

Opening Statement of the Honorable Lee Terry
Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade
Hearing on “Improving Sports Safety: A Multifaceted Approach”
March 13, 2014

(As Prepared for Delivery)

Every day, parents make choices about whether or not to let their daughter play soccer or what kind of mouthpiece to buy their son for his first day of Pop Warner football. Unfortunately, it seems like every day, we hear about how participation in certain sports can be dangerous. It's easy to understand how what parents see in the news inevitably affects youth participation in sports. Case in point; earlier this year; President Obama said publicly that if he had a son, he wouldn't let him play pro football.

We want to better understand the innovations being made by sports leagues, equipment manufacturers and the medical community to make all sports safer.

One clear example is the NHL, which has been working hand-in-hand with the NHLPA to make hockey safer. Dating back to 1997, the NHL recognized the dangers of head injuries and took the pro-active step of forming a Joint Concussion Committee. Additionally, the NHL also established a Department of Player Safety at its headquarters, the first of its kind for any of the professional leagues.

USA Hockey and USA Football, two organizations that help oversee youth sports in the U.S., have followed the lead of their professional counterparts by employing a multi-pronged approach to making participation safer. USA Hockey now requires coaches to complete an online education module specific to the age group they are coaching that includes safety information, concussion education and proper techniques. USA Football, which is endowed by the generosity of the NFL and NFLPA, was the first national governing body for any sport to participate in the CDC's "Heads Up Concussion in Youth Sports" initiative and has also engaged in providing youth with non-tackling alternatives to develop their skills. Additionally, USA Football's "Heads Up Football" program encompasses six elements meant to make youth football safer, including coach education and concussion recognition.

Proactive actions like the ones I just mentioned are exactly what parents need in order to be assured that everything possible is being done to keep their child safe while they are on the field or the ice.

Researchers have also been hard at work to improve the tools that coaches and doctors have at their disposal when treating an athlete. For example, Dr. Dennis Molfese, who runs the University of Nebraska's Center for Brain, Biology and Behavior, located inside the Husker's football stadium, has been developing an MRI Machine that can be used on game day to assess a head injury. This would allow the medical staff to determine if a player has suffered a concussion, how severe the injury is, and if that player is able to return to the game. Equipment manufacturers are also using technology to make innovative changes to helmets, mouth guards, footwear and other equipment – all in order to reduce injuries.

I feel confident saying that given recent rule changes, and the rate which technology is advancing, playing a contact sport today is likely safer than it has been in the past. However, we must accept that there is no "silver bullet." No helmet or pad is going to prevent 100 percent of the injuries 100 percent of the time.

This is why we need to consider a multi-pronged approach aimed at keeping our kids safer while still promoting youth participation in sports. This involves listening to how leaders like the NFL, NHL, youth leagues and top-tier University researchers are partnering to make progress towards making sports safer. These are the types of innovations and paradigm shifts needed to give parents the assurance that all possible steps are being taken to improve the safety of their child on the field.

###