



## **ATHLETE ASSISTANCE FUND AND THE NEW YORK SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO CHILDREN LAUNCH *ATHLETES ARE CHILDREN FIRST* INITIATIVE FOR GYMNASTICS CLUBS NATIONWIDE**

*The initiative will provide virtual sexual abuse prevention trainings in New York State and across the U.S. to gymnastics club coaches and staff*

**New York, NY — February 9, 2021** — The **Athlete Assistance Fund (AAF)** has launched the ***Athletes are Children First*** initiative, an innovative sexual abuse prevention program with **The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (The NYSPCC)**. Specific to gymnastics, and in response to previous prominent instances of sexual abuse occurring within the sport, this program provides sexual abuse prevention training workshops to gym owners and coaches to equip them with the knowledge and tools they need to keep child athletes safe. ***Athletes are Children First*** will debut with a pilot program in New York State connecting gymnastics clubs with local child protection experts to deliver child sexual abuse awareness and prevention workshops virtually to coaches and staff. Simultaneously, The NYSPCC will provide bi-monthly virtual training sessions for gymnastics club coaches and staff nationally, to ensure comprehensive child sexual abuse prevention education is available nationwide.

Developed by The NYSPCC, the ***Athletes are Children First*** trainings are tailored specifically to the sport of gymnastics with input from athletes, club owners, coaches, and staff, and further refined through feedback from sessions conducted at two gymnastics regional congresses and one national congress.

“Having the expertise of The NYSPCC alongside the Athlete Assistance Fund as we embark on this pilot program and national rollout is an invaluable asset as we work to protect and assist our athletes,” said Tina Ferriola, AAF Board Chair, CEO of NYC Elite Gymnastics, and former competitive gymnast. “***Athletes are Children First*** is a concrete advancement in our sport’s training protocols and strategy to prevent sexual abuse in the future. Together, our organizations are committed to making gymnastics safe and to holding our gyms to the highest standards, for the safety of the children.”

After a rigorous Request for Proposals process and agency evaluation for the pilot project, The AAF and The NYSPCC have selected seven child advocacy centers and child welfare agencies in New York State to spearhead the program. The following agencies were chosen to connect

with, educate, and provide ongoing support to gymnastics clubs in their communities: **Child Advocacy Center at BestSelf Behavioral Health, Inc., Child Advocacy Center of the Finger Lakes, Albany County Crime Victim and Sexual Violence Center, The Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse, the Suffolk County Child Advocacy Center, and the Child Advocacy Center of Putnam County**, which will work in collaboration with the **Child Advocacy Center at the Westchester Institute for Human Development**.

“The selection of these seven exceptional child protection agencies in New York State is an exciting step forward in our efforts to safeguard our child athletes from sexual abuse” said Dr. Mary L. Pulido, Executive Director of The NYSPCC. “The AAF, The NYSPCC’s staff, and the selected agencies have worked tirelessly to ensure that children are always put first. The NYSPCC is the world’s first child protection agency, and we are grateful to be able to continue spreading our mission and helping those in need.”

In addition to the New York State trainings, beginning today through November 2021, The NYSPCC will hold two national virtual training sessions per month for gymnastics clubs. These sessions will support club owners and coaches across the country in recognizing signs and symptoms of abuse. The trainings will also help club owners and coaches understand appropriate athlete-coach boundaries, create child safety policies and report practices that will safeguard gymnasts and foster a culture that promotes athletes’ wellbeing. Participants in this initiative will have access to the *Athletes are Children First* Initiative Policy Handbook, as well as Gymnast and Parent E-Learning Workshops, which will launch later this year.

Each of these participating agencies and The NYSPCC will be funded for one year by The AAF to provide training to gymnastics club staff in New York State and support clubs in implementing best practices in child protection. Staff from each agency have been trained as NYSPCC-certified Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Trainers using The NYSPCC’s training curriculum, Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Education for Club Owners, Coaches and Staff, and Facilitator’s Guide, as well as The NYSPCC/AAF *Athletes are Children First* Initiative Policy Handbook, which outlines best practice policies for gymnastics clubs. These co-created materials will support efforts to ensure all New York State gymnastics clubs and coaches adhere to the same best practice standards for child protection. Staff from these agencies will also receive free support and technical assistance from The NYSPCC.

The *Athletes are Children First* initiative furthers both the AAF’s mission to make gymnastics a safe sport in which children can thrive and succeed, as well as The NYSPCC’s mission to eradicate child sexual abuse in all its forms. In 2019, the AAF selected The NYSPCC to develop a multi-pronged approach to combating child sexual abuse in gymnastics. The NYSPCC conducted background research, site visits, information gathering sessions, and focus groups with key stakeholders, athletes, parents, coaches, and club owners to assess areas of need and identify gaps in child safety practices. The *Athletes are Children First* Initiative is informed by their findings.

For additional information on this initiative, please visit [athleteassistancefund.org/training/](http://athleteassistancefund.org/training/).

### **About The Athlete Assistance Fund**

The Athlete Assistance Fund (AAF) seeks to eradicate all forms of abuse in the sport of gymnastics through a combination of critical abuse prevention education and counseling services. An independent, not-for-profit, the AAF delivers comprehensive abuse prevention education for gymnasts, parents, coaches and gym owners and provides free counseling services to any current or former USA Gymnastics member or gymnast who suffered sexual abuse within the sport of gymnastics. Read more about the AAF at <http://www.athleteassistancefund.org>.

### **About The NYSPCC**

The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children ([NYSPCC](http://www.nyspcc.org)) is one of the most highly respected child protective agencies in the world. Founded in 1875, The NYSPCC helps the most vulnerable children of our community recover from trauma. And, more importantly, it helps prevent child abuse through its work with parents, teachers, children and foster care agencies. The NYSPCC's amazing work is used as a model for child welfare agencies across the nation. The NYSPCC has investigated more than 650,000 cases on behalf of over two million children and has educated over 53,000 professionals working with children on child abuse and neglect issues. Read more about The NYSPCC at <http://www.nyspcc.org>

### **Media Contacts:**

Erin Freilich on behalf of The NYSPCC

[erin.f@high10media.com](mailto:erin.f@high10media.com)