



**Sportable Sexual Abuse  
Prevention and Response  
Stakeholder Interview Report**

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## **Introduction**

Members of Sportable's Sexual Violence Prevention Project Team interviewed these stakeholder groups {athletes, caregivers, volunteers, coaches, and staff} to gain additional clarity and follow-up data after reviewing the initial survey results. Overall 3 athletes, 3 caregivers, 3 volunteers, 5 coaches, and 10 staff members were interviewed. The identity of staff was held anonymous to the contractor and the other stakeholders were known only to whomever conducted the interview and the contractor. An anonymous Google Form was delivered to everyone following the interviews; however, to date, no one has provided additional information through that mechanism.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Once the transcripts were reviewed and edited, the recordings were deleted. The transcripts were held in a private contractor folder to ensure anonymity for staff and to limit access to the interviews with other stakeholders. Each transcript was reviewed and analyzed using thematic coding. The following codes emerged from the data and loosely corresponded with themes from the interview questions:

- Organizational Culture - overarching ideas related to the way the organization operates and how individuals and groups engage with one another (Pg. 3)
- Leadership - direct mentions of organizational leadership and its impact on this work (Pg. 5)
- Training Issue - how stakeholders are or are not trained regarding sexual abuse prevention and response specifically (Pg. 6)
- Policy Concern - thoughts on what could be included in policies and procedures, how policies/procedures could impact different stakeholder groups, and how those policies/procedures will be rolled out (Pg. 8)
- Additional Concepts - other ideas to consider related to any of the above themes (Pg. 9)

The data will be presented in this report without direct participant quotes to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.

## Organizational Culture

Interview participants were asked in different ways if they believed elements of Sportable's organizational culture would need to shift in order to fully support the implementation of the sexual abuse prevention project. Generally, the interview participants shared positive outlooks on the organizational culture of Sportable. Terms like respect, integrity, caring, kind, trustworthy, and supportive were used repeatedly to describe individuals across the stakeholder groups. Concerns were raised by a small number of interviewees related to diversity of lived experiences across stakeholder groups. Some noted that while Sportable hosts a predominantly woman-identified staff, the culture of the organization can feel like a "boys club" and certain behaviors remain unaddressed because they do not rise to the level of harassment or abuse, but cause discomfort for some interviewees. It was noted that there is a disparity in gender-specific programs with fewer opportunities for girls and women at a high level of competition, particularly as they age out of youth programs. Many individuals suggested that sexual abuse prevention could be part of larger organizational conversations and could become commonplace and less difficult as the organization engages in this work more deeply.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Gender parity in all sports offerings.** Gender parity demonstrates an organizational value that women and girls are as important as men and boys. What kinds of resources would be needed to ensure similar opportunities are available for girls and women as for boys and men? Is Sportable ready to respond to the needs of non-binary athletes? What is the long term plan to make sure high level competition is seen as a future route for the young girls being served now?
- **Leverage trust to support this work.** How can we encourage stakeholders to value the efforts of the sexual abuse prevention project as much as they value access to sports programs? Is the organization's commitment to this work enough to bring most stakeholders along?
- **Sweat the small stuff.** Behaviors that don't rise to the level of harassment or abuse can inflict personal harm and the individual harmed may not feel empowered to address the behavior in an organization where these behaviors have been allowed to proliferate over time. How can staff and other stakeholders identify ways in which they have experienced things that have made them uncomfortable? How can the organization begin to change

what is tolerable across the organization? Examples could be a male coach saying something about playing like girls as a negative comment or individuals commenting on someone else's looks.

- **Have hard conversations.** Shifting beliefs of people across generations, across ethnicity and race differences, across disability profiles, and more is tricky. Much of the organizational change work needed to support this project will happen in tough conversations. Some stakeholders are ready for it and some are likely not. How can a group of leaders across stakeholder groups begin this work to influence the long-lasting and far-reaching change needed to institutionalize sexual abuse prevention as a cultural norm at Sportable?

