

# Local Program Development Guide

## Section 2 – Athletes

Special Olympics aims to create an inclusive environment for all athletes. While no athlete will be turned away based on financial need, there are required steps to become a Special Olympics athlete. There are also recommended sources for recruiting athletes and additional opportunities for athletes beyond the playing field.

### Eligibility

Special Olympics training and competition is open to every person with intellectual disabilities who registers to participate in Special Olympics as required by the General Rules. For detailed information regarding eligibility within General Rules, please visit: <https://resources.specialolympics.org/governance-and-leadership-excellence/special-olympics-general-rules/article-2>

### Age Requirement

Individuals are eligible for training and competition at age 8, and there is no upper age limit for participation. Children under age 8 are eligible to participate in the Special Olympics Young Athletes program. The athlete must turn 8 by the sport's medical deadline in order to be eligible to compete in that sport season.

A Local Program may permit children who are at least 6-years-old to participate in age-appropriate Special Olympics training programs, or in specific and age-appropriate cultural or social activities offered during a Special Olympics event. Such children may be recognized for their participation in such training or other non-competitive activities through certificates of participation, or through other types of recognition not associated with participation in Special Olympics competition. No child may participate in a Special Olympics competition (or be awarded medals or ribbons associated with competition) prior to their 8th birthday.

### Identifying a Person with an Intellectual Disability

A person is considered to have an intellectual disability for purposes of determining their eligibility to participate in Special Olympics if that person satisfies one of the following requirements:

- The person has been identified by an Local Program or professional as having an intellectual disability as determined by their localities
- The person has an intellectual delay as determined by standardized measures, such as intelligent quotient (or IQ) testing, or other measures which are generally

accepted within the professional community as being a reliable measurement of the existence of an intellectual delay

- The person has a closely related intellectual disability, meaning that the person has functional limitations in both general learning (such as IQ) and adaptive skills (such as in recreation, work, independent living, self-direction, or self-care)
- Persons whose functional limitations are based solely on a physical, behavioral, or emotional disability, or a specific learning or sensory disability, are not eligible to participate as Special Olympics athletes. However, these individuals may volunteer for Special Olympics or consider becoming a Unified Sports partner.

### **Unified Sports Partners**

Unified Sports partners must be a registered Class A Volunteer and complete all three steps in the Class A Application. For more information about becoming a Class A Volunteer: <https://www.specialolympicswisconsin.org/get-involved/volunteer/class-a-volunteers/>

### **Athlete Registration**

Athletes must submit an Athlete Medical Form to Special Olympics Wisconsin. This health information form must be signed by a medical professional. Forms may be accessed at the following site: <https://www.specialolympicswisconsin.org/sports-offered/become-an-athlete/>

Athletes must submit a Special Olympics Release Form (or comparable Special Olympics consent form). Athletes under the age of 18, or who have guardians appointed to them, must have their parent or guardian sign the form. Athletes who are 18 years of age or older without a guardian may sign the Release Form themselves.

No athlete can be excluded due to lack of funds. For more details, visit Special Olympics General Rules, Article 3: <https://resources.specialolympics.org/governance-and-leadership-excellence/special-olympics-general-rules/article-3>

## **Young Athletes**

**Young Athletes** is a play and learn program for all children ages 2-10. This is a unified program that can be implemented in schools, communities, and homes. Young Athletes is a guided curriculum that covers foundational skills such as running, walking, and balancing. Young Athletes also introduces healthy habits regarding both fitness and nutritional guidance. There are a couple of subset programs that can be run simultaneously with Young Athletes, Unified Readers and Unified Rookies.

**Unified Readers** is a youth based reading curriculum that contains various books, guided questions, and relative activities. This program is built to create new friendships, encourage individual growth, and embrace inclusion through young literature.

**Unified Rookies** is based on developmental sports. Instead of focusing on foundational skills, Unified Rookies focuses on individual sports. This program is designed for children ages 8-12 based on skill and sport maturity.

### ***Target Young Athletes***

- Partner with local groups that involve people with intellectual disabilities, such as The Arc or your local Down syndrome association. Most organizations have space for resources at their offices, on their websites/publications, or at dedicated community events.
- Target inclusive preschools and share information as to how they can incorporate the program during the day, and encourage teachers to become coaches.
- Offer a Young Athletes Festival at Local Games and invite the public. To attract new families, incorporate Special Olympics Healthy Athletes® opportunities that begin with a screening.

