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USA Swimming announces steps to protect athletes

By PAUL NEWBERRY
AP National Writer

Rocked by allegations of rampant sexual misconduct within its coaching ranks, USA Swimming unveiled a plan Wednesday to make it easier for athletes to report abuse while addressing some of the concerns raised by several lawsuits around the country.

The seven-point plan was detailed in an open letter from USA Swimming president Jim Wood and executive director Chuck Wielgus, who said the organization has "a responsibility to help create a safe and positive environment for children and young adults who are our members."

USA Swimming has more than 300,000 members and has experienced rapid growth over the past decade, largely due to the popularity of 14-time Olympic gold medalist Michael Phelps.

"My regret is that any family has had to go through this terrible experience," Wielgus said in an e-mail to The Associated Press. "That is intolerable and should never happen. I'm angry and heartbroken. We've been flooded by phone calls and e-mails from our members who are ready to lock arms with us and get at this problem in an even more significant way."

Jonathan Little, an Indianapolis attorney who filed one of at least four ongoing sexual abuse cases against USA Swimming, was skeptical of the organization's plan.

"This was a rash, rushed reaction from USA Swimming," Little told the AP in a telephone interview. "Since its inception, USA Swimming has been trying to police itself. They know that coaches have sex with athletes. Everyone knows it, but no one does anything about it."

Little represents Brooke Taflinger, an All-American swimmer at Indiana University who came forward with allegations against her coach, Brian Hindson. In 2008, Hindson was sentenced to up to 35 years in federal prison for secretly videotaping young female swimmers showering.

At least three other lawsuits have been filed against USA Swimming, including a case brought up Monday in Kansas City, Mo., where a suburban coach is accused of having a sexual relationship with a teenage swimmer.

Last month, Deena Dewardurff Schmidt, a 1972 Olympic champion, disclosed she was molested by her coach while training in the 1960s. Despite telling officials at USA Swimming years later, she said, the coach — whom she wouldn't name — went on to train more young swimmers and was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of

Fame.

Her comments came after a separate lawsuit was filed in Santa Clara County, Calif., alleging that more than 30 coaches nationwide have engaged in sexual misconduct with young females. Also, ABC's "20/20" reported that at least 36 coaches have been banned for life by USA Swimming over the last 10 years because of sexual misconduct.

"This is an opportunity for us to change youth sports and USA Swimming," Little said. "You can already see that USA Swimming knows they have to change. We are starting to see that happen. But until they are willing to remove the bad apples from their midst, they're not serious."

USA Swimming said it will develop comprehensive guidelines for acceptable coaching behavior; enhance the system for reporting sexual abuse to the organization and law enforcement; determine if improvements need to be made in the current system of background checks; and develop stronger ties with local clubs that are responsible for hiring coaches.

The plan also calls for a review of USA Swimming's conduct code and the process for sharing coaches' records with member clubs and other youth organizations. Finally, the governing body said it must educate athletes, parents, coaches and club leaders on what they can do to help.

"There is a sense of urgency, of course, which is why our board has taken this action now," Wielgus said. "However, we've been careful not to let the media or other influences rush us into taking action just for the sake of taking action. We've said all the way through that we're going to focus on doing what's right, and doing it the right way."

The USA Swimming board of directors will meet May 1 to define the timeline and procedures for implementing the plan, Wielgus said. It also will share the key findings in its report with other youth organizations, within and outside the Olympic movement.

"We're not in a bubble on this," he said. "Quite frankly, I've had multiple phone calls from people from other organizations, sport and otherwise, who have expressed that they too are facing this problem."

Since 2006, USA Swimming has required background checks for all coaches every two years, but Little said the checks should be more thorough and incorporate the FBI database, not just focus on cases that reach the criminal justice system.

"They need to have real background checks," he said, "not this crap they've been doing."


Even though the allegations have been painful, Wielgus said he's confident USA Swimming will come out even stronger now that so many cases have come to light.

Swimming has been one of the most successful U.S. sports at the Olympics, and figures to be again at the 2012 London Games with a team including Phelps, Ryan Lochte and Natalie Coughlin.

"Being in the media spotlight on this issue is obviously not where we want to be," Wielgus conceded. "(But) the media attention to this issue actually goes a long way in accomplishing one of our goals, which is to raise awareness and have conversations about the issue."



Lynn Johnson announces the filing of a lawsuit against the governing body of U.S. competitive swimming and a swim coach during a news conference in the office of Shamberg, Johnson and Bergman Monday, April 19, 2010, in Kansas City, Mo. (AP Photo/Orlin Wagner)

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