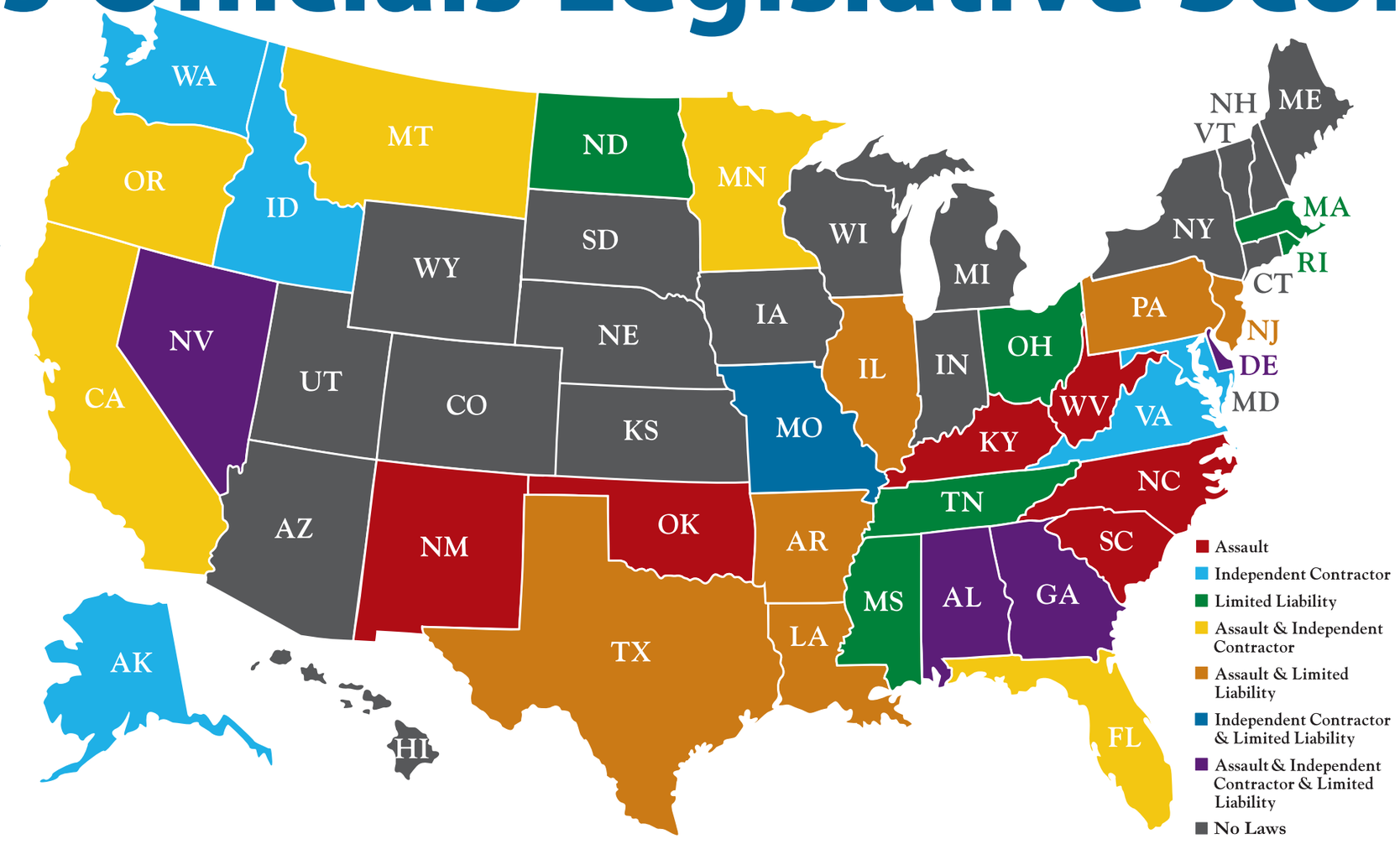
Sports Officials Legislative Scorecard

Has your state passed laws related to assaults on officials, officials' liability or independent contractor status? Those three issues impact sports officials and the officiating industry. Many states have realized the importance of addressing those topics.