## **Leadership**

Generally non-staff stakeholders and a large group of staff shared an assumption that the leadership of Sportable is supportive and committed to the success of this endeavor. This feedback mirrors the survey responses. There remain conflicting opinions about the commitment of the Board to prioritize this work and be cheerleaders for new policies, procedures, and educational opportunities. Others noted that diversification of the Board could lead to increased support for efforts like the sexual abuse prevention project, but those individuals may not know the extent to which the Board is engaged, informed, and enthusiastic about this effort. Some staff commented that not everyone on staff has a full understanding of the role of the Board or of their beliefs about this project or other areas of Sportable's programming. This disconnect could be addressed through the organizational culture shift recommendations listed above; however, it is compelling that these assumptions from the survey were solidified through the interview process. The number of staff professing this level of concern about the leadership of the organization is small. More individuals expressed that Laura may be a hinge factor for this whole project which might be a more impactful concern.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Transparency is key.** Opportunities to engage the Board of Directors regarding this project could be shared with staff to demonstrate the commitment of the Board. Coaching Boys Into Men encourages a "Pledge Day" to invite members of the community where the training occurs to commit to taking a stand against relationship abuse and violence. This could be considered as a tactic for Sportable's staff and Board to publicly demonstrate its commitment.
- **More than one.** Many interviewees repeated the assumption that if Laura no longer worked for the organization that the project would falter. While grant funding and other organizational needs dictate who works on which projects, it would be beneficial to have other staff including program leaders discuss these issues and publicly engage in the work. Even if the fact is that the program will carry on with or without Laura's presence, getting everyone to believe that fact is critical.

## Training Issues

Most stakeholder groups were asked some questions related to training along the lines of: would they be likely to participate or support their youth athletes to participate; would they benefit from receiving additional training; or, could they identify potential barriers or pushback that Sportable would experience when rolling out training or policy changes. Across the board, interviewees believed that additional training would be beneficial for adults and youth to increase skills related to sexual abuse prevention and response. Caregivers expressed how valuable age appropriate training for youth would be as Sportable is sometimes the only supportive social space for their child and having conversations around boundaries, healthy relationships, safe touch, etc. would benefit their child. Volunteers, coaches, and athletes agreed on the value of regular training opportunities with each group sharing nuanced perspectives on what could be most useful. Coaches shared the enthusiasm for Coaching Boys Into Men and Athletes As Leaders as effective tools for skill building with the athletes on their teams to make a positive impact in the Sportable community and beyond. In addition to mandatory reporter training, opportunities to discuss what is ok, what is not ok, and what to do when things are unclear would broaden interviewees capacity for this work. Many were surprised that this level of training wasn't already taking place at Sportable because it is required in other areas of their personal and professional lives. Several individuals mentioned that this topic could be difficult for individuals who may have experienced sexual abuse and a trauma-informed approach to any training on this topic would be necessary.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Onboarding for all stakeholders.** If this is to be a true cultural shift, Sportable needs to be talking about its expectations regarding sexual abuse prevention and response from go. Sexual abuse prevention and response should be an important part of all stakeholder training obligations during the initial stage of engagement and annually thereafter.
- **Training for ALL.** It is imperative that caregivers, athletes, volunteers, coaches, Board, and staff have access to training that encourages thinking about and discussing sexual abuse prevention and response at Sportable. The training would look different and goals will need to be articulated for each stakeholder group. Creating a dynamic environment where every individual engaged with Sportable understands and can discuss the basics

of sexual abuse prevention and the organization's policies and procedures for safeguarding and responding to incidents is an instrumental part of this project.

- **Trauma-informed training approach.** Since the topic of sexual abuse can be difficult for individuals who have lived experience to talk about, any training developed must have a trauma-informed lens. Collaborating with a local Sexual and Domestic Violence Agency could provide an opportunity for emotional support if needed and could provide skilled educators to provide training opportunities as needed.
- **Athlete specific training is critical.** Athletes As Leaders and/or Coaching Boys Into Men can be adopted into the regular offerings of Sportable after the pilots and revisions have been completed. Developing the skills around boundary setting, healthy relationships, and safe touch are key components of safeguarding against abuse and will also ensure our athletes can be respectful, loving partners as they age and find themselves in intimate relationships.

