



**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD FROM
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THE ARMY OF SURVIVORS
SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSUMER PROTECTION, PRODUCT SAFETY, AND DATA SECURITY
PROMOTING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT IN U.S. ATHLETICS HEARING
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Thank you to Chairman Hickenlooper, Ranking Member Blackburn, and the other Subcommittee Members for inviting me to speak today to offer my perspective on safety in sports as an athlete and survivor, and specifically, the effectiveness of the U.S. Center on SafeSport. I deeply appreciate the Committee's time. My name is Grace French, and I am the Founder and President of The Army of Survivors (TAOS), a nonprofit focused on creating awareness, accountability, and transparency around the issue of abuse in sport through our pillars of advocacy, education, and resources.

I began doing this work in 2018 when I came forward about the abuse I had experienced at the hands of the now infamous and imprisoned US Gymnastics and Michigan State University doctor. I was abused from the ages of 12-19. It was only after I came forward that I found out that the first report to the University of his abuse was in 1997 when I was two years old.

Another report to the University happened in 2014, as I was being abused. In 2015, USA Gymnastics, the USOPC, Michigan State University, and the FBI knew he was sexually assaulting people, but failed to stop him or tell his patients. So, I continued to see him for my injuries. I faced abuse even after it had been reported because the institutions that were put in place to protect me failed to do so.

I did not know as a young athlete how vulnerable I was to abuse. Athletes face extreme vulnerability to sexual abuse because of their complex and sometimes isolating schedules, the intimate nature of coaching and development of sporting skills, the increased physical care and scrutiny, the pressures, and stressors of athletic competition, as well as concerns about career opportunities in a finite timeframe. I was focused on being the best athlete I could be and trusting the coaches, doctors, and staff that supported me.



What I failed to predict when becoming public with my story was that the institutions that I had trusted with my safety wouldn't listen to us, believe us, nor make necessary changes to prevent this from happening again. Instead of doing the right thing, they prioritized their brand, image, and dollars over the victims of their failures who had given so much to speak out in the hope of change. The institutions failed to be transparent or trauma-informed. And there was no support from my sport or sports-connected organizations.

Through all of this trauma, and re-traumatization through the failures of the institutions to respond in a trauma-informed way, the silver lining was that I became a part of a group of like-minded people. The community that was formed through abuse found healing in advocating for change, centering and leading with our lived experience, and creating a world where no one would have to experience what we did. In the summer of 2018, 40 of us came together to create a shared vision for the future because we knew that we were not alone in our experience. And from that, The Army of Survivors was formed to turn our pain to power.

Since then, our organization has expanded rapidly, and we have met countless survivors of abuse in sport from across the nation and the world. We are in the process of piloting a curriculum for coaches, Compassionate Coach™. To support national advocacy efforts, we have developed a trauma-informed survivor policy advocacy training to empower survivors to use their voices to influence change. We've worked every day since our founding to realize our shared vision: a world where athletes can train and compete without violence.

Congress has responded with new laws after the abuse among athletes came to light, but we have continued to hear from many athlete survivors of all ages, genders, and sports over the past two years that more needs to be done. It is clear to me that SafeSport needs further reforms and support to fulfill its mandate to create lasting change to prevent and address sexual, physical, and emotional abuse of athletes.

Starting in May 2022, TAOS conducted a series of interviews with a diverse group of athletes across several different sports, genders, ages, and levels of competition regarding their experiences with reporting sexual assault. All of these survivors tried to work through SafeSport's process. Since the initial research and listening sessions, TAOS has remained an informal watchdog for SafeSport, and we still receive calls on a weekly, if not daily basis, from survivors who are struggling or have been harmed by the SafeSport process. Survivors trust us with their stories, and they are trusting us to help shepherd reforms.

We've gathered their testimony and found some common disturbing themes. A full report of our findings is available and will be submitted with my comments. Of most concern to me is the



re-traumatization that survivors of sexual abuse have been subject to in SafeSport's process. Survivors have been ignored, silenced through do not disclose agreements, had investigations that lingered for years, had no notice of actions taken by SafeSport that could put them at risk, have little to no confidence in the SafeSport investigation process, are subject to unchecked or interrupted retaliation, and have not been supported through a trauma-informed approach.

Through these discussions with athlete survivors and witnesses of sexual abuse in sports regarding how their cases were handled, it is clear more reforms and oversight are needed to ensure accountability of individuals and institutions, best practices on trauma-informed training and support are used, and more transparency is created. There is no excuse for the victim-blaming, and minimizing statements that SafeSport staff continue to make to survivors and witnesses. SafeSport will never gain public trust if its processes and staff are belittling and retraumatizing athletes.

