who bravely came forward with their experiences of abuse to demand better protection not only for themselves, but for all athletes. SafeSport was set up first and foremost to serve and protect the athlete, and if the process is falling short, it must be fixed.

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We must ensure a transparent and accountable system for all stakeholders. That includes a strong, effective Center for SafeSport that has adequate resources to respond to the thousands of reports it receives annually. It also includes responsible and accountable NGB leadership, team coaches, training staff, and anyone who works with our athletes. And it requires everyone involved in the Olympic movement to work together to prevent abuse and respond decisively when it occurs.

Thank you to all our witnesses for being here to share your perspective and expertise. I look forward to a productive conversation today.

I yield back.