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Maryland House Ways & Means Committee

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Good afternoon.

Chairwoman Kaiser and all members of the House Ways and Means Committee, thank you for having me today.

My name is Scott Hallenbeck. I am the Executive Director of USA Football, the sport's national governing body and a member of the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC).

USA Football strongly yet respectfully opposes banning or putting an age restriction on youth tackle football and cannot support House Bill 1345 as amended. Please let me explain why.

USA Football supports youth tackle football and today's game is safer than it's ever been. We are here today to advocate on behalf of youth tackle football.

At USA Football, our intense focus and emphasis on the safety of young athletes has positively changed the culture of youth football by establishing nationally endorsed standards for safer and smarter play.

However, we do not support any bill which puts an arbitrary age limit or restriction on youth tackle football and disregards medical consensus regarding contact sports and player health. Such consensus includes, but is not exclusive to, the latest [Consensus Statement on Concussion in Sport](#), authored by 36 medical experts across multiple continents and published by the British Journal of Sports Medicine in 2017.

More than 700,000 youth and high school coach certifications have been completed through our Heads Up Football program since 2012. Coach certification in youth football is the new normal. No coach should be on a field unless he or she is certified. Our coach certification curriculum is accredited by the U.S. Center for Coaching Excellence.

Our national practice guidelines for youth tackle football – to our knowledge – are the first of any sport to earn the endorsements of three of the country's largest sports medicine associations. Those groups are the American College of Sports Medicine, the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine and the National Athletic Trainers' Association.

USA Football was the first national governing body of any sport to participate with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to promote its “Heads Up” Concussion in Youth Sports program, joining other early supporters like the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Alliance for Youth Sports.

I was honored to join United States Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois this past October in voicing USA Football’s endorsement of the “Protecting Student Athletes from Concussions Act.”

USA Football also was the first USOPC member to earn a National Athletic Trainers’ Association Youth Sports Safety Ambassador Award for our work focused on the health of children nationwide.

Our commitment to player safety is real. It is witnessed through substantial reforms and partnerships benefitting young athletes in Maryland and across our nation.

We understand and respect the concerns parents have about their children’s health and well-being – in all sports. And we believe that responding to those concerns is critical to making football more inclusive and accessible.

Parents do not want their government telling them when their kids can play football. We hear this from them often. Instead, they want to make informed decisions for themselves. Parents need information and options in order to determine what is best for their child.

It is incumbent on USA Football and other leaders in our sport – like those with me today – to educate parents on what to look for when considering football programs for their children.

We have a solution for concerned parents, community members and legislators.

As we’ve shared with Delegate Hill, we’ve created a Football Development Model – or “FDM.” This model aligns with the USOPC’s long-term athlete development principles. It is based on progressive skill instruction that reduces contact and helps coaches teach athletes based on their age, the skill they are learning and the football game type they are playing.

The FDM is a 21st century framework for how we play, coach and experience football, offering parents’ options in non-contact to limited contact to contact football. Like baseball’s progression of tee-ball to “coach pitch” to “player pitch,” the model employs multiple football game-types, which includes but is not exclusive to flag, modified tackle – what we call Rookie Tackle – and 11-player tackle. This spectrum of game categories and game types are applied as avenues to learn and reinforce developmentally appropriate skills.

This creates new ways for more kids to participate, have fun and enjoy a sport they love to play as a pathway for life-long wellness.

Guided by our FDM Council, comprised of leaders from highly respected institutions such as Children’s National Hospital, Dartmouth College, the USOPC and others, the FDM marks our sport’s first long-term athlete development model for all players, youth players in particular.

Our Council includes specialists across medicine, child development and long-term athlete development as well as football subject matter experts from youth, high school, college and professional football. This Council would be pleased to share its findings and information with this Committee, including its recommendations for the grassroots football community. This may include but would not be limited to fundamental skill development, appropriate football entry points and

options, and medically endorsed practice structure.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, representing 67,000 pediatricians, acknowledges there is no data to support a specific age for participation in youth tackle football. Additionally, according to the [Sports Neuropsychology Society and its Fact Sheet on CTE](#), “[A]t this time, there is no research that causally links youth contact sport participation with a risk for CTE.”

I wish to underscore that USA Football and our FDM Council would be pleased to work with this Committee for the good of Maryland’s youth and scholastic football family.

In conclusion, through the FDM, we will continue to improve the education of tens of thousands of coaches and teach better techniques and standards that further reduce contact in football. I believe this is the ultimate goal for all us in this room.

USA Football’s intense focus on the safety of young athletes has positively changed the culture of youth football. And as I’ve stated here today, we’re inspired to continue to do more.

Thank you.