Sports officials should be able to perform their duties without threat of personal injury, administrative hearings or litigation because of their game calls. Being a referee or umpire is no easy task. State legislators can show support for the men, women and children who officiate on the courts, fields and ice by passing laws to protect them.

NASO has been bringing attention to assault, liability and independent contractor issues for years. The map, updated for 2017, displays the states that have passed laws dealing with those issues. There are currently 21 states that have officiating assault laws (including 19 with criminal laws and two with civil statutes), 16 with limited liability legislation and 14 states with independent contractor laws. In addition, two states — Idaho and Washington — have supportive resolutions for sports officials (not shown on the map). How does your state match up with others? If there is work to be done, consider getting involved in pushing for legislation.



Pass Legislation in Your State

Since 1984, when NASO first submitted model legislation regarding assaults against officials, members and legislators have used such models to construct their own legislative bills.

There is no fool-proof plan to get the job done. Each state handles legislation differently, and it is up to the local constituency to manage the process effectively. It is NASO's goal that individual members utilize the proposed legislative models and work with their local officials associations and local legislators to construct viable laws. Before you do anything else, it's a good idea to do some research. Request an NASO Assault Legislation Packet and visit naso.org. Contact your state government to find out what specific legislation is in place. And if your state does not have needed laws supporting officials, you can get involved.

1. Contact your local association. Share with your association what other states have done in terms of legislation. Move forward united. You can also work to get other officials associations in the area or your state association to back your cause.

2. Circulate a petition. Ask members of your association and area officials associations to sign a petition asking lawmakers to take action.

3. Gather information. Gather and present information to legislators about incidents that have happened in your state that apply, such as officiating assaults, etc.

4**. Get on the phone or Internet.** Contact your legislators and meet with them to present information that may help to pass the legislation.

5. Follow up and don't give up. After talking and meeting with your legislators, follow up with a thank you letter and tell them that you will follow their progress. Keep the topic in the forefront. Even if a proposed bill doesn't pass the first time, it doesn't mean it won't pass in the future. Take time to gather more support and continue to pursue the legislation at the next opportunity.

Assault Legislation Information Available Online

For the latest legislation information, visit naso.org. There you will find legislation statuses in each state, information about model legislation and specific state assault legislation.

Michigan Senate Committee Approves Assault Bills

A Michigan Senate Judiciary committee in March approved Senate Bills 200 and 201 that would increase penalties for those who assault sports officials. The wife of John Bieniewicz, a referee who was killed by a punch to the neck during an adult soccer game, testified in support of the legislation. The couple's son, who is a referee, also spoke for the legislation.

The legislation calls for a maximum of five years in prison for anyone who assaults a referee and causes serious injury. The maximum would be two years for a lesser injury.

The bills now go to the full Senate for a vote.

"Referees, they're out on an island. There's nothing there to protect them, OK?" Kris Bieniewicz said. "Attacks are made on teachers, but generally speaking teachers have their security in schools nowadays; there's things to deter it.

"Referees are out there by themselves. It's not like they're packing a gun. They've got a whistle. That's it."

Indiana Pursues Assault Legislation

Indiana Senate Bill 270 was developed to increase the penalties for battery against a working sports official. Currently, simple battery and battery causing bodily injury are misdemeanors. Sponsored by Sen. Lonnie Randolph, D-East Chicago, the bill would make those acts felonies if they're committed against sports officials.

"You would hope people wouldn't take it to a physical level, but it does happen," Rick Frank, a deputy prosecutor in Marion County and president-elect of the Indiana Officials Association, told the Indianapolis Star. He works high school football and basketball. "We read stories from all around the country where (officials) are attacked or injured or battered. ... If you do that, if you decide to take that into your own hands, whether you're acting out of rage or not, a felony charge is certainly appropriate."

Randolph said the bill would "make people stop and think twice about getting too heated, too emotional during a game, especially when you're dealing with kids."