

AAU Creates Task Forces to Review Sex-Abuse Prevention

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By Curtis Eichelberger

(Updates with comments from Stout, background in fourth, fifth and eighth paragraphs.)

Dec. 14 (Bloomberg) -- The Amateur Athletic Union created two task forces of child safety and law enforcement officials to review its policies aimed at protecting young athletes from sexual predators and for screening adult volunteers.

The AAU opened an investigation into sexual-abuse allegations against the group's one-time president, Bobby Dodd, 63, after two former basketball players told ESPN that he molested them in the 1980s when they were between 12 and 16 years old.

Dodd, the top executive from 1992 until he underwent surgery for colon cancer in November, told the AAU he was innocent. Dodd didn't respond to a message left for him through the AAU seeking comment on the allegations.

"We have never been introduced to a tragedy of this nature. Ever," AAU President Louis Stout said at a press conference at the group's headquarters in Lake Buena Vista, Florida.

"Consequently, were we caught off-guard? Yes. Are we going to correct that so we won't get caught off-guard again? You betcha."

Stout said AAU executives confronted Dodd on Nov. 14. Dodd acknowledged the allegations were serious and "emphatically denied any wrongdoing," even after being pressed by AAU officers. He told the board he needed to have surgery for colon cancer and asked if he could retire for medical reasons. The request was later denied. Stout said the AAU owes Dodd about \$15,000 in salary, vacation and sick leave.

Penn State

The allegations come weeks after retired Penn State University assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky, 67, was charged with sexually assaulting 10 young boys over a 15-year period, and

Syracuse University assistant men's basketball coach Bernie Fine, 65, was fired after police initiated an investigation into allegations of child sexual assaults. Both men have denied wrongdoing.

Penn State President Graham B. Spanier and football coach Joe Paterno were fired; neither faced criminal charges.

“This is not Penn State. This is not Syracuse,” Stout said. “In stark contrast to those institutions, to which I have much respect, we took action.”

The AAU has asked Chris Newlin, executive director of the National Child Advocacy Center, and Lauren Book, founder of Lauren's Kids Foundation, to review its policies and practices.

Florida Experts

Tim More, a commissioner of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and Jim Sewell, who previously served as assistant commissioner of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, will help the AAU determine the most effective ways to vet coaches, volunteers and other adults who work with children, the organization said in a press release.

Their actions are being echoed through youth sports leagues and associations around the U.S.

National Collegiate Athletic Association President Mark Emmert said in an interview that he will address sex abuse issues next month. Emmert said he wants to make sure he has a clear commitment from schools that they have systems for victims and others to come forward and provide information anonymously, “and outside the loop of the athletic department.”

He also wants to speak to representatives of the Catholic church and elementary and high school educators who may have more experience handling child sexual abuse, and then create a set of best practices that can be passed to colleges and universities.

“The truth is none of us knows how deeply issues of sexual abuse run within the education community at any level or society as a whole,” Emmert said in an open letter on the NCAA website. “But we know that one instance is more than we can bear.”

Youth Sports

Many national youth organizations have policies that include background checks and pre-employment screening for adults.

The U.S. Olympic Committee hired attorney Malia Arrington as director of its newly created Ethics and Safe Sport office in April. The Colorado Springs, Colorado-based organization is developing online training for everyone who interacts with athletes that is focused on common elements of sexual and physical misconduct.

“It’s not an athlete’s responsibility to prevent this from happening to themselves,” Arrington said in an interview. “It’s our responsibility as adults.”

Anti-Abuse Policy

USA Swimming promoted Susan Woessner to the newly created role of athletic protection officer in September 2010, about nine months after the sentencing of former San Jose-area swim coach Andy King, who pleaded no-contest to 20 molestation charges and is serving a 40-year prison sentence.

“We said it’s a dark time, but we want to come out of this as a leader in this area,” Woessner said in an interview. “We re-examined what we were doing beforehand and said, ‘How can we improve it?’”

The swimming governing body used to conduct background checks on coaches, but expanded that to include any of the 30,000 adults, whether coaches or volunteers, that interact with youth. It also now requires pre-employment screenings for local clubs that include reviews of motor-vehicle records and education and requires clubs to check references. It also lists the names of coaches and volunteers who have been banned from the sport.

Little League

Little League Baseball oversees 7,000 leagues worldwide, with more than 1 million volunteers and more than 2.5 million players. Every adult, whether a coach or concession-stand worker, must fill out an application that matches their names against the national sex-offender registry as part of a background check. The system has been in place since 2003.

“I don’t think there is any foolproof system,” said Little League spokesman Steve Barr. “The recent allegations kind of throws up a red flag and makes you do a self-check on the systems you have in place.”

Child sex-abuse cases dropped 55 percent to 65,964 in 2009 from about 150,000 in 1992, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. A second study mandated by Congress reported in 2010 that the number of sexually abused children decreased 38 percent to 135,300 in 2006 from 217,700 in 1993.

The numbers from the second study are larger because it includes additional data collected by teachers, police officers, health-care professionals and day-care workers.

“We are making progress,” said David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire in Durham. “There has been an increased level of awareness.”

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