

Testimony Before the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary  
Education

“Field of Fees: Private Equity’s Role in the Commercialization of American Youth Sports”

Tuesday, June 30, 2026

Matt Kakabeeke, Executive Director, Kalamazoo Optimist Hockey Association (KOHA)

Chairman Kiley, Ranking Member Bonamici, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today regarding our experience as a community-based youth sports organization.

For nearly 50 years, I have been involved with the Kalamazoo Optimist Hockey Association (KOHA) as a player, coach, parent, Hockey Director, and now as its Executive Director. Five years ago, I assumed the role of Executive Director following my retirement from a 21-year career in federal law enforcement with the United States Probation and Pretrial Services System. I took on this role because of my longstanding commitment to public service and to serving the families and young people in my community.

The first four years of my tenure as Executive Director of KOHA were both exciting and rewarding. During that time, our organization implemented numerous initiatives and organizational improvements that positioned our youth hockey association as a leading destination for player development and community-based hockey in western Michigan.

These efforts were guided by our Mission and Vision:

The mission of the Kalamazoo Optimist Hockey Association (KOHA) is to provide a safe and inclusive environment for youth of all skill levels to learn, develop, and excel in the sport of hockey. We strive to instill a lifelong love of the game and promote sportsmanship, teamwork, and leadership among our players. We pride ourselves on providing age-appropriate player development and skill-appropriate coaching.

KOHA exists to offer a premium, affordable opportunity to learn the game of hockey for players in our organization. Through high-quality coaching, training, and competition, we aim to help our athletes reach their full potential on and off the ice. Our ultimate goal is to produce well-rounded, confident, and skilled hockey players who will be successful at all levels of the game.

Our efforts have received recognition from leaders within both the national and international hockey communities. During the 2025 International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) Global Hockey Summit in Nice, France, our commitment to advancing positive youth sports experiences and community-based player development was acknowledged by Tom Farrey, Executive Director of the Aspen Institute’s Sports and Society Program.

In addition, KOHA regularly hosts educational and developmental visits from USA Hockey Player Development staff, NCAA ice hockey coaches, professional and international coaches, and other hockey leaders for players, coaches, and parents. These partnerships and educational opportunities help ensure that our players and families receive a world-class youth sports experience that is fully aligned with our mission, vision, and organizational values of Trust, Respect, Excellence, and Fun.

As KOHA prepared to begin its 60th anniversary season and as I entered my fifth year as Executive Director, our organization was focused on building upon six decades of providing affordable and accessible youth hockey opportunities in the Kalamazoo community.

However, on September 1, 2025 - the very first day of that milestone season - we were informed during a meeting with rink management that Wings West, our longtime home rink and the foundation of youth hockey in our community for decades, had experienced a significant mechanical failure and that the ownership group would not make the investments necessary to repair the facility.

KOHA's programming was subsequently relocated to Wings Event Center, a three-sheet ice facility also owned by the same ownership group. However, upon announcement regarding the closure of Wings West, it was also disclosed that Wings Event Center would cease ice operations in June 2028.

As a result, KOHA faced the prospect of operating at Wings Event Center for only a limited three-year period while simultaneously confronting significant uncertainty regarding our long-term future.

On October 7, 2025, Wings West was acquired by Black Bear Sports Group. Our organization remained optimistic that we might eventually return to our longtime home at Wings West under the ownership and management of Black Bear Sports Group. However, the change in ownership marked the beginning of a series of events that would fundamentally alter our organization and create significant challenges for our nonprofit youth hockey association and the families we serve.

On October 16, 2025, my colleague Dave Toth, KOHA's Operations Director, and I met with Black Bear Sports Group's representatives. We entered that meeting with optimism and a sincere desire to establish a collaborative partnership that would allow KOHA to continue providing an affordable, high-quality opportunity for young people in the Kalamazoo community to learn and play the game of hockey.

Unfortunately, our expectations for a cooperative relationship were quickly dispelled. Rather than discussing a shared commitment to preserving and strengthening community-based youth hockey, it became evident they had little interest in preserving KOHA's longstanding role in the community.

Within the first moments of the meeting, Black Bear Sports Group made clear that the 60-year history and community-based identity of KOHA would not be preserved under the new

ownership structure. In less than a minute, Black Bear Sports Group and corporate sponsor, Biggby Coffee, outlined a series of non-negotiable demands that reflected what we could only describe as coercive business practices.

They stated that KOHA's longstanding identity as the KOHA K-Wings, a name that honors our community's professional ECHL team, the Kalamazoo Wings, would be eliminated. They indicated that our organization would instead be rebranded as the Biggby Broncos and that this change would be mandatory as a condition of both our ice user agreement and our ice rental contract.

Additionally, they advised that all uniform, apparel, and equipment purchases would be required to be made through Black Bear Sports Group's designated supplier, Breakaway Sports. This requirement would immediately have redirected nearly \$200,000 in annual expenditures away from locally owned hockey retailers that have long supported youth hockey in the Kalamazoo community.

