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Congress of the United States
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September 10, 2014

The Honorable Fred Upton
Chairman
Committee on Energy and Commerce
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Tim Murphy
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Committee on Energy and Commerce
2123 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Upton and Chairman Murphy:

A video released earlier this week showing Baltimore Ravens player Ray Rice striking his fiancé and knocking her unconscious has ignited a public controversy about the prevalence of domestic violence by National Football League (NFL) players and the NFL's response to this violence. In the wake of this recent incident, I am writing to ask that you hold a hearing to examine and investigate the problem of domestic violence by professional athletes.

Mr. Rice's case gained public attention earlier this year, when a February 2014 video was released showing him dragging his unconscious fiancé from an elevator.¹ The new video released on Monday shows the graphic and full footage from inside the elevator. In the video, Mr. Rice is seen striking his fiancé until she loses consciousness and collapses, and then dragging her out of the elevator and nudging her until she regains consciousness.

When the first video was released, the NFL responded by issuing Mr. Rice a two game suspension and a \$500,000 fine. Domestic violence victim advocacy groups criticized the NFL for a response they deemed too lenient, pointing to harsher penalties imposed on players for violations of NFL rules such as smoking marijuana.²

¹ ESPN, *Ray Rice cut, then suspended by NFL* (Sept. 9, 2014) (online at http://espn.go.com/new-york/nfl/story/_/id/11489134/baltimore-ravens-cut-ray-rice-new-video-surfaces).

² New York Times, *Roger Goodell Defends Length of Ray Rice's Suspension* (Aug. 1, 2014) (online at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/02/sports/football/roger-goodell-defends-his-two-game-suspension-of-ray-rice.html?_r=0).

After the latest video was released, the Baltimore Ravens organization immediately released a statement releasing Mr. Rice and NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell placed him under an indefinite suspension.³ This swift action is commendable, but it also raises additional questions about the NFL's initial investigation and response to the incident.⁴ One report in July 2014 claimed that the league had access to tapes from inside the elevator at the time the initial suspension was imposed, but the league claims that while it requested the tape in the course of its investigation, it did not receive it and that Commissioner Goodell only saw the tape on Monday when it was released to the public.⁵ The Associated Press reported earlier today that a law enforcement official provided the video to the NFL on April 9, 2014.⁶

Unfortunately, this is not the only incident of domestic violence among players in the NFL. A USA Today database of NFL player arrests identified at least 33 separate incidents where NFL players on 22 NFL teams were charged with domestic violence or sexual assault in the past five years.⁷ An analysis by the website fivethirtyeight.com found that "relative to the income level ... and poverty rate ... of NFL players, the domestic violence arrest rate is downright extraordinary."⁸

NFL players are not the only professional athletes that have been charged with domestic abuse. NBA players Royce White, DeAndre Liggins, Jared Sullinger, and Ty Lawson all faced domestic violence charges in 2013.⁹ NHL player Semyon Varlamov was arrested on domestic

³ ESPN, *Ray Rice cut, then suspended by NFL* (Sept. 9, 2014) (online at http://espn.go.com/new-york/nfl/story/_/id/11489134/baltimore-ravens-cut-ray-rice-new-video-surfaces).

⁴ CBS Local, *Domestic Violence Victim Advocate Groups React To Rice Release, Suspension* (Sept. 8, 2014) (online at <http://houston.cbslocal.com/2014/09/08/national-womens-group-reacts-to-ray-rice-being-released-suspended-by-nfl/>) and Associated Press, *NFL players strongly condemn Ray Rice after new wife-hitting video surfaces* (Sept. 8, 2014) (online at <http://www.wjla.com/articles/2014/09/nfl-players-strongly-condemn-ray-rice-after-new-wife-hitting-video-surfaces-106910.html>).

⁵ The MMQB, *The Tuesday Mailbag* (July 29, 2014) (online at <http://mmqb.si.com/2014/07/29/jordan-gross-weight-retirement-panthers/2/>) and USA Today, *Roger Goodell: We asked for Ray Rice video on multiple occasions* (Sept. 9, 2014) (online at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2014/09/09/roger-goodell-commissioner-interview-ray-rice-video/15355227/>).