The report of the Commission on the State of the U.S. Olympics and Paralympics also spells out there is a need for systemic reforms in SafeSport and Congressional action is needed to steward these changes. SafeSport needs direction to incorporate more collaborative and trauma-informed practices and needs to build transparency, trust, and accountability in the field of ending abuse in sports.

SafeSport does not have the trust and respect of athletes, coaches, families, and other stakeholders in sport. For some athletes, reporting to the U.S. Center for SafeSport can be a first step in their journey to healing and accountability, but from our experience, no athlete has seen the Center that way. If SafeSport is truly too important to fail, it needs to commit to systemic changes in how it functions and how it sees its work.

SafeSport must increase the transparency of its processes and improve communication. The survivors we talked to were all frustrated with SafeSport's process and felt there was no transparency of process nor was there good communication about their cases and investigations. Survivors have no information as to how SafeSport applies the preponderance of the evidence standard and are left in the dark when cases are delayed due to criminal legal cases or defensive legal strategies. One survivor shared a long history of consistent miscommunication from SafeSport about her case. She requested advanced notice about when a decision was going to be made because she knew that decision would have mental health impacts on her and her family. She also was planning a major vacation and wanted to avoid the negative impact of inevitable re-traumatization brought on by having to read the entirety of a 600-page report in one sitting. A warning by the center would give her enough time to mentally process before leaving for time with her loved ones. Not only did SafeSport fail to provide any

warning that the case was being closed, but they did not take into account her requests for notice or consider the impact on her life and her family. Another example is at the end of 2022, SafeSport suddenly administratively closed what appeared to be hundreds of cases. TAOS was flooded with calls from survivors because of the sudden closures and the fact that SafeSport closed these cases before shutting down for a winter break, leaving no one available to respond to survivor concerns or questions. These survivor accounts demonstrate an unknown and arbitrary process at SafeSport that does not consider the traumatic impact the Center itself has on survivors. There is no need for arbitrary timelines and secrecy in the SafeSport process.

A trauma-informed systems approach is needed within SafeSport. SafeSport must understand that a trauma-informed approach is not biased; it is simply an approach that recognizes the impact of trauma and takes steps to mitigate the impact of re-traumatization. The impact of trauma on a person’s body, mind, and mental health is widely scientifically researched¹. Any organization working with people who have been traumatized needs to center this approach and acknowledge this interconnection. The role of SafeSport is too important to fail in its intended mission to address sexual, physical, and emotional abuse of athletes—it cannot fulfill its mission without being trauma-informed, much like law enforcement and education systems. SafeSport needs to understand that a trauma-informed systems approach is bigger than who is hired as an investigator—it goes to the heart and founding principles of how the Center functions and establishes its protocols. SafeSport needs a higher level and more comprehensive understanding of the impact of trauma and trauma-informed principles. All SafeSport staff should understand trauma-informed care and approaches. Staff also must understand the nuance and special vulnerabilities for abuse in sport—such as athlete isolation from friends and family, the stress and competitive nature of elite sports, and the coercive power and control tactics those in power use to gain and sustain abuse. SafeSport must build meaningful relationships with others in the work to end sexual violence in sport and needs a better understanding of the advocacy work and research that already exists to guide best practices.

Require SafeSport to prioritize prevention of abuse. We need to also center strategies to prevent these abuses in the first place. We should support innovative prevention programs and community-level prevention strategies that consider the complex and intersectional lens of abuse in sports and sexual abuse specifically. The U.S. Center on SafeSport has not been supportive or a place of trust for athletes up to this point. SafeSport must rebuild trust with athletes and invest in prevention. Again, collaboration with outside expertise, which TAOS has offered, and which others stand ready to provide, is central to long-lasting improvements. Further, the final report of the Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics and Paralympics

¹ See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>



released earlier this month highlighted the need to change the culture of coaching in sports. To this end TAOS is launching a coaching curriculum, Compassionate Coach™, that was developed by TAOS in partnership with athletes and athlete survivors of abuse as well as leading experts in institutional courage, trauma-informed care, and player-centered coaching. This 8-week virtual interactive course educates coaches on understanding trauma, how it affects child athletes, how to recognize it, and how to appropriately adjust their coaching style to create a safe and secure sporting environment. By coaching in a trauma-informed way, coaches can provide a safe and secure environment for athletes who have experienced trauma to continue training without the risk of re-traumatization. Coaches will also be able to more easily identify athletes who may have experienced trauma and learn how to respond if they see abuse themselves.