## **Policy Development and Implementation**

Interview participants were asked questions about which kinds of policies would be helpful to consider regarding sexual abuse prevention and response and what kind of pushback or potential barriers could they imagine as policies and procedures were implemented. Some stakeholders did not have ideas and suggested that they were not the right kind of person to consider these things, but almost every person had a helpful thought to contribute. There is overwhelming evidence from the interviews that as long as the policies and procedures are reasonable, clear, age-appropriate, and enforced fairly that everyone involved in Sportable can be expected to abide by them. A small number of staff reiterated the concern that Sportable has been very lucky thus far and that very few very serious incidents had been brought to the attention of organizational leadership and shared what could be construed as a resentment that the agency hasn't invested in this work until recently. Most interviewees articulated a desire for clarity on an if this/then that process for responding to abuse allegations. Some policy ideas that were shared include: coaches/volunteers should never communicate 1-1 with minors via text or other messaging mediums; limiting 1-1 interactions between people in positions of authority and others; ensuring all policies are discussed during onboarding before a volunteer or staff member engages with any athletes; addressing complexity of having young adults as volunteers with a smaller age differential between themselves and the athletes they work with; and generally being very clear about what is ok and what is not ok across all these relationships.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Policies will need to cover a lot of ground.** Everything from communication, travel and overnight accommodations, toileting support, to changing facilities and codes of conduct will need to be discussed and clarified by staff and leadership before finalization.
- **Differentiating expectations across stakeholder groups may be necessary.** Every person engaged with Sportable will have some level of accountability for preventing violence and addressing any issues that may arise. However, different groups may have more obligations than others requiring different training, different reporting obligations, and different behavioral expectations based on level of authority or engagement.



## **Additional Concepts**

A few interviewees shared thoughts that felt important enough to list in this report. They cross thematic designations and warrant their own section.

- A coach mentioned a desire to be certified in Coaching Boys Into Men or Athletes As Leaders in some way or having extensive training prior to attempting to deliver the materials to their team. While this may not be possible for all the coaches, this is something to take very seriously. The project will require coaches who feel comfortable delivering the curriculum or who can work with an advocate or consultant to co-lead the sessions. Futures Without Violence does offer training for coaches throughout the year, so they could consider attending those sessions as they come available even if they haven't been tapped to lead the curriculum during 2023.
- Youthful volunteers, like college students for example, could pose an interesting dilemma. Some young adults may not be used to being an authority figure and drawing distinct boundaries in their relationships with minors. Eighteen year olds may be more inclined than older adults to give out phone numbers or follow Sportable athletes on social media who are 16 or 17 years old.
- When considering behaviors of athletes that may be gray areas for this project, caregivers and coaches expressed that part of Sportable's role is giving these young people opportunities to have an active social life. Some youth may not be fully aware of how to handle rejection, how to approach people they are interested in, how to respect boundaries, etc. Dismissing athletes from programs for gray area behaviors may be more detrimental because we deny the learning opportunity and room to grow.
- It was mentioned that there could be more training with volunteers regarding how to be impactful supporters for athletes by shifting from a reactionary perspective to more of a resilience/confidence building and empowerment approach. A concrete example was provided regarding an athlete who falls and instead of the volunteer jumping in to help the athlete back up, a volunteer could be willing to get on the floor and model how the athlete might help themselves get back up into a stable position.

## **Conclusion**

The interviews provided additional insight about data received from the survey; however, they did not drastically change the conclusions drawn from the survey. There seems to be great enthusiasm for this project across stakeholder groups.

Overall, developing appropriate and clear policies and procedures, offering an array of training opportunities geared toward specific stakeholder groups, and identifying cheerleaders at different levels of the organization (including the Board) remain key to reaching the organizational culture change required to successfully implement necessary safeguarding measures and response protocols.