Black Bear Sports Group representatives further described plans to fundamentally restructure KOHA's existing model for delivering youth hockey programming to align with their for-profit business model. These proposed changes included reducing services and programming while increasing costs to participants. They also indicated that KOHA staff would be expected to plan, market, and administer Black Bear Sports Group's "Take a Shot at Hockey" program, which is promoted as a free introductory hockey experience, despite the program needing substantial resources and personnel from our nonprofit organization to execute it locally.

Subsequent meetings followed with a similar pattern. Discussions focused on restructuring KOHA's recreational hockey program, which has historically relied upon local corporate sponsorships to maintain affordability for families and to support the operational needs of our nonprofit organization.

For decades, our recreational teams have proudly represented local businesses and community partners, allowing young athletes to skate under the names of neighborhood tire stores, dental practices, restaurants, and other local sponsors that have invested in youth hockey in Kalamazoo. This model has not only helped offset costs for families but has also strengthened the connection between our players and the local business community.

Black Bear Sports Group proposed replacing these longstanding community partnerships with a standardized branding model tied to its corporate affiliations with Biggby Coffee. Under this approach, teams would no longer represent local businesses but instead would be renamed under Biggby-branded identities, such as the Biggby Bombers or Biggby Bulldogs. This proposal would have displaced local sponsorship and visibility opportunities, diminished community involvement, and further advanced a corporate branding strategy at the expense of a longstanding nonprofit built upon local support and community engagement.

The final breaking point in our discussions with Black Bear Sports Group occurred on December 4, 2025. As KOHA continued to advocate for the preservation of our 60-year history, community identity, and nonprofit model, we were informed that KOHA would no longer be permitted to offer its Learn to Skate and recreational hockey programs. Black Bear Sports Group believed it could operate these programs more efficiently and profitably.

During this discussion, Black Bear representatives repeatedly emphasized that KOHA's willingness to align with Black Bear Sports Group's business model would directly affect both our ice rental rates and our access to desirable ice times. They indicated that organizations unwilling to conform to their model could face increased costs and less favorable scheduling.

At one point, they made what we perceived to be a punitive remark, stating that, "You don't want your 10-year-olds skating at 9:00 p.m. because we can do that." We interpreted this statement as a clear threat that access to age-appropriate ice times would be used as leverage to compel compliance with Black Bear Sports Group's business model.

Additionally, Black Bear advised KOHA that our annual golf outing fundraiser would no longer continue in its existing form. This event serves not only as a critical fundraising initiative for our organization but also as a memorial honoring two young players from our hockey community who were lost far too soon. Instead, we were informed that the event would be replaced with a Biggby Coffee-sponsored "celebrity" hockey game, with any proceeds directed toward offsetting ice costs controlled by Black Bear Sports Group.

For KOHA, these discussions represented more than a disagreement over programming or operations. They demonstrated how control of essential ice facilities can be weaponized against longstanding nonprofit organizations to abandon their identity, surrender community-based programming, and conform to a vertically integrated, for-profit model that prioritizes corporate objectives over the families they serve.

Ironically, while KOHA was engaged in negotiations with Black Bear Sports Group, fellow Kalamazoo community ice users were experiencing similar challenges. The Greater Kalamazoo Skating Association, which serves local figure skaters, and the South Central High School Hockey League, which supports area high school hockey programs, both encountered significant difficulties in securing and maintaining access at the former Wings West facility.

The Greater Kalamazoo Skating Association experienced challenges in preserving its established ice rental blocks and was reportedly advised that its programming could be moved to earlier time slots that would conflict with local school schedules and create substantial hardships for participating families.

Similarly, representatives of the South Central High School Hockey League were informed that annual locker room rental fees would increase dramatically, from approximately \$3,000 per year to nearly \$18,000 per year, with payment required in advance. Such increases created significant financial concerns for local high school hockey programs and further

raised questions regarding the affordability and accessibility of youth and amateur ice sports within our community.

These experiences validated that KOHA's concerns were not isolated. Rather, multiple longstanding community organizations serving youth and amateur athletes encountered similar challenges regarding facility access, scheduling, and escalating costs following the change in ownership and management practices.

The profit-driven operating model employed by Black Bear Sports Group also had implications for local sports tourism and the broader Kalamazoo economy. Both KOHA and the Greater Kalamazoo Skating Association have developed longstanding partnerships with USA Hockey and U.S. Figure Skating that have enabled our organizations to host regional and national events. These competitions and tournaments have generated significant economic activity, contributing millions of dollars to the local economy through hotel stays, restaurant spending, retail purchases, and tourism-related activities, according to local economic impact assessments conducted by Discover Kalamazoo, the local convention and visitors bureau.

During our discussions, Black Bear Sports Group indicated that hosting large-scale amateur sporting events was not as financially attractive as alternative ice rental opportunities. This perspective appeared to prioritize short-term facility revenue over the broader economic and community benefits associated with regional and national events.

As a result, the Kalamazoo community risks losing opportunities to host prestigious amateur sports events that not only showcase our community on a national stage but also provide substantial economic benefits to local businesses and support the continued growth of youth sports. This shows how a profit-maximizing approach to facility management can overlook the wider public and economic value that community-based youth sports organizations provide.

