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Senate

Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein

Passage of the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act

Mrs. FEINSTEIN.
Mr. President, nearly a year ago I met with six gymnasts. All of these young women were world class athletes. All of them had put their faith in USA Gymnastics. And all of them were sexually abused by an adult who had earned their trust.

It was one of the most difficult meetings I've held as a senator. Listening to their stories of abuse and how the system let them down left me with equal parts sadness and rage.

These young women weren't telling me their stories to get legislation passed, but that afternoon I promised them I'd do all I could to make sure no one else ever experienced the agony that they had.

And Mr. President, I'm proud that later today the Senate will come together and pass the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act in order to send it to the President's desk.

This bill is intended to protect young athletes who participate in amateur sports from the sexual abuse that these gymnasts had to suffer.

In the House, Representative Susan Brooks from Indiana and Representative Lois Frankel from Florida, who co-chair the Women's Caucus, partnered with us on this bill. They have been strong champions in protecting young women from abuse.

This bill wouldn't have been possible without the courageous survivors who shared their stories.

Some of the same women who I spoke with in February came back to Washington in March to speak about the bill. It was a very powerful hearing that touched many of us.

One of those brave women was Jamie Dantzscher, who won a bronze medal in 2000.

Jamie told the Judiciary Committee in moving testimony that she fell in love with gymnastics at a very young age. Her parents had to beg her to leave the gym after practice because gymnastics brought her such joy.

While she competed with the national team led by USA Gymnastics, team doctor Larry Nassar was assigned to provide her with medical treatment.

As any young woman would, Jamie put her faith in Nassar, who was employed by USA Gymnastics.

But her faith was turned on its head in horrifying ways. In Jamie's words: "What I have only recently come to understand is that the medical treatment he performed for my back pain and other injuries was sexual assault. Dr. Nassar abused me at the USA National Training Center in Texas. He abused me in California and at meets all over the world. Many times the abuse took place in my own room, in my own bed. Worse, he abused me in my hotel room in Sydney at the Olympic Games."

Jamie went on: "When I first spoke out about my abuse at the

hands of Dr. Nassar, I thought I was the only one. I was disbelieved and even criticized by some in the gymnastics community for bringing this disturbing issue to light."

It's impossible to imagine the horror that Jamie felt. But what we do know is that Jamie wasn't the only victim.

Jessica Howard was a 15-year-old rhythmic gymnast when Nassar began abusing her.

She testified that her first few years of training were "pure bliss." Eventually she was sent to Nassar for hip problems. Nassar told her she shouldn't wear underwear for her treatments.

Jessica was confused, but she was fearful to say anything to anyone. She believed she would be prevented from pursuing her dreams if she said anything. This is how so much of this abuse was conducted, under a

shroud of fear that the athletes' dreams would be quashed.

Later in her life, Jessica served on USA Gymnastics' Board of Directors. In Jessica's words: "As an adult, I spent years serving on the USA Gymnastics Board of Directors with a mission of protecting children in my sport from the psychological abuse that I endured. But the meetings seemed to revolve around two things: money and medals. When a sexual abuse case came up during my time on the board, the concern was about the reputation of the coach, not the accusation of the athlete. As I have attempted to come to terms with what happened to me as a teenager, it has become glaringly obvious that USA Gymnastics has not done nearly enough to protect athletes from any form of abuse."

Jessica and others like her were silenced by a culture of

complicity where those in power refused to promote a safe environment and survivors could report abuse. That's what the bill we will pass aims to change.

Finally, I'd like to talk about another gymnast we heard from more recently. Aly Raisman, one of the most decorated Olympic gymnasts ever, revealed that she, too, was sexually abused by Larry Nassar, starting when she was 15 years old.

As Aly said, "I didn't know anything differently. We were told he is the best doctor."

As a result, Nassar used this trust to manipulate hundreds of victims so they couldn't fully understand that they were being abused.

When telling her story, Aly asked, "Why are we looking at why didn't the girls speak up? Why not look at

what about the culture? What did USA Gymnastics do, and Larry Nassar do, to manipulate these girls so much that they are so afraid to speak up? I am angry."

Mr. President, I think we should all be angry by what we've heard from these brave young women.

When I heard these stories, I found a common theme: the very institutions tasked with protecting these athletes allowed this egregious conduct to occur.

In my view, these governing bodies were, at best, complicit in the devastation wrought on these young children and their families. They did far too little to prevent abuse from happening in the first place, and when they saw signs of abuse, they did little to stop it.

In fact, USA Gymnastics, which oversees more than

3,000 gymnasiums nationwide, had bylaws that actually made it more difficult for survivors to report abuse.

For example, the only way for a member athlete to "effectively" make a complaint about a coach was through a signed, written complaint. Not only is this an ineffective way to prevent sexual abuse, it actually serves to protect the abusers by making it harder for child victims to come forward.

USA Gymnastics didn't even require that sexual abuse be reported to law enforcement when it was discovered. It was a disgusting abuse of power, to say the least.

