

**“How Sports Can Improve Girls’ Health”  
Briefing Summary  
June 16, 2015**

On June 16, Women’s Policy, Inc. (WPI) sponsored a briefing in cooperation with Reps. Kristi Noem (R-SD) and Doris O. Matsui (D-CA), Co-Chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues (the Women’s Caucus), and Reps. Susan Brooks (R-IN) and Lois Frankel (D-FL), Vice-Chairs of the Women’s Caucus. The sixth in a women’s health series sponsored by WPI over several years with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the briefing focused on the role of sports in improving girls’ health. Approximately 125 guests attended the briefing, including Members of Congress, senior congressional staff, representatives of federal agencies, and health and women’s advocacy organizations.

Cindy Hall, president of WPI, thanked the briefing cosponsors: the leadership of the Women’s Caucus and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (the Foundation) for supporting the briefing and for all the Foundation’s work to improve the health and health care of all Americans. The Foundation was represented at the briefing by Kim Elliott, Director of Policy Outreach, and Ginny Ehrlich, Director of the Childhood Obesity Team (who moderated the discussion). Cindy expressed appreciation to the U.S. Soccer Foundation, a cosponsor of the briefing, for its important work to expand sports’ opportunities for girls and boys in underserved communities. She recognized Dr. Nancy C. Lee, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Health, Women’s Health, and Director of the Office on Women’s Health at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), for serving as a long-time champion of women’s health.

In addition to Ginny Ehrlich, Cindy acknowledged the panelists for the briefing: Ed Foster-Simeon, President and CEO of the U.S. Soccer Foundation; Keury Jamilette Guillen, Coach-Mentor for Soccer for Success in Los Angeles, California; Nohemy Salomon, an eighth grader at Chavez Prep Public Charter School in Washington, DC and co-captain of DC SCORES; and Crystal Dunn, a member of the U.S. Women’s National Team and the Washington Spirit, National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL).

**Members of the Women’s Caucus**

Rep. Lois Frankel (D-FL), Vice-Chair of the Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues, thanked WPI, the sponsors, and especially the young girls and women on the panel. Growing up in the 1950’s, sports played a central role in Rep. Frankel’s life. At that time, young girls were not supposed to play sports, and there were few organized teams outside of school. Nevertheless, Rep. Frankel played softball, volleyball, and basketball, having fun and learning sportsmanship. The Congresswoman said that the soccer players represented at the briefing displayed amazing endurance and athleticism, and she encouraged every young woman to take up a sport.

Del. Stacey Plaskett (D-VI) grew up in Brooklyn N.Y. with two parents from the Virgin Islands. Her father’s advocacy was instrumental in making her believe that she could do things that girls were not supposed to do, including playing sports. Del. Plaskett represents the Virgin Islands where a lifestyle and diet based on a hundred years of working in cane fields have led to increasing rates of obesity, diabetes, and other diseases. With 31 percent of the children in the Virgin Islands living in poverty, the breakfast and school lunch programs are very important. However, many of the children who qualify for these programs are not eating the food because they find it unfamiliar. Del. Plaskett concluded by saying that it is important to find ways to respect the culture of the community while also educating parents about good nutrition and sports options for their children, such as tennis, golf, and sailing.

## **Speakers**

### **Ed Foster-Simeon**

Cindy Hall introduced Ed Foster-Simeon who has more than two decades of experience at the local, state, and national levels of soccer in the United States. In 2011, Ed was awarded the Community Leadership Award from the President's Council on Fitness, Sports, and Nutrition. He thanked Cindy, WPI, and Ginny Ehrlich from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for sponsoring the event, and also thanked the Congresswomen for their remarks. As the father of a 16-year old girl, Ed stated that he was in the right place – talking about the importance of sports in the lives of girls and women.

Created after the 1994 World Cup to support the growth of soccer in this country, the U.S. Soccer Foundation (the Soccer Foundation) has benefitted more than 13 million people over the last two decades. In recent years, the Soccer Foundation has turned its attention to using soccer as a vehicle to improve child health outcomes in underserved communities. The primary program, Soccer for Success, is an afterschool program offered free of charge to girls and boys in underserved communities. The program partners with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the Justice Department to provide mentoring to boys and girls across the country.

