

Testimony of Dionne Koller
Co-Chair, Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics & Paralympics

Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Consumer Protection,
Product Safety, & Data Security

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Thank you, Chairman Hickenlooper and Ranking Member Blackburn. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today in the capacity as Co-Chair of the recent bipartisan Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics and Paralympics.

As the Subcommittee is aware, our Commission delivered its final report to Congress on March 1, completing a year-long, intensive study and having developed a set of policy recommendations to Congress, the states, and stakeholders in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic movement. I was proud to lead this Commission with my Co-Chair, Han Xiao, and work closely with commissioners appointed by the Chair and Ranking Member of the Senate Commerce Committee as well as the Chair and Ranking Member of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce. These commissioners included both Olympians and Paralympians, experts on sports oversight and governance, and those with a long history of engagement on issues such as athletes' safety and representation.

During the course of our study, our Commission requested and reviewed tens of thousands of documents from the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee, the U.S. Center for SafeSport, and governing bodies. We interviewed hundreds of individual participants in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic movement – a movement that includes the millions of Americans who participate every day in youth and grassroots sports in their communities. Our Commission also conducted surveys and convened focus groups, and we held a public hearing with expert witnesses and movement leaders here on Capitol Hill in September, including Ms. Colón, Ms. French, and Mr. Kelleher.

In short, our Commission carried out the most comprehensive analysis of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic movement and its governance ever undertaken. Ours was the first independent, governmental, and bipartisan commission tasked with evaluating this movement broadly in over four decades. I'm proud that we delivered fully on the mission with which Congress entrusted us.

I urge all of the members of this Committee – and, indeed, every legislator in Congress – to read through our final report. The findings we share demonstrate the urgent need for systemic reforms if our nation is to make movement sports safer, more equitably accessible, and better accountable to the public it serves. Our recommendations were the product of consensus among both Republican and Democratic appointees, and I am encouraged by the very positive feedback we've received from members of Congress on both sides of the aisle since the report's release. Sports continue to bring Americans of all ages together, and it is gratifying to see a concern for athletes' safety, access, and well-being reflected in true bipartisanship here on Capitol Hill.

One of the key takeaways from our report, which I'll highlight today, is that addressing just one challenge alone has proven to be a losing strategy when it comes to reforming this movement and making it safer for athletes. Broad, systemic change is needed, not piecemeal adjustments that do not address the root causes of the issues we see coming up over and over again. Much of the attention, understandably, has been on changes needed to the structure and practices of the U.S. Center for SafeSport. However, addressing SafeSport by itself – without adopting other major recommendations in our final report – is a recipe for further problems. That's because safety and athletes' well-being within the movement depend on more than just SafeSport.

I hope all of you will read carefully through all our recommendations, particularly ending the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee's unworkable dual mandate, which has exacerbated athlete-safety concerns. Also central to this effort must be the creation of an independent body representing high-performance athletes within the system, with its own source of funding and a statutory mission to advocate solely on these athletes' behalf. We must do more to ensure that Paralympians and those participating in para sports at all levels are treated equally, and we identified ways to improve the Olympic and Paralympic host-city bid process to advantage the United States. Additionally, it will be critical for Congress to establish a stronger method of public oversight, so problems do not fester and so movement institutions are more accountable to Congress and the American people.

I am including a copy of our report's Summary of Findings and Recommendations along with my testimony and ask that it be included in the hearing record. Again, I want to thank the Subcommittee for its attention to these important issues. I appreciated the opportunity to serve as the Commission's Co-Chair and one of the Senate Commerce Committee's appointees. I look forward to answering any questions you might have about our final report, our findings, and our recommendations.