Kalamazoo is not the only Michigan community to experience what we believe to be the coercive practices of Black Bear Sports Group. Following the acquisition of the Arctic Coliseum in Chelsea, Michigan, the Chelsea Hockey Association (CHA), a nonprofit youth hockey organization with more than 25 years of service to its community, encountered many of the same challenges and pressures that KOHA experienced.

According to discussions with leadership from the Chelsea Hockey Association, the organization was subjected to similar business practices and operational demands following Black Bear Sports Group's acquisition of its local facility. The concerns expressed by CHA closely mirrored those experienced by KOHA regarding organizational autonomy, community identity, programming, and the preservation of the nonprofit model.

During this period, I maintained regular communication with the President of the Chelsea Hockey Association. Our conversations frequently centered on the challenges our respective organizations were facing and the growing concern that longstanding nonprofit youth

hockey associations were being pressured to abandon their established identities, operating models, and community relationships in favor of a more centralized, profit-driven approach.

Ultimately, Black Bear Sports Group advised the Chelsea Hockey Association that it would no longer be granted ice rental access at the facility. This decision effectively resulted in the dissolution of a nonprofit youth hockey organization that had served the Chelsea community for more than 25 years. At the same time, Black Bear Sports Group introduced its own for-profit hockey programming to operate out of the newly renamed Bigby Coffee Ice Cube in Chelsea.

These issues are not isolated to a single community. Rather, we believe they reflect a broader pattern in which the acquisition of community sports facilities by a single operator is often followed by pressure on longstanding nonprofit organizations to conform to a vertically integrated, profit-extraction model - or risk losing access to the facility. As youth sports becomes more consolidated, longstanding community-based organizations face the prospect of losing facility access, organizational autonomy, and their historic identities.

These experiences raise important questions regarding market concentration, access to essential recreational facilities, and the ability of nonprofit youth sports organizations to continue serving their communities when a single entity can control both the facilities and the competing youth sports programs operating within them.

The displacement of longstanding nonprofit youth sports organizations represents only one component of Black Bear Sports Group's vertically integrated business model following the acquisition of a community ice facility. Black Bear Sports Group exercises influence over numerous aspects of the youth hockey experience, extending well beyond the operation of the rink itself.

In addition to facility ownership, Black Bear Sports Group maintains control over team uniforms and apparel, designated equipment suppliers, live-streaming services within its facilities via Black Bear TV, electronic scoring and statistical platforms, and the leagues and tournaments in which affiliated teams are expected or required to participate. The company also utilizes stay-to-play hotel requirements for tournaments and events, further expanding its control over the ancillary services associated with youth sports participation.

This vertically integrated model enables a single organization to capture revenue at multiple points throughout the youth sports ecosystem, from facility access and team operations to equipment, apparel, technology services, tournaments, and travel accommodations.

Furthermore, Black Bear Sports Group's business practices have extended beyond youth hockey to include adult recreational hockey programs. Adult hockey leagues, often comprised of individuals who participate primarily for physical activity, social engagement, and community involvement, have also experienced increased costs and operational changes. The effects of this for-profit business model reach beyond youth athletics and impact a broader segment of the local skating and hockey community.

KOHA is fortunate to have a temporary home for the next two years, providing our organization and our families with continued access to ice as we work toward a long-term solution. Together with our fellow ice user organizations and community partners, we are actively engaged in developing both a transition plan and a sustainable long-term strategy to preserve opportunities for youth hockey, figure skating, high school hockey, and other ice sports in the Kalamazoo community.

While these circumstances have presented significant challenges, they have also strengthened the relationships among local ice user groups. Our organizations have become more unified in our commitment to preserving affordable, community-based recreational opportunities and ensuring that local families continue to have access to youth sports programs that prioritize participation, development, and community engagement.

The Kalamazoo community has responded by rallying in support of its longstanding nonprofit organizations and community-first institutions. Our experience has highlighted broader concerns regarding the growing influence of private investment and vertically integrated business models within youth sports, particularly when the ownership of essential facilities is coupled with efforts to control programming, branding, participation, and the associated revenue streams. We believe that youth sports should remain centered on the needs of children, families, and communities rather than on maximizing profits or extracting additional costs from those who participate.

Thank you, Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Committee for your time and for the opportunity to share KOHA's experience. I am honored to testify before you on behalf of the hundreds of families, volunteers, coaches, and young athletes who have been impacted by these events and who continue to believe in the value of community-based youth sports.

The issues discussed today extend far beyond one hockey association, one community, or one sport. As private investment and vertically integrated business models continue to expand within youth sports, there is an urgent need to examine how these practices affect affordability, accessibility, competition, and the ability of longstanding nonprofit organizations to serve their communities. The decisions made in boardrooms and investment offices ultimately affect children, families, volunteers, and local communities.

I believe this Committee has a unique opportunity to bring attention to these issues and to ensure that youth sports remain centered on the development of children rather than the maximization of profits. The work of this Committee can help protect community-based organizations, preserve affordable access to sports, and safeguard the local institutions that have served generations of families.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I would be pleased to answer any questions the Committee may have.