Soccer for Success leverages the influential position of the coach as a teacher and mentor. The coaches teach kids to play soccer, stay out of trouble, and become healthy and productive adults. Ed emphasized that while children go to school because they *have to*, kids run to the soccer coaches in the Soccer for Success program because they *want to*. The program is now in 34 cities and engages over 30,000 young boys and girls across the country (40 percent of the participants are girls). Soccer for Success has an active girls' program in Washington DC at the Washington School for Girls, and recently added 250 girls to its program in East Los Angeles.

To get a sense of the program, a short video about Soccer for Success was shown to attendees. An independent evaluation conducted by the Federal Social Innovation Fund found significant improvements in health outcomes among children in Soccer for Success compared to outcomes for children in similar afterschool programs. Approximately 95 percent of the girls in the program are minorities, and 77 percent of these girls have experienced positive health outcomes with regard to BMI (body mass index) and cardiovascular fitness (82 percent of the girls increased their aerobic capacity).

### **Keury Jamilette Guillen**

Ed introduced Keury Jamilette Guillen, one of the coach-mentors for Soccer for Success in Los Angeles. He noted that Keury's participation in a high school program modeled on Soccer for Success in Los Angeles gave her confidence, a healthier weight, and a passion for making a difference in her community.

Keury said that Soccer for Success has had a significant impact on her life. At the age of nine, she turned away from sports after a negative experience on her first day of basketball practice. Without physical activity, Keury gained weight until she weighed 200 pounds at the age of 14. Embarrassed by her weight, Keury did not try sports again for years until she saw that being on a soccer team made her younger brother feel great. Keury signed up for a soccer team but was ready to give up after having a number of coaches until she saw a flier for the Brotherhood Crusade Soccer for Success program. The fact that the program was free meant that Keury did not need to ask her parents to pay for it.

From the first day, the coach provided terrific one-on-one guidance and encouragement to Keury and her teammates. Keury gradually got better and better at soccer, and developed the confidence to try out for the soccer team in high school. Starting out on the JV team, Keury was chosen as MVP and moved up to the varsity soccer team. She described how her coach, Liz, pushed Keury in positive ways and

encouraged the team to believe in themselves: “I held on to this encouragement, and hold on to it, even to this day.”

Success in soccer motivated Keury to try out for the school’s cross-country and swim teams as well as other activities. She made the high school band and, within one year, moved up to the advanced band. Keury went on to play in the high school jazz band and the LA Youth Jazz Ensemble at the University of Southern California (USC). She credited Soccer for Success for providing her with the confidence to branch out: “If I had not had the push to go for what I wanted, I would not have had these opportunities. Being with Soccer for Success gave me so much motivation; it gave me the push to continue on because I knew I could make it.”

Keury is now a coach-mentor with Soccer for Success in LA, where she gives the girls one-on-one attention, makes them feel comfortable, and helps them realize that they can reach their goals. Keury also teaches the girls about the importance of physical activity and nutrition. By the end of the season, the girls are coming to practice with fruit to eat. Keury noted that it is also great to see the parents become involved through their own classes, and to see the whole community grow together.

Ed thanked Keury for her terrific presentation and reminded the audience that 99.9 percent of children will never get paid to play a game they love. But those children can learn so many valuable things from proper engagement in sports that pay off in their lives including leadership, discipline, how to win and lose, and how to lead and when to follow. Keury’s remarks underscored these benefits, demonstrating that coaches can motivate, guide, and encourage children to reach a higher place than they could accomplish on their own.

### **Nohemy Salomon**

Ed introduced Nohemy Salomon, a student in the eighth grade at Chavez Prep Public Charter School in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Washington, DC. Nohemy started playing soccer through DC SCORES in elementary school and this past school year, she was co-captain of the Chavez Prep girls’ soccer team, where she helped lead the team to second place in the DC SCORES Capital Cup championship.

Nohemy began playing soccer with DC SCORES in the fourth grade. Since then, the sport has changed her life and helped her to become the person she is today. Soccer has taught Nohemy “to feel confident in myself.” Having learned sportsmanship from soccer, she is proud when someone from the other team gives her a complement after the game. As captain of her team, Nohemy has learned to be a good leader: “I am always there to cheer on my teammates and help them improve. I make sure to give them good advice and support them when they need it.”

