

Penn State scandal punishment viewed as solid step in combating child sex abuse

Jul. 25

desmoinesregister.com

Iowa child sexual abuse experts hailed fines levied against scandal-ridden Penn State University on Monday.

“What they did was send a very strong message,” Stephen Scott, director of Prevent Child Abuse Iowa, said of the \$73 million in fines levied by the NCAA and Big Ten Conference.

Penn State was fined as part of unprecedented sanctions tied to former school officials conspiring to conceal the fact that assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky sexually molested young boys.

“We hope we would never, ever see anything of this magnitude or egregiousness again in our lives,” NCAA President Mark Emmert said in announcing a wide range of penalties. “But we do have to make sure that the cautionary tale of athletics overwhelming core values of the institution and losing sight of why we are really participating in these activities can occur. That’s the balance that every university needs to strive for.”

Penn State will be fined \$60 million by the NCAA, and that money is to be paid into an endowment for external programs aimed at preventing child sexual abuse or assisting victims. The school was also fined \$13 million by the Big Ten; that money has been designated for “charitable organizations in Big Ten communities dedicated to the protection of children.”

It was not immediately clear Monday how much of that money, if any, would reach Iowa. But, Scott said, “whatever money the state of Iowa gets would be significant.”

Iowa Department of Human Services data indicate there were 637 cases of founded sexual abuse of children in the state in 2010. But a state task force report in January also noted that child sexual abuse is “significantly under-reported.”

“That money, however it’s distributed, will do some very good work,” said state Rep. Beth Wessel-Kroeschell, D-Ames. “There are many organizations that have been working to prevent child abuse for a long time. We’ve been working to put money into those organizations, but state money is very tight.”

DHS officials also applauded the way the fine money will be used.

“Any additional funding helps kids and families everywhere,” said Julie Allison, bureau chief of the Child Welfare and Protective Services branch of the DHS. “The Penn State scenario gives us an opportunity as a state to look at policies and procedures regarding preventing sexual abuse of children.”

That is the goal, said University of Iowa President Sally Mason, chairwoman of the Big Ten’s council of presidents and chancellors. “The victims remain at the center of our thoughts,” she said.

Mason did not answer directly Monday when asked if the conference considered suspending Penn State’s football program. “We had a discussion on the full range of options in terms of what we as a conference might or should do with regard to Penn State,” she said during a teleconference. “Everything ... was discussed.”

Sandusky, 68, was convicted last month of sexually assaulting 10 boys over 15 years. He was found guilty on 45 of 48 counts. He awaits sentencing.

This month, a report by former FBI Director Louis Freeh concluded that former Penn State football coach Joe Paterno intervened when school officials planned to report a 2001 allegation against Sandusky to child welfare authorities. In addition, Freeh said Paterno and three other officials, including ousted Penn State President Graham Spanier, exhibited “callous and shocking” disregard for victims.

Penn State President Rodney Erickson said Monday that the university would pay \$12 million a year for the next five years into an endowment created to fund programs for the detection, prevention and treatment of child abuse.

Scott figured even just \$50,000 of the Penn State fine could do positive things in Iowa.

“That would help significantly,” he said. “If we’re talking around \$50,000 — that could go a long ways toward treating a handful of people.”

Wessel-Kroeschell was on a subcommittee in the last legislative session that successfully pushed a bill requiring colleges and universities to prepare policies for reporting child sexual abuse.

“Actually, we started on the bill before news of the Penn State case came out,” she said. “We have to make people aware of the issue, and what to do if you’re a witness, and we were working on that even before we had knowledge of what happened at Penn State.

“However the (fine) is distributed will have a strong impact on providing a healthy childhood for so many kids.

“Child sexual abuse is permanent damage. It can’t be undone.”

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