⁶ Associated Press, *Sources Say Rice Video Sent to NFL* (Sep. 10, 2014).

⁷ USA Today, *NFL Player Arrest Database* (accessed on Sept. 9, 2014) (online at <http://www.usatoday.com/sports/nfl/arrests/>).

⁸ FiveThirtyEight, *The Rate of Domestic Violence Arrests Among NFL Players* (July 31, 2014) (<http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/the-rate-of-domestic-violence-arrests-among-nfl-players/>).

⁹ Yahoo Sports, *76ers' Royce White 'vehemently denies' allegations of domestic violence against ex-girlfriend* (Sept. 6, 2013) (online at <https://sports.yahoo.com/blogs/nba-ball-dont-lie/76ers-royce-white-vehemently-denies-allegations-domestic-violence-165111815--nba.html>).

violence charge, including second degree kidnapping and third degree assault, in October 2013.¹⁰ Former MLB All-Star Andruw Jones was arrested on domestic violence charges in December 2012.¹¹

The penalties imposed by professional sports leagues on players who commit such violence vary widely. In August, the NFL revised their domestic violence policy and now imposes a six-game suspension without pay for a first offense and a lifetime ban for the second offense.¹² The NBA imposes a minimum 10-game suspension for a first felony conviction but has no specific rules for domestic violence.¹³ The National Hockey League (NHL) and Major League Baseball (MLB) do not have any rules set in place for violent behavior by their players.¹⁴ In 2006, MLB pitcher Brett Myers was allowed to start a game the day after he was observed by witnesses punching his wife on a downtown Boston street.¹⁵

Professional athletes are role models, and when they abuse women – particularly when they are not held appropriately accountable for their behavior – it normalizes such violence and sends the wrong message to young men and women. Esta Soler, President and Founder of Futures Without Violence, stated, “It’s important that, like every workforce, every institution that has these problems [be it] the NFL [or] the NBA, grapples with the problem of violence against women in a highly responsible way. Players are seen as role models for the next generation. Our athletes are revered in our society and it’s really important that we give them the tools so that they don’t get in trouble.”¹⁶ We should not allow this behavior to continue unaddressed, and professional sports leagues should take action to prevent domestic violence by their players and make it clear that such behavior will not be tolerated.

¹⁰ USA Today, *Girlfriend: Semyon Varlamov kicked and stomped on me* (Nov. 1, 2013) (online at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nhl/avalanche/2013/10/31/semyon-varlamov-domestic-violence-kidnapping-assault-charges/3325925/>).

¹¹ Atlanta Journal-Constitution, *Former Brave Andruw Jones arrested in Gwinnett* (Dec. 26, 2012) (online at <http://www.ajc.com/news/news/local/former-brave-andruw-jones-arrested-in-gwinnett/nTfmQ/>).

¹² SB Nation, *NFL announces new domestic violence policy* (Aug 28, 2014) (online at <http://www.sbnation.com/nfl/2014/8/28/6079465/nfl-announces-new-domestic-violence-policy>).

¹³ USA Today, *Armour: NFL recognizes its cluelessness with new domestic violence penalties* (Aug. 28, 2014) (online at <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/2014/08/28/nfl-domestic-violence-discipline/14746153/>).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ SB Nation, *MLB’s record on domestic violence worse than NFL’s* (July 28, 2014) (online at <http://www.sbnation.com/mlb/2014/7/28/5936835/ray-rice-chuck-knoblach-minnesota-twins-mlb-domestic-abuse-violence>).

¹⁶ TIME, *A Veteran Campaigner Reflects on 20 Years of Fighting Domestic Abuse* (Sept. 9, 2014) (online at <http://time.com/3311043/esta-soler-violence-against-women-act/>).

This Saturday marks the 20th anniversary of the Violence Against Women Act. As the Committee with primary jurisdiction over professional sports, we could play an important role in standing up for victims of domestic violence by asking professional sports leagues to explain in a public hearing how they are acting to educate their players about violence against women, what they are doing to prevent them from engaging in such violence, and whether they are administering appropriate punishments for athletes who commit violence against women.

I hope you will consider my request and that we can hold this hearing before Congress recesses until the November elections.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Diana DeGette", written in a cursive style.

Diana DeGette
Member of Congress