Nohemy’s favorite part of DC SCORES is the opportunity to play soccer every day and to participate in other activities with her team on and off the field. This spring, her team advocated for a soccer field at the park in their neighborhood. She hopes that the hard work of her team will pay off with a new soccer field soon. Being part of a close team is one of the best parts of the program. As Nohemy put it, “We are a soccer family and we grow together.” When she was going through a hard time last year, her teammates encouraged her to keep playing – and soccer helped her to heal and get through this period. Nohemy’s coach, who is a teacher at the school, also helped her to stay positive. The soccer coach is always there to support the girls during the school day and at soccer practice – and looks out for the girls after school, encouraging those who are having a bad day. Having learned about nutrition from her coach, Nohemy understands that she is a much stronger player when she eats well before a game.

Next year, when she is in high school, Nohemy hopes to come back and help her middle school team as a coach. Her favorite soccer memory is making it to the finals and placing second at the DC SCORES Jamboree this year. Even though her team did not win the championship, Nohemy and her team felt so

proud because they knew how much they had improved. She concluded: “As an eighth grader and captain of my team, I feel so much stronger and more powerful than when I started five years ago. I am grateful for the sport, my teammates, and my coach—and the opportunity to play the sport that I love.”

Ed thanked Nohemy for a powerful presentation, and said that the presentations highlighted the theme of self-confidence, and showed how sports help the girls in so many ways beyond the field. He said, “It is the secret sauce for a successful life.”

### **Crystal Dunn**

Ed then introduced Crystal Dunn, a member of the U.S. Women’s National Team and the Washington Spirit, National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL). She was the first player since Mia Hamm in 1993 to win the ACC Player of the Year award three times. On January 17, 2014, Crystal was selected first overall by the Washington Spirit in the 2014 NWSL Draft and, later that month, she was called up to the senior U.S. national team.

Crystal introduced herself as a professional soccer player for the Washington Spirit, and stressed that soccer has done so many incredible things for her and taken her on the most amazing journey. For Crystal, soccer started as a hobby when her mother put her into a soccer program at age four. Soccer quickly grew into a lifestyle, and she has been playing the sport for almost 20 years. Her soccer career has provided her with the opportunity to travel to many places and connect with many amazing people. Soccer has also given Crystal an education. She acknowledged that, without soccer, the University of North Carolina probably would not have been an option. Soccer also taught Crystal discipline, to put others first, and to be a leader who people want to see every day, share advice with, and bounce ideas off from.

Crystal reflected on her development as a player. At 5 foot 2 inches, she did not think that soccer was in her future. But she was a very fast runner, and concluded: “I might get bullied on the field but I am going to run so fast that you are probably not going to catch me.” Crystal emphasized that we all have weaknesses. What is important is to work on what we can control. Soccer came easily to her, but there are moments when she and her team are not performing well. For Crystal, it is all about maintaining one’s confidence and finding the joy in the sport. If she could not play with some of her best friends, Crystal would have walked away from soccer a long time ago. She can have a bad practice, but it is the people and connections that keep her going.

Crystal concluded by saying that soccer has given her a career. Women’s sports have come such a long way. There was a time when women could not have a career in soccer; if you were caught playing with a soccer ball, people would give you a hard time and make fun of you. She feels blessed to have the opportunity to play this sport for a living, and looks forward to growing in the sport and learning more about herself and soccer. Crystal urged everyone to watch the Women’s World Cup and shared that she was the last person cut from the World Cup team. Although she was very disappointed, Crystal said that she has moved forward: “This is just what life is. When you have a hardship, and you are heartbroken about something, you have to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and roll with the punches.”

Ed thanked Crystal for her inspiring remarks, and said that the other theme that came through the presentations is that the sport helps girls and women develop leadership skills. This is a testament to the four decades since the passage of Title IX; many opportunities have opened up for girls and women. There is still a lot of work to be done but we have moved to a different place, and it is a good place.

### **Dr. Ginny Ehrlich**

Ed introduced Dr. Ginny Ehrlich, Director of the Childhood Obesity Team at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Ginny joined the Foundation in July 2014, working with businesses, community

organizations, policymakers, schools, and government officials to address the many factors affecting childhood health. Prior to joining the Foundation, she was CEO of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, where she positioned the organization as a national leader in the childhood obesity prevention arena. Ginny also was a founding member of the First Lady's Let's Move Initiative.

Ginny began by thanking WPI and the U.S. Soccer Foundation for the briefing, as well as Ed and her fellow speakers for doing such a compelling job in addressing the role of sports in the health and well-being of girls. The stories of the panelists showed that sports make a difference in girls' lives. These stories must become the stories of every girl across the country. Ginny said that there is a strong body of evidence that reinforces what we have heard today about how girls' participation in sports and physical activity leads to greater health, confidence, and well-being.