After we introduced our legislation, USA Gymnastics hired former federal prosecutor Deborah Daniels to conduct an independent review of USA Gymnastics' policies and procedures.

Needless to say, they were found to be woefully ineffective and insufficient.

After reviewing documents and interviewing nearly 160 individuals, Daniels recommended nearly 70 policy changes, including a recommendation that USA Gymnastics “undergo a complete cultural change, permeating the entire organization and communicated to the field in all its actions.”

In one damning finding, Daniels stated, “The overall impression received externally is that the athlete protection function is, at best, secondary to the primary focus: winning medals.” That is completely unacceptable.

The legislation we will soon pass does three main things to help protect sex abuse victims and reform institutions like USA Gymnastics.

First, the bill makes it mandatory for anyone affiliated with USA Gymnastics or any other national governing body or amateur sports organization that crosses state lines, to immediately report sexual abuse to local and federal law enforcement or social services agencies.

This requirement would apply to USA Gymnastics and each of the other 47 national governing bodies that oversee a variety of Olympic sports, including USA Taekwondo, USA Speed Skating, USA Swimming and USA Cycling.

It is absolutely imperative that a firm line be drawn for everyone working with national governing bodies and amateur sports organizations. Once there is suspicion of abuse, a report must be made as soon as possible to law

enforcement. This bill mandates that.

Second, the bill strengthens the law that allows victims of sex abuse to file suits against those who abused them to commit crimes such as sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, and child pornography.

It clarifies, for example, that victims of child sex crimes are entitled to statutory damages of \$150,000 as well as punitive damages due to the heinous nature of the crimes.

The bill also extends the statute of limitations so that victims can sue their abusers ten years after they become aware of their abuse. This is important because tragically, survivors often do not fully become aware of their abuse until later in life.

The statute of limitations extension is part of legislation that Senator Cornyn and I

have worked on over the past couple of years, called the Extending Justice for Sex Crime Victims Act.

Third, the bill makes reforms to the Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act, which establishes “national governing bodies” like USA Gymnastics.

When I first contacted USA Gymnastics about its poor handling of sexual abuse allegations, the group cited the Stevens Act as a shield, saying that it prevented them from doing more to protect athletes from sexual abuse.

The bill we are passing is a direct response to that claim.

It requires the newly created U.S. Center for Safe Sport – championed by Commerce Committee Chairman John Thune and Ranking Member Bill Nelson – to establish strict policies

and procedures for handling abuse allegations, as well as oversight procedures to make sure these policies are adhered to by every national governing body.

The reforms in the bill ensure that national governing bodies and amateur sports organizations will adopt five baseline policy prescriptions.

First, specific policies and procedures for mandatory reporting of sex abuse to law enforcement.

Second, policies and procedures to keep track of coaches who leave one gym only to repeat the cycle of abuse at another gym.

Third, policies to avoid circumstances where minors and adults are in one-on-one situations.

Fourth, policies to facilitate reporting of sex abuse allegations to national governing

bodies and other authorities.

And fifth, stronger oversight and enforcement policies so that complaints are dealt with uniformly and with fairness and due process.

These new provisions give national governing bodies like USA Gymnastics no excuse not to prevent abuse or to report it when it occurs.

All over the country, survivors of sexual abuse are coming forward to tell their stories of abuse and exploitation.

Multiple survivors from around the country have contacted my office and described with great courage their pain and anguish.

Mr. President, each of these stories represents an untold amount of pain and suffering that has generational ripple effects.

It is absolutely devastating.

This's why I'm so encouraged that my colleagues in this body will soon pass this important legislation to protect abuse victims.

I'd also like to acknowledge the list of 270 organizations and individuals who have contributed to and supported this bill. Their names are listed on our website.

I'd also like to recognize my staff who have worked on this bill, including Peter Hyun, Ashley Schapitl, Sarah Chang, Matthew Halek, Jennifer Duck, and Tom Mentzer.

I'd also like to thank Peter Feldman and Ashok Pinto from Senator Thune's staff, Christian Fjeld and Ioana Gorecki from Senator Nelson's staff, Evelyn Fortier and Kyle McCollum from Senator Grassley's staff, Rob Hicks from

Representative Susan Brooks' staff, Meg Barr from House Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte's office, and Yana Mayayeva from Representative Lois Frankel's staff.

And finally, I'd like to recognize two individuals who recently passed away – both were fierce advocates on behalf of survivors of abuse.

Barbara Blaine, who founded SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, passed away in Utah. And Kristine Ward, the co-founder of National Survivor Advocates Coalition, passed away in Ohio.

Both of these extraordinary women spent much of their lives giving a powerful voice to those who have been sexually abused.

This bill attempts to do what both women so powerfully advocated for throughout their lives: speak for the

voiceless and demand the change necessary to protect our children, our most precious resource.

Thank you very much, Mr. President. I yield the floor.