



Maryland Soccer Foundation

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January 14, 2025

Maryland Senate
Senator William Smith, Chair
Judicial Proceedings Committee
Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

RE: Support of SB 112 - Criminal Law - Second Degree Assault - Sports Official

Chairperson Smith and Members of the Committee,

My name is Matt Libber, and I am currently the Executive Director of the Maryland SoccerPlex, and I am providing testimony in support of Senate Bill 112. For the last 25 years, I have been involved in youth and amateur sports as a coach, referee, tournament director, league commissioner, MSYSA State Cup Director, and now a facility and club administrator. In those 25 years, the landscape of youth sports has changed in both big and small ways, but one clear trend over that time is the escalation of abuse faced by referees, umpires, and officials.

Sports officials are a core element to youth sports ecosystem and every year it becomes harder to find enough referees to cover all the games. Nationally there is a shortage of referees for **EVERY** sport. Recruitment and retention of sports officials has become a core aspect of national governing bodies, leagues, and local sports organizations. More sports officials leave the game every year than new referees come into the game. When asked why referees leave the game, the most common answer is "they are tired of the abuse." Players, coaches, parents, and spectators over the years have escalated this abuse from common yelling to physical confrontations on the field, on the sidelines, and in the parking lots of sports facilities across the U.S. There seems to be this sense of entitlement by these individuals to say and do what they want, when they want, and where they want. Leagues and facilities can put in protocols and procedures to try and minimize this abuse, but this cannot provide full protection, and we have little means for meaningful consequences when rules are broken. In 2024, a national survey by the National Association of Sports Officials reported that 51 percent of male officials and 53 percent of female officials have felt unsafe or feared for their safety while officiating during the 2023-24 seasonal year. There needs to be substantial penalties through the law to help protect sports officials.

To provide a real-life example of one of these incidents, at the SoccerPlex in 2023 during an MLS Next event, the highest level of boy's youth soccer in the US, after a game parents from a team from Pennsylvania got in their cars at the field and followed the referees back to the referee tent, on the other side of the park. This demonstrated a willful intent to confront the referees. If it had not been for the hired security staff present during the event this most likely would have ended in a physical altercation. It seems ridiculous that we have to hire security personnel to monitor a youth soccer tournament, but that is the world we currently live in.



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The lack of meaningful consequences has led to a decline of 26% in sports officials across the United States. This decline impacts not only the ability to provide programming to youth athletes but also impacts the safety of the officials. In more and more games, there is not a full complement of officials for games. This may mean that a soccer game that would normally have 3 officials, now has only one referee by themselves. They no longer have the backup and support of the two other officials to look out for their partners on the field. If this game takes place at a location with only one field, you now have one person alone amongst 80-100 people with no support. This is not a situation anyone should find themselves. This decline in the number of referees is also driving up the cost of youth sports. As the number of referees declines, the cost for referees goes up. When I was still officiating 10 years ago, the higher end of youth soccer referees were making \$40 a game, on average. They now are making \$80-\$120 per game depending on the age group and level of play. This is not a sustainable model for youth sports. We are literally driving families out of the game due to high cost.

We need to find a way to keep sports officials in the game, and bring new sports officials into the ranks, if we want to continue to provide opportunities for our children to play sports. Cutting down on the abuse of sports officials has to be a priority. While this Bill will not solve all the problems, it is a good start to curb the abuse that takes place on every field across the State. Real consequences for individuals who escalate yelling into violence will send a message across the State that we will not stand for this any longer.

Respectfully,

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