

Chairman Lang and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to address this panel on the issue of sports officials' assault.

I also want to thank my Representative Bill Roemer and Senator Kristina Roegner as they were the ones willing to sit down with us initially, listen to our issue and then bring it forward to this body. It is refreshing to know that our democracy still works when you respectfully come before your political leaders with an issue, present solutions and work towards a common goal to be a part of the solution.

At our first meeting with Senator Roegner, she asked me why I was personally a proponent of this legislation. In an indirect way, I believe she was asking me if I have been assaulted in such a way that this law would have protected me.

As I thought about the answer to this question, I had flashbacks to conversations with fellow officials who have had much more horrific situations than I did. I have submitted over 4 dozen written statements to Chairman Lang of which I'd like to highlight some here as these individuals were not able to attend today. As I highlight these, please note that these accounts are from all sports, boys and girls, at all levels of competition:

- Mark Mangiona, during a freshman lacrosse game was physically assaulted by a parent, pressed charges and only saw a light reprimand from the courts for the convicted spectator.
- Tim Donovan, a 35 year old baseball, softball and football referee who had a coach and then players throw baseballs at him after making a call that they didn't agree with.
- Frank Micale, a 29 year basketball referee whose face was spit on by a high school coach for making a call that the coach didn't agree with.
- Allen Davisson, a Stark County Athletic Director that witnessed a basketball coach throw a chair across the floor at a referee.
- Doug Billerman, a 23 year veteran official, witnessed 2 occasions where fellow officials were grabbed by the jersey and physically assaulted while in the bathroom between games.
- Ray Parker (video), a 15 year baseball and basketball official who ducked just in time to miss a punch through at his head after an ejected teenager ran out from the locker room in the middle of a game.

The one that takes the cake was the phone call with the mother of a 16 year old daughter, who was doing a U12 girls softball game and had 2 male coaches corner her in the dugout after the game, screaming at her to where she feared for her life.

It's not uncommon to see news about assault on sports official. Take the recent incident last week in Lakewood, Colorado where the 13 year old baseball umpire abandoned a U7 boy's game due to a brawl by the opposing spectators and coaches. Take also the Kentucky basketball referee that was sucker punched by a Michigan coach this past winter at an AAU tournament who is now dealing with brain trauma and multiple surgeries.

I could go on about these personal assaults but for the sake of time, I encourage you to read the rest of the testimonies as I'm certain there is one from each of your respective districts.

For me as a licensed soccer referee instructor, mentoring coordinator and 9 year veteran of soccer refereeing, this legislation is about the future of youth sports. Although I've had only one verbal threat on my life, I've had too many new referees tell me that they quit because of the threats that they had received. This issue starts at the youngest of organized youth games..age 8-9. Spectators say and act how they want with no fear of having any consequences for their actions. As the level and age of competition increases, the verbal assaults turn into threats and then escalate to physical violence against the official.

According to research by the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO) Referee Magazine and the National Federation of High School Sports (NFHS) we lose 70% - 80% of our newly trained officials within 2-3 years. Imagine trying to run any organization with that kind of turnover. Their research also tells us that spectator and coach abuse is cited as the top reason why sports officials quit. This is what lead my own 16 year old daughter to quit after having to eject a 40 year old male coach while doing a U12 girls game on a Sunday afternoon. Further NASO research tells us that there are more officials over the age of 60 than there are under the age of 30, which means that we don't have a stable full of officials to pull us through.

From a national perspective, there are 21 states that already have similar legislation (<https://www.naso.org/resources/legislation/state-legislation/>). From Ohio's perspective, our code already offers felony consequences for assault on those serving in the public sector such as teachers, school administrators, bus drivers (ORC 2903.12(d)). Unfortunately, the sports official is not covered under this statute.

As an example of why this legislation should be implemented, the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) views their sports events as an "extension of the classroom." The NFHS sees the referee's participation in the sporting event "as a vital role in the educational process of student athletes." Therefore, it follows that the sports official, who is the center of controversy, should be afforded the same protection as the bus driver who brought them to the game, the coach, athletic trainer and site administrator who all participate in the event.

From a membership perspective we are at all-time lows with the number of licensed sports officials. From a game assigner's perspective, this makes it difficult to cover all of the games that are being played, especially when you consider that there are more sports being played now than the previous 5-10 years. Just think back to your own high school and you will see more sports are being played now compared to when you were there. This referee shortage is causing the assigners to cover the higher level games first and then triage the next tier of games. In other words, some games will have only 1 referee where they should have 3. Newer referees are being asked to take games that should be assigned to veteran referees due to the level of the competition. Lastly, the youngest of age groups will be going without any referee at all. This is not the situation of what we will face in the future, but a reality we are facing now.

To those that say sports officials should have thicker skin I say that we accept the fact that when we whistle for a foul there is a good chance that 50% of the crowd agrees and 50% don't. This legislation is about what happens next. It's to protect us from the escalating number of spectators and some coaches that can't control their emotions and take out their frustrations on the sports official.

It is for the preservation of youth sports and the need for a safer workplace environment for our current sports officials' membership that I ask you to pass this legislation. If any of my testimony is in doubt, I would respectfully ask that you go to a competitive youth sporting event and just imagine yourself as the parent, spouse or child of the sports official and you will quickly understand our need for the protection that this law will give to us.

Respectfully Submitted,

Andy Milligan

Proponent