

**Congress of the United States**  
Washington, DC 20510

July 28, 2021

Ms. Sarah Hirshland  
Chief Executive Officer  
United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee  
One Olympic Plaza  
Colorado Springs, CO 80909

Dear Ms. Hirshland:

We write today to express our extreme dismay at the experience of a Maryland constituent, Ms. Becca Meyers, around her quest to compete in the Paralympics as a member of Team USA. The actions of the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC) to deny Ms. Meyers access to a sufficient personal care attendant are inexcusable for an organization devoted to providing an opportunity for disabled athletes to compete.

As stated on your website, the U.S. Paralympics is dedicated to, "... becoming the world leader in the Paralympic movement and promoting excellence in the lives of people with disabilities, including physical disabilities and visual impairments." Physical and aerobic activities may be challenging for the millions of people with disabilities, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes nearly half of all adults with disabilities get no leisure time aerobic physical activity. The Paralympics and Team USA members thus present an incredibly uplifting message that may empower and serve as an inspiration for other disabled Americans and citizens globally.

Many athletes, and millions of disabled Americans, rely on caregivers, sometimes referred to as personal care attendants (PCAs), to help with one or more activities important for daily living. Providing assistance with activities such as bathing and dressing, paying bills, and providing meals or transportation, PCAs may also provide emotional support and help with managing a chronic disease or disability. For some disabled Americans, their disability may not allow them to complete activities of daily living without a PCA. This is a specialty skill very different from sports competition that cannot simply be thrust upon someone without appropriate experience.

The Games of the XXXII Olympiad are operating under incredibly challenging circumstances due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics were pushed from 2020 to 2021, international fans are barred from attending any events, and earlier this month the Japanese Olympics minister announced that all Summer Olympic and Paralympic events in the Tokyo area would be held without spectators. We understand that the organizers of the Olympic and Paralympic have also put caps on the total number of people from any country's delegation, including athletes and essential personnel, as a means to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. All of these additional stressors and restrictions serve to increase the need for PCAs, not eliminate them.

Having been born with Usher syndrome, a condition that left her deaf and with progressive vision decline, Ms. Meyers requires a PCA to help her navigate new environments. Since 2017, USOPC has permitted Maria Meyers, Becca's mother, to travel with Becca to international competitions as her "person of trust" and de-facto PCA. In February, as it became clear that the Tokyo Games were going to proceed, Ms. Meyers communicated to the USOPC about their previous agreement allowing her mother to serve as her "person of trust" and de-facto PCA. Via a zoom meeting with the director of US Para Swimming, Ms. Meyers raised her concerns for her accommodations for the upcoming Games.

On May 4, Ms. Meyers was informed by USOPC about the decision to only provide one PCA for almost the entire Team USA's Paralympic swim team. In the same correspondence, Ms. Meyers was told that the Team USA Paralympic Swim team, "... staff will serve in a PCA role during the games... (who) will be there to assist you in addition to a few other swimmers throughout the games." On May 24, Ms. Meyers participated in a zoom meeting with the chief of U.S Paralympics, the Associate Director of US Para Swimming, Sports Medicine, Mental Health and Games Operations as well as her agent, Dan Levy, to discuss her request for a dedicated PCA. At this meeting, her request was denied and US Para Swimming again offered to provide a Para Swimming staff member that was already accredited to travel to Tokyo as someone that would be available to assist Ms. Meyers and any of her 33 teammates when needed. The reason for denying her request was the tight travel restrictions Japan imposed on countries to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Given her fraught experience at the 2016 Summer Paralympics, and degrading vision since that time, Ms. Meyers made an incredibly difficult and frustratingly necessary choice to withdraw from Team USA because the USOPC would not fulfill their responsibility to provide her with the support she felt she required as a deaf and blind athlete to safely compete in the Paralympics. Even though US Para swimming was aware of her needs prior to COVID-19, they did not find a way to fulfill her accommodation needs for the 2021 Paralympic Games.

The communication from USOPC around providing PCA services to the Team USA Paralympic swim team has been troublingly inconsistent. In a public statement provided to media on Wednesday, July 21, USOPC wrote that there would be one designated PCA assigned to the full Para Swimming team, and that this PCA would join 10 other coaches and staff who would also provide part-time support for the team members.<sup>1</sup> However, on Friday, July 23, in response to questions from congressional staff, USOPC wrote that the PCA, "... was added to the Para Swimming team to support Ms. Meyers and **would have been a dedicated PCA** for Ms. Meyers." This sudden difference in USOPC's version of events does not align with information shared previously by USOPC with the media, congressional staff, or Ms. Meyers.

Either way, USOPC is failing to provide adequate support to the Team USA Para Swimming team. If USOPC policy is to provide one dedicated PCA for the entire 34-member team, this is inadequate. The individual identified for this role has coaching experience, but does not have training in personal care attendant services – and could hardly carry out this function for so many athletes. If the other 10 staff for the Para Swimming team, which includes coaches, trainers and nutritionists, are designated as "dual-hat" aides, these staff are stretched thin under normal circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/olympics/2021/07/21/usopc-response-becca-meyers-paralympian/>

They would have little time beyond their regular duties to provide adequate personal care services to the athletes, such as navigating a deafblind athlete through the Paralympic village. A history of slim staffing for athletes at the Olympic and Paralympic games does not make it right or adequate for our athletes, particularly under the current stresses of the pandemic.

If, as the USOPC now maintains, the PCA for the Paralympic swim team was exclusively for Ms. Meyers because she was the only athlete to request a PCA, why was Ms. Meyers not simply given the option of electing to use her mother as her PCA as USOPC had authorized for previous competitions? An important element to PCA services is trust, which Ms. Meyers had with her mother by her side in previous competitions. Will the "dedicated" PCA still go to Tokyo even though Ms. Meyers withdrew, and will they travel to support the rest of the team as the initial communication indicated? By changing the USOPC narrative, you continue to fail Becca Meyers and the other members of Team USA.

We appreciate that globally we are operating under challenging circumstances, and that the USOPC has a limited number of members of the U.S. delegation who could attend in-person due to the ongoing pandemic. However, Ms. Meyers' condition, previous experience, and requirements dictated that you deem her mother essential personnel. Tragically, you have failed to live up to your dedication to promoting excellence in the lives of people with disabilities and may steer a generation of Paralympians away from competing for Team USA.

The upcoming XXIV Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Beijing also may operate under the looming threat of COVID-19, and it is incumbent upon the USOPC to commit to work with the athletes to ensure you are providing appropriate and adequate accommodations going forward.

In order to better understand your policies, procedures, and future plans for providing reasonable accommodations for our world-class Paralympians, we ask that by September 30, 2021, you provide a detailed explanation of the current policies and procedures of when and how PCAs are provided to our athletes, as well as how you plan to improve them for future competitions. In such detailed explanation, we ask that you include recommendations on how to improve the Section 220527 Complaints against national governing bodies process under the Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act to ensure athlete's preferred accommodations are considered before a Section 9 appeal is conducted.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to hearing from you so that every one of America's Paralympians can compete at the highest levels possible.

Sincerely,



Benjamin L. Cardin  
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator

*Maggie Hassan*

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Margaret Wood Hassan  
United States Senator

*C.A. Dutch Ruppertsberger*

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Member of Congress