

Testimony Before House Federal & State Affairs Committee
In Support of House Bill 2520
By Erik Sartorius

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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you in favor of House Bill 2520 addressing both assault and battery of sports officials. This legislation is long overdue.

During high school and again when my son was young, I refereed youth soccer. Nothing beats watching kids growing to enjoy the game you love. Everyone's enjoyment fades quickly, however, when spectators become belligerent. I was fortunate in my time refereeing that such moments were fairly rare.

You may be aware of the shortage of referees for many sports. In some areas, leagues have been jeopardized as a new generation of sports officials is not coming along to replace those who came before them. Why? When questioned, a frequent response among referees is that the abuse they receive. The loss of their enjoyment and increased concerns for their safety make it not worth it to them to perform their vital role in sports.

While sports officials have maybe never been fan favorites, the normalizing of vitriol directed at them has moved the boundaries of "acceptable" behavior. In turn, this has made physical contact with sports officials a more frequent occurrence.

One area in the bill where I would suggest clarification is Sect. 1(e) on page one and again in Sect. 2(g) on page five. Each of the crimes is described as one "committed against a sports official on the premises of an athletic facility where an athletic contest is held in which the sports official is engaged in the performance of such sports official's duties."

I believe the language leaves a gap in protection where an official has completed the "sports official's duties," e.g., the game is over, but the official is still "on the premises of an athletic facility." As sad as it is, not all spectators "leave it on the field" when the game is over. Numerous instances exist of spectators following officials as they go to their vehicles and assaulting them in the parking lot. Protection should not be limited to during the game and on the field/court.

More than anything, I hope this is a piece of legislation that truly does become a deterrent for the crime for which punishments are being set. Leagues share expectations with coaches, parents and other spectators that players and referees are to be respected and good sportsmanship prevails. Rarely will anyone council the parent who cannot maintain control. Being able to point to a statute with teeth in it may finally get the attention

I thank the committee again for your time and ask that you report House Bill 2520 favorably for passage.