

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 7, 2024

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

To Whom It May Concern:

We are concerned regarding reports that the U.S. Center for SafeSport (“SafeSport”) is not fully realizing its mission to address and prevent abuse and misconduct in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement. In 2018, Congress authorized SafeSport to serve as the independent national safe sport organization with the charge to safeguard amateur athletes against abuse – including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse – in sports.¹ For the betterment of everyone impacted by SafeSport, it is critical that athletes, parents, families, and all parties that it serves – have the opportunity to provide perspective on SafeSport’s policies. To that end, we write today seeking input regarding the experience of your National Governing Body (“NGB”) in working with SafeSport since its establishment in 2017, as well as to inform the question of whether further Congressional action may be needed to address recent concerns regarding SafeSport.

A well-functioning, independent safe sport organization has never been needed more. Indeed, due to a confluence of factors – namely, a mental health epidemic and increasing reports of athlete abuse – this need is particularly urgent. According to recent reports, student-athletes “continue to report elevated levels of mental health concerns, with rates of mental exhaustion, anxiety, and depression remaining 1.5 to two times higher than pre-pandemic levels.”² At the same time, it is estimated “that 2-8% of young athletes had been sexually abused in some way.”³ Needless to say, these statistics are extremely troubling. SafeSport must have the authority and resources to thoroughly and efficiently investigate and resolve reports of abuse or misconduct affecting individuals in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement at national, regional, and local levels.

Over the last seven years, SafeSport has made progress in helping athletes and families fight abuse in sports, but there is more to be done. Among other concerns, we have heard from NGBs, athletes, and advocates that SafeSport’s processes lack transparency, that investigations too often end in administrative closures, and that, as a result, NGBs may be handcuffed from taking action to protect athletes.⁴ In addition, complainants have cited delays in SafeSport’s processing of allegations and an appeals process that may be overly deferential to respondents, having the effect of forcing complainants to deliver the same testimony repeatedly.⁵ We are grateful for SafeSport’s

¹ 36 U.S.C. 220541(a).

² *Athlete Mental Health 2023: Statistics and Trends*, GITNEX (Sept. 8, 2023), <https://blog.gitnux.com/athlete-mental-health-statistics/>.

³ James Richards, *Facts About Sexual Abuse in Youth Sports*, SLATER VECCHIO LLP (Dec. 2, 2022), <https://www.slatervechio.com/blog/facts-about-sexual-abuse-in-youth-sports/>.

⁴ 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/>.

⁵ *The Future of Olympic and Paralympic Sports in America: Hearing Before the Comm’n on the State of U.S. Olympics and Paralympics* (Sept. 6, 2023), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/642af7d875688d63cfff08be/t/652d51c009badf208cb4d047/1697468867042/Final+Transcript+-+CSUSOP+Public+Hearing+9-6-23.pdf>.

work since its founding in helping to safeguard children, families, and the broader U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement. Still, athletes continue to experience obstacles in reporting abuse and misconduct to SafeSport and in seeing those reports adequately investigated and resolved. More must be done to ensure SafeSport achieves its founding mission.

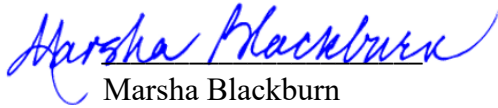
Ultimately, we all share the same goal: to support and protect amateur athletes as they compete and represent America on the international stage. These athletes carry Americans' hopes, dreams, and ideals. They should not *also* be forced to carry the burden and pain of abuse. To that end, we ask that you answer the following questions no later than February 21, 2024.⁶


1. How can Congress better ensure SafeSport's processes for responding to and resolving abuse and misconduct allegations are transparent and effective? Once an allegation is received by SafeSport, in what ways would enhanced information sharing by SafeSport, both prior to and during the pendency of an investigation, benefit your NGB?
2. In your experience, what is the average duration of a SafeSport investigation and adjudication? Are there straightforward ways, in your view, to expedite these processes?
3. How does SafeSport's practice of administratively closing many matters impact your NGB's ability to act on allegations of abuse? Are there instances where you have been unable to take action to protect athletes following the administrative closure of a matter?
4. We have heard troubling reports that SafeSport's appeals process is not transparent, may be overly deferential to respondents, and can force complainants to repeatedly deliver the same testimony. How can Congress add clarity and transparency to this process?
5. In your experience, are mental health professionals and trauma experts adequately incorporated into the SafeSport investigative and adjudicative process? If not, how can Congress address this?
6. A growing number of alleged abuses are not only being committed by coaches and staff, but by athletes as well. What can Congress do to combat this increasingly prevalent issue?
7. How can Congress assist SafeSport in preventing the abuse of athletes with disabilities?
8. In your view, how effective are current SafeSport training materials? How can SafeSport act to prevent abuse more effectively in the first instance?
9. In what other ways can Congress empower SafeSport to safeguard amateur athletes against abuse, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, in sports? Are reforms needed to SafeSport's Code to make the Center operate more effectively?

⁶ It is important to note that any personal information of any survivor should be redacted, as it is critical to ensure that their privacy is protected.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,


Marsha Blackburn
United States Senator


Gary Peters
United States Senator