



Testimony of
Eric L. Olsen
Commonwealth's Attorney
Stafford County, Virginia

Protecting Young Athletes from Sexual Abuse

Senate Committee on the Judiciary

Tuesday, March 28, 2017

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Feinstein, members of the committee:

My name is Eric Olsen and I am the District Attorney in Stafford County, Virginia, a county of 135,000 residents 40 miles South of Washington, D.C. In Virginia, prosecutors are called Commonwealth's Attorneys and after 22 years as an assistant I was elected as Stafford's Commonwealth's Attorney in 2011. I have been on the Board of Directors of the National District Attorneys Association (NDAA) since 2008 and I am the chairman of our Training and Education Committee.

I was hired in 1989 to be Stafford's prosecutor for child abuse and domestic violence cases. Back then, child sexual abuse and exploitation was often under-reported and, frequently, not investigated. Almost 30 years ago my former boss had the foresight to see that specialization was the key to bringing the criminal justice system's dark secret into the open. The secret that children were being abused and exploited and we were not doing enough about it.

The 90's was a watershed decade in child protection. State Legislatures and the U.S. Congress enacted significant measures aimed at both protecting children from exploitation and abuse and giving the law enforcement community the tools and resources to detect abuse and hold offenders accountable. It was the perfect combination of state and federal cooperation.

That decade saw:

- 1) The enactment of the Violence against Women Act (1994)
- 2) The establishment of the first Child Advocacy Centers in cities across the country
- 3) The enactment of mandatory reporting laws, which require teachers, professionals, and caregivers to report suspected abuse

4) The establishment of the multidisciplinary approach to child abuse investigations

These advances completely changed our approach to prevention, investigation, and prosecution of child sexual abuse, and to a large extent, the catalyst for that change was this body – The U.S. Congress.

Why is that the case? How do you explain the fact that in a system that thrives on partisanship, a deliberative body is able to enact legislation and steer a system of 50 different philosophies in a single direction?

The answer it seems is quite simple. In order to live up to our role as the world's greatest democracy – we must protect our children.

That universal truth has guided this body for generations, and over the last 30 years the strides taken, the laws enacted and the funding provided has brought protection and comfort to countless children.

Unfortunately, that success has been tempered with challenges of a growing population, and advancements in technology. The advent of digital photography and the Internet brought child exploitation to the computer screen and, in my opinion, has been responsible for an increase in incidents of child sexual abuse. This does not suggest that I am critical of the advances that we have made, I merely point out that as we constantly seek ways to protect children, new challenges arise.

Today let me address one challenge that brings us all together – the sexual abuse scandal surrounding USA Gymnastics. If proven true, the reports of abuse and exploitation have a familiar ring – individuals associated with a major sports entity - entrusted by parents for the care and nurturing of their children – who then go on to abuse that trust. This is not the first time this has happened and, as painful as it is to admit, it

will likely not be the last. But just as past scandals have shown, and just as child protective service workers, detectives, and prosecutors have observed for decades, as secretive as child sexual abuse is, in so many cases, adults see, adults hear, adults know. Yet, even today, in too many cases a report is not made.

I encourage this body to consider and enact whatever legislation can address this code of silence that all too often seems to descend when adults hear of child sexual abuse. Stated simply - we cannot combat this type of exploitation if we don't know about it.

In terms of specific legislation, NDAA has reviewed, and is supportive of, Ranking Member Feinstein's bill, the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse Act of 2017. There is one suggestion that I would like to offer related to this legislation.

From the efforts of this congress since the enactment of the Violence against Women Act, local child protection services and local law enforcement have been given the tools to immediately respond to reports of child abuse. In all accredited agencies, a comprehensive and multi-disciplinary approach is taken the minute a report of suspected abuse is received. I encourage you to rely on existing systems in many states across the country and require any federal system of mandatory reporting to include an immediate report to local authorities. We are well positioned to respond in the way the public expects us to respond.

I also would like to bring to your attention a report issued in March 2016 by the Commission to End Child Abuse Neglect and Fatalities (CECANF), a commission that was created with the passage of the Protect our Kids Act of 2012. This commission held numerous hearings in the field to understand how we can protect children more effectively and try to achieve a goal we all share: reducing child abuse neglect and

fatalities. The overarching finding of that Commission was that in fact, we can prevent these incidents from happening.

A couple of recommendations in the Commission's report address real-time information sharing between law enforcement agencies and Child Protective Services as well as expanding the use of the multidisciplinary approach to investigating child abuse neglect and fatalities. This may be an area in which this Committee, along with the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, could work to achieve mutual goals in a collaborative manner.

Overall, prosecutors at the state and local level handle the bulk of caseloads for a variety of cases, and child exploitation and abuse are no exception. Our local prosecutors are an integral part of child advocacy centers and the multidisciplinary approach to child abuse investigations. They participate in intelligence gathering and handling of cases generated as a result of Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) task forces. They partner with local organizations in our communities to ensure adequate services are available for children who have been taken advantage of and exploited. That is all to say that prosecutors have a central role in this topic and process. This year, the ICAC Task Force program will need to be reauthorized and we hope to work with some members of this committee looking at that issue to advance it forward.

I thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee and I assure you that those of us on the front lines of child protection are prepared to assist you in any way that we can to prevent the exploitation and abuse of our athletes. We will protect, we will investigate and, if the unspeakable occurs, we will hold the offenders accountable.