Training provided by SafeSport must be impactful. These examples of frustration extend to the Center's reputation in the sports world. We have heard that coaches, athletes, and families/parents are concerned that the training they provide is not tailored to sports and does not include a prevention approach or trauma-informed lens. General education is not enough. Trainings must be relevant to their audiences, accessible, and engage participants in critical thinking about what is acceptable behavior in sports. Several participants of our coaching curriculum, Compassionate Coach™, have shared that they have no trust in SafeSport's training materials and that SafeSport trainings are not impactful nor informed by the experiences of survivors of abuse in sport. Many coaches shared with us that SafeSport trainings are seen as a joke. The virtual training is ineffectual. It allows users to multi-task and simply click through the slides to receive the 'checkbox certification.' The lack of accountability within this model encourages no self-reflection and leads to well-intended coaches reporting to us that they struggle to have thoughtful conversations about how athletes are treated in their sport because SafeSport's trainings are "unhelpful, ineffective, and a waste of time."

SafeSport should collaborate with survivors and experts. The U.S. Center for SafeSport has not engaged with organizations, like The Army of Survivors or others as far as we know, to bring a meaningful trauma-informed approach to their work and philosophy. We have tried to open channels of communication several times, only to be largely ignored. After a year and a half of silence, only in the last few weeks has SafeSport reached back out for TAOS expertise without meaningfully responding to our brief of concerns and recommendations from survivors. While we understand the overwhelming number of cases coming to SafeSport and are not advocating for abolishing the Center, serious reforms enforced by Congress seem necessary at this point. The outreach by SafeSport has been too little and too late for the survivors harmed through the SafeSport process.



SafeSport must connect survivors to mental health resources and allow for support from victims' advocates. The Center has also failed to connect survivors with meaningful mental health/suicide prevention support and resources. It seems that the Center does not have a working network of crisis support beyond reaching out to national hotlines. We have stories of athletes being directed by the Center to just call 1-800 suicide prevention hotline numbers and have no follow-up to their case. One male survivor shared on a call with a SafeSport investigator that they were suicidal. On the same day, his case was closed and the only follow-up that was given was an email with a website and suicide hotline. Other survivors have shared that case management is failing or non-existent, with lengthy delays in communication and little to no understanding of how the sport subject to investigation functions. Another burden is on the survivor to explain the workings and conflicts of interest within their sport to SafeSport investigators and case managers. A survivor shared that they were expected to teach the investigator how their sport worked and that if they had not proactively brought up conflicts and safety issues, they would have been missed or ignored.

SafeSport should improve communication and understanding of administrative closing of cases. Further, the Center's arbitrary closing of cases with no further information given to survivors, and their holding jurisdiction of cases they administratively close -- which prevents non-governmental sports organizations from investigating and providing accountability and intervention -- are just further examples of how SafeSport's systems re-traumatize and harm. Again, the lack of transparency and clarity breaks trust and has created a system that is not taken seriously.

TAOS's mission is to prevent what happened to me from happening to others. To support the healing of survivors like me. To hold the institutions that fail children accountable. We see the U.S. Center for SafeSport as one of those institutions that is critical in responding to and preventing abuse. And we know there are necessary changes that the Center must make.

TAOS encourages the Committee to support legislation to make these reforms modeled after The Safer Sports for Athletes Act of 2024, expected to be introduced shortly in the House. The bill is intended to create safer sports for athletes through key revisions that would improve the reporting process for athlete survivors and revise training guidelines at SafeSport.

Also, and importantly, this new legislation starts to focus some efforts and resources on prevention strategies--something that appears to be woefully ignored by the Center. We need to center strategies to prevent these abuses in the first place. We should consider the unique vulnerabilities of athletes. I would ask that the Committee consider supporting legislative action of the principles included in The Safer Sports for Athletes Act for this reform.



TAOS' work has an international reach within the field of athlete safeguarding and as a result, we are often called upon by colleagues outside of the U.S. to ask about the U.S. Center for SafeSport's effectiveness as their country considers a similar system. Sadly, we are unable to recommend the system and in turn, have concerns for others that are not aware of the Center's weaknesses. We wish the U.S. model were the model for the world, but sadly we are not and instead, our system is creating harm and should not be replicated worldwide.

Recently, a survivor reached out to TAOS about an ongoing investigation where widespread and unchecked retaliation had isolated and alienated the survivor from her personal and professional community. She reported a long history of sexual abuse in sport by a peer. The investigation process was grueling, and she felt that no one believed her. When ultimately the abuser was held accountable and banned from the sport, she was surprised because she felt so unseen and unheard by the investigation process. When a survivor comes forward, SafeSport must be able to respond in a respectful and trauma-informed way. If the Center is not required to make changes, there is little hope that people experiencing abuse will feel safe reporting.

As an athlete and athlete-survivor founded and led organization that implements trauma-informed practices, The Army of Survivors will continue to work toward a safer future for athletes. We hope that through your leadership, policy change can become trauma-informed, survivor-centered, and timely. All the children in sports are watching and all the survivors of abuse in sport are waiting. Thank you for your time.