## **Athlete Recruitment**

Special Olympics Local Programs are always growing. It's important to reach as many athletes as possible to help maintain growth. Below are a number of tips to assist with outreach to new and current athletes.

### ***Create Links to Local Groups & Local Programs Serving Individuals with Disabilities***

- Partner with Parks and Recreation Departments for opportunities to include individuals with intellectual disabilities in their current Programs. Connect links between Special Olympics and Parks and Recreation websites for more information on how to get involved.
- Connect with all Local Programs and community services – such as group homes – to bring in older athletes or maintain current athlete base as they age out of school.

## ***Advertise Locally & Utilize Social Media***

Create a Local Program website and social media account(s), according to your Accredited Program's guidance. Use these outlets to promote your Local Program and recruit. Since Facebook only allows a very small percentage (10-16%) of people to see your posts on a Facebook "page", opening a "group" is a much better option. In groups, 100% of your followers will receive notifications by default when any member posts to the group. Members can upload photos, Documents (such as registrations for events), participate in chats, and invite members to group events.

Groups are designed to provide a forum for a small group of people to communicate about shared interests so it's perfect for Local Programs. Facebook groups differ from pages in several ways:

- **Privacy:** In addition to an open setting, more privacy settings are available for groups. In secret and closed groups, posts are only visible to group members.
- **Audience:** Group members must be approved or added by other members. When a group reaches a certain size, some features are limited. The most useful groups tend to be the ones you create with small groups of people you know.

There are several guidelines for Local Programs interested in setting up a Facebook group:

- Local Programs interested in setting up a Facebook group should contact SOWI HQ prior to establishing the group. SOWI Staff have many tools that can help you along in the process and ensure people know about your group.
- A Facebook group must be associated with (or set up by someone with) a personal account.
- Your group name should your complete Local Program name (for example, Adams-Friendship Special Olympics).
- SOWI will provide a copy template to use for the "About" section on the group page. This "About" copy will include an explanation of your Local Program's tie to SOWI.
- You must make Jay Messar, Director of Communications from SOWI State Office, as an admin for the group. He can keep you connected with others in your area to help promote your group.
- There are several privacy settings available for groups. We recommend an "Open" privacy setting to allow any prospective members to find and join the group.
- Any existing Local Program Facebook pages should establish a migration plan from the page to the group. The SOWI staff can help with this. Advertise

upcoming events and include information such as how to join, how to volunteer, and how to donate.

### ***Target Local Schools***

With support from Special Olympics Wisconsin, introduce the Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools® program, which is a comprehensive model implemented in the United States that combines Special Olympics Unified Sports®, Inclusive Youth Leadership, and Whole School Engagement to create school and community climates of acceptance and inclusion. This can begin as early as kindergarten with Young Athletes, and continue throughout elementary, middle, and high school with Unified Sports and/or related sports and leadership opportunities.

- Work with local independent school districts, Special Education Directors, or Athletic Directors. Partner with them to add Special Olympics opportunities to the school day or as a part of after-school programs with a focus on the middle schools.
- Speak at parent meetings and/or teacher professional development days
- Provide Special Olympics and Unified Sports information to students and their families through newsletters and brochures.

## **Unified Champion Schools**

### Terminology:

- UCS: Unified Champion Schools
- UCCS: Unified Champion City Schools
- Unified: Both athletes & partners are involved and participating together.
- Athlete: Any student who has an intellectual disability.
- Unified Partner: Any actively involved student who does not have an intellectual disability.

Special Olympics Wisconsin offers a Unified Champion Schools strategy to schools across the entire state of Wisconsin. In a “Unified Champion School” (UCS), or a “Unified Champion City School” (UCCS) there is an understanding that there is not just a single experience or event that happens for one day; but rather, there is an expectation that acceptance and inclusion are everyday occurrences that change entire schools and impact the whole student body throughout the year. This strategy can be introduced to any grade level, preschool through college. Our goal is to continuously expand and offer as many unified experiences as we can. To classify as a Unified Champion School, schools must adhere to three components. These components are as follows:

**Inclusive Sports** focuses on athletics and fitness based programs. A few examples of how to create inclusive sport opportunities in your own school would be offering an Adaptive PE class, Unified Sports Club, hosting Unified Recreational Days, Young Athletes, SOfit, Unified Rookies, and more. Each of these clubs or programs are centered around being active, as well as creating meaningful inclusion.

