

To: Members of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
Members of the House Appropriations Committee
Members of the House Ways and Means Committee

From: The Hidden Opponent

RE: Education – Coaches - Mental Health Training

My name is Leeann Passaro and I'm here to testify in support of Coaches Mental Health Training legislation. I'm a former NCAA athlete, and I'm now an Annapolis resident, a high school English teacher, and varsity sports coach. I'm also one of the founders of The Hidden Opponent—a national non-profit that takes action for student-athlete mental health and works to create an overall healthier sports culture.

As a high schooler, I played at some of the highest levels of elite soccer for many different coaches with different coaching styles. In college, I faced harrowing coaching abuse, disguised as “old school coaching tactics,” which ruined my mental health, self-worth, and love for the game. I have since found healing in my own career working with young people as a coach and an educator.

I'm inspired daily by my student-athletes, who have the language to name their feelings or struggles. They are capable of being tough when the time calls for it, and are also capable of asking for help when needed. It's us adults that are behind the curve of the mental health movement.

The Hidden Opponent works in all 50 states with hundreds of student-athletes serving as ambassadors of our mission. Our non-profit is now officially partnered with Adidas, one of the largest sporting companies in the world. We are seeing more and more top-level athletes speak out about this issue and discuss holistic health. Sports culture is just beginning to take these steps; Maryland can be a front runner in this marathon.

Requiring mental health training should be as logical as requiring CPR certifications. In my 25 years, I've spent countless hours on sports fields and courts. I'm grateful that I have never witnessed a cardiac episode, but I have seen a handful of my own teammates or classmates die from a mental health crisis. My biggest wish as a coach is to keep my players safe.

Imagine this: you're at your child's sports game. Two players collide—hard. Your child's coach is off the bench, screaming at the referee in honor of “keeping the players safe.” If you've been around contact sports, you've seen this play out.

Coaches are so quick to point fingers at referees for ensuring player safety, —and trust me, I've seen some truly terrible referees in my time —but the baseline safety starts with us as coaches. We can't control what happens on the field. We can control the type of environment we create on our teams.

Care should be at the core of coaching. Mandated mental health trainings will reinforce these ideals and help save lives. I'm proud to now call Maryland home, and I will be even more proud when we sign this legislation. Thank you.