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House Committee on Education

Oral Proponent Testimony for HB2080

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According to a 2017 survey conducted by the National Association of Sports Officials, 87 percent of the 17,000 referees that participated in the survey suffered verbal abuse in their role as officials. Thirteen percent said they had been subjected to a physical assault before, during or after a game. That's almost one out of every seven officials claiming abuse of some sort.

Sadly, not many people seem willing to do anything about this trend. Worse, even fewer take into consideration how many of those suffering such assaults are, in fact, children. Seventy – two percent of youth soccer referees for leagues affiliated with the U.S. Soccer Federation are under 19 years of age. Nearly 80 percent of the referees in Kentucky are 18 years of age or younger. Sixty-nine percent of Minnesota's referees are kids under the age of 14.

I don't have a dramatic story about myself or a loved one like the story that Kris Bieniewicz shared with the Michigan Senate Judiciary Committee in 2014 and whose husband was killed during a soccer game. More than 22 states already have laws defining an assault on a referee as a specific crime, according to the National Association of Sports Officials. What I can share is that I have been an official for various sports: football, baseball, soccer, basketball and slow pitch softball for over 35 years. I have coached not only my own children in various sports but now my grandchildren and the Ell-Saline Cardinals for an accumulation of 30 years. I have witnessed and experienced angry coaches, parents and spectators. I can attest that the number of experienced officials has declined due to being spit on, called names and followed out into the parking lot and been threatened with bodily harm all because they officiate a sport so that children can play. As a coach we have had games rescheduled and cancelled due to lack of officials because of increasing abuse. This was a rare occurrence several years ago, but now it happens frequently.

Oct. 8, 2022, KNS News Team reported the nationwide problem and that it is here in Kansas about the lack of officials for sporting events and that the State of Kansas is now acting. This action is called the "Bench Bad Behavior" which was adopted by the Kansas State High School Activities Association. A national survey of officials showed 55% said that verbal abuse is the reason they quit. 59% don't feel respected, 57% believe sportsmanship is getting worse and 84% say they are treated unfairly by spectators. The bottom line is that officials are quitting faster than new ones are signing up. This attempt by the Kansas State High School Activities Association is certainly a start and appreciated. Having laws in place to protect officials and prosecute the abuser is the next step.

Kansas sports officials should be able to perform their duties without threat of personal injury, administrative hearings or litigation because of their game calls. Kansas State legislators can show support for those who officiate by passing laws to protect them. Kansas has many laws that protect people from various accidents and crimes. We don't have anything that protects officials that truly put their life on the line not only for high school and college sports but for the recreation departments that

are in every town and city in Kansas. This is the gateway for so many children so that they can experience the joys of a team sport and introduce them to a healthy lifestyle that might stay with them for their entire life.

Kansas Officials need your support that not only validates what they do for children and sports but to validate that their lives matter. Please support HB2139 Bill that was first announced in 2020 by J. R. Claeys prior to the arrival of COVID and is now being brought back for your consideration by Representative Clarke Sanders – District 69. Thank you for listening and I pray that you think about the sporting events that you have attended. Have you ever heard nasty comments from spectators about officials that put their uniform on with pride and step on the court and do the best they can for athletes that are playing. Please help protect these officials.

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