Last month, the Women's Sports Foundation released a report, "Her Life Depends on It," synthesizing more than 1,500 studies on the benefits of girls' participation in sports and physical activity. Some of the highlights from this report showed that girls who engage in sports and physical activity are less likely to use illicit drugs and smokeless tobacco – and they also are less likely to attempt suicide or suffer from depression. Girls who are engaged in sports and physical activity do better in school. In fact, girls who are enrolled in schools with more opportunities to engage in sports have higher rates of participation in advanced placement classes. Research shows that healthy kids – and healthy girls – learn better. Over the long run, participation in sports in childhood and adolescence contributes to lower incidence of breast cancer and osteoporosis among women. Women who participate in sports also are more likely to maintain a healthy weight throughout their lives.

In February of this year, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation announced a redoubling of its effort to ensure that by 2025 all kids in America, no matter who they are or where they live, grow up at a healthy weight. The Foundation has committed \$500 million over the next decade to achieve this goal. Ginny reported that nearly one in three young people are already overweight or obese, putting them at great risk of living sicker and dying younger than their parents. She stressed that we need to turn the tide on this epidemic, and physical activity is a central part of this effort, especially among girls.

The data shows significant gender disparities in levels of physical activity. Boys between the ages of six and 11 are 25 percent more active than girls are, and this gender disparity only worsens in adolescence. It is staggering that boys are 88 percent more active during the middle school years than girls are, and 66 percent more active in high school compared to girls. These gender disparities are even greater for girls of color, girls living in poverty, and girls with disabilities.

The good news is that there are some solutions, such as the evidence-based program, Soccer for Success. There are also some policy levers that can be effective in increasing the level of physical activity among girls. While Title IX has made a big difference in the lives of girls and women, we have a long way to go to fully implement equity in sports for girls. Opportunities must be expanded for girls and boys to be active in quality PE programs at school and in quality before or after school programs that are free or affordable. Children also need access to safe and accessible parks near their homes because the evidence shows that kids are more active when they have these opportunities.

Another important policy area is the prevention of concussions in children and youth, which are just as prevalent for female athletes as for male athletes. Policies also need to address unintended consequences around equity and disparities in access to sports. The "pay to play" sports system now in place limits access to sports and activity for kids in underserved areas. The result is that many girls do not get an early start in sports, which limits their competitive options later on. Efforts are needed to train coaches and educators to encourage girls of all abilities to play sports.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation believes that it is critical to create a culture of health where everyone, regardless of where they live, has a sense of well-being and the opportunity to really thrive

and live well. The Brotherhood Crusade site in Los Angeles is an example of “a culture of health” – a place where girls and boys play soccer, parents talk about making healthier choices, and families access an array of services including opportunities for physical activity. Ginny closed by saying that we need to build a broad culture of health across the country, so that every child and community has these opportunities – and we need to think about how we can leverage policy and other mechanisms to accomplish this goal.

## **Discussion**

Ginny invited participants to raise questions or topics for discussion. Dr. Nancy Lee, Director of the Office on Women's Health at HHS, asked what else needs to be done through Title IX to broaden access to sports for girls and women. Ginny responded that one area that needs attention is closing the great disparities in activity levels between boys and girls in middle and high school, and another is ensuring that playing sports is a safe experience for both female and male athletes.

A question was raised about how to convince school districts to integrate a culture of health into the schools, and Ginny recommended looking for creative solutions and small initiatives to make advancements with schools. In response to a question about Voices for Healthy Kids, Ginny said that this Foundation initiative supports policymaker education around a number of state and local policies that help to ensure that all kids grow up to have a healthy weight.

Additional discussion focused on the cultural barriers to healthy nutrition and lifestyles; the importance of starting early in life to engage in sports and making sports fun; the role of coaches, mentors, teachers, and teammates in encouraging girls and women to stick with sports; the value of the time before and after school for sports programs; and the barriers of cost, transportation, liability, and limited access to nutritious, affordable food for families in underserved areas.

Cindy Hall concluded the event by thanking Ginny Erhlich for moderating the briefing, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for funding the briefing series, and the Members of Congress who offered their remarks. She also thanked the U.S. Soccer Foundation for cosponsoring the briefing, commending Ed Foster-Simeon and the young soccer players for their excellent presentations. Finally, appreciation was expressed to the WPI staff for their work on the briefing.

The webcast of the briefing can be viewed by clicking this [link](#).