

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr.

Hearing on “Timeout: Evaluating Safety Measures Implemented to Protect Athletes”

March 21, 2024

Today’s hearing is about keeping our athletes safe. We should have zero tolerance for misconduct of any kind in sports. The health, dignity, well-being, and performance of millions of athletes across our country depend on the strength of the systems in place to keep athletes safe from abuse.

I hope that today’s hearing brings more awareness to this issue and the improvements that must be made. Whether we’re talking about little kids playing on local soccer teams, high school age gymnasts, Division I college wrestlers, or competitors in Olympic-level track and field events, sports should be a place of safety, respect, and fair competition. Athletes, of all ages, deserve nothing less.

Unfortunately, numerous scandals involving abuse of athletes across sport demonstrate the need for action and constant vigilance. By 2016, several high-profile cases of sexual abuse of minor athletes in the USA Gymnastics, USA Swimming, and USA Taekwondo programs had come to light. We watched as hundreds of USA Gymnasts courageously came forward to detail decades of harrowing abuse by a team doctor, Larry Nassar. Press reports and independent investigations exposed systematic failures to respond to reports of Nassar’s abuse and attempts to cover it up.

Amidst these shocking revelations of abuse and the many ways athletes’ attempts to speak out were overlooked, discredited, and suppressed by the very people whose job it was to protect our athletes, Congress established the U.S. Center for SafeSport in 2017.

Congress gave SafeSport exclusive jurisdiction over allegations of sexual misconduct and discretionary authority to investigate other forms of misconduct, including physical and emotional abuse. It can impose sanctions against perpetrators of all types of abuse. SafeSport is also required to provide education, outreach, training, and annual compliance audits of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) and National Governing Bodies (NGBs) responsible for managing individual sports within the United States. Its creation was a significant step forward in addressing abuse, harassment, and misconduct in sports.

More than 11 million athletes in the Olympic Movement count on SafeSport for their safety but more must be done to improve SafeSport and better protect our nation’s athletes. Athletes and other stakeholders have raised serious concerns about SafeSport’s policies and procedures in investigating and resolving reports of sexual abuse. They have also questioned whether claimants are being sufficiently heard and protected.

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Athletes and NGBs who have reported abuse allegations to SafeSport have also raised concerns about a lack of transparency and poor communication as investigations are ongoing. Investigations can also take years to be resolved and we've heard from stakeholders that very little information is shared, even at the conclusion of a case.

Part of the challenge is that SafeSport is charged with managing a ballooning caseload with insufficient resources. In 2018, SafeSport opened roughly 300 investigations relating to complaints from 38 different NGBs. Four years later, in 2022, SafeSport was receiving an average of more than 100 new reports of alleged misconduct every week.

As the Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics & Paralympics concluded in a report it released earlier this month, SafeSport's funding level is insufficient to meet its mandate to ensure athlete safety. The Commission also found that SafeSport's broad jurisdiction over everything from grassroots youth sports to high-performance Olympic-level athletics inhibits its ability to effectively protect our athletes.

The Commission recommended SafeSport be fully independent from the USOPC and reform its investigation practices, including the way it handles cases where athletes are reluctant to participate.

Athlete trust in SafeSport's process is critical for its success, and we must ensure their safety through an accountable and transparent system. And Congress needs to be clear about what we expect from SafeSport and understand what we can do to improve athlete safety.

SafeSport is a critically important institution that has to succeed. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about how we can come together to improve SafeSport, so that athletes at every level can participate in sports free from abuse and misconduct and focus on their fair play, competition, and high performance.