**Whole School Engagement** is designed to encourage the entire student body to be involved in some way. Whole School Engagement is a core part of creating an inclusive environment that students feel safe and welcomed in. A few examples of this component would be participating in Respect Week, Get Into It lessons, Fans in the Stands, or the annual Polar Plunge.

**Inclusive Youth Leadership** helps bring unified experiences to life and ensures that all students have a voice, create new friendships, gain leadership skills, and more. Bringing Inclusive Youth Leadership to your school can look very different. A few common examples would be to start a Unified Club, School Coordinating Teams, attend a Youth Activation Summit, join the Youth Activation Committee, or attend the Special Olympics Wisconsin Education Leaders Network.

These examples are not conclusive. There are many different ways that a “Unified Champion School” can look. For more information on how to become a Unified Champion School, please reach out to the Unified Department at Special Olympics Wisconsin.

## **Athlete Leadership**

Athlete Leadership empowers athletes to develop leadership skills and utilize their voices and abilities to undertake meaningful leadership roles (also referred to as Unified Leadership), influence change in the Special Olympics movement, and create inclusive communities around the world. As athletes gain the confidence that comes with achievement, they feel empowered and ready to take on new challenges to make use of all their abilities.

There are various roles athletes might serve in the Local Program. Some roles require meeting certain criteria as well as training. A support mentor can assist the athlete to become more successful and have a more meaningful experience.

Athletes can serve Special Olympics as an Athlete Leader in many roles such as: Local Program Management Team Member, Global Messenger, Assistant Coach/Coach, Official, Committee Member, and more!

Contact the Vice President of Unified Leadership for more information. Additional athlete leadership resources can also be found at:

<https://www.specialolympicswisconsin.org/unified/athlete-leadership-programs-alps/>

## **Health and Fitness Programming**

### **Healthy Athletes**

Healthy Athletes is a Special Olympics Wisconsin program that provides free health screenings and health education in a fun, welcoming environment with a focus on removing the anxiety people with intellectual disabilities often experience when faced with a visit to a medical professional.

Healthy Athletes events are led by licensed medical professionals with the support of additional medical professionals and students going into those fields to give them hands on experience working with people with intellectual disabilities.

Current Healthy Athlete disciplines offered include: Fit Feet, FUNfitness, Healthy Hearing, Health Promotion, MedFest, Opening Eyes, Special Smiles, and Strong Minds. A detailed description of each discipline can be found at:

<https://www.specialolympicswisconsin.org/health/healthy-athletes/>

### **Fitness**

Physical fitness is a key part of the Special Olympics Wisconsin mission. Fitness is a lifelong pursuit, requiring the establishment of healthy habits year-round. Athletes and all other members of the Special Olympics Wisconsin community are encouraged to seek optimal health and performance through adequate physical activity, nutrition and hydration.

Special Olympics Wisconsin's SOfit Program is a Unified approach to improving and protecting health and wellness for people with and without intellectual disabilities. SOfit is a program that treats wellness as a Special Olympics sport. Teams meet once a week to learn about health and wellness topics and participate in physical activity. More information on SOfit can be found at

<https://www.specialolympicswisconsin.org/health/so-fit/>. In addition, fitness materials including Fit5 have been developed and are available for use at <https://www.specialolympicswisconsin.org/health/fitness-resources/>.

## **Athletes As Coaches (AAC) Program**

Special Olympics Wisconsin (SOWI) welcomes and encourages athletes to assume leadership positions such as athlete-coach. To be successful, athletes wishing to coach in the SOWI system should first communicate their wishes to their Local Program Manager. This provides an opportunity to determine the best plan for the Local Program and athlete, as well as a time to discuss the criteria for involvement (below)

and understand important SOWI policies such as the Policy Regarding Volunteers and Staff Dating Athletes, found in the *Volunteer Policy* section of this handbook.

#### Criteria for Involvement

- 1) Athletes wishing to coach in the SOWI system must be registered and screened as a participant in the AAC program. This is done by completing all steps of the Class A Volunteer registration process and completing the on-line General Coaches Certification (Athlete coaches must be 16 years old or older.)
- 2) Athletes must have a mentor in the AAC process, and have the ability to meet the requirements of being a coach (attendance at practices and competitions, etc.). Local Program managers may assist the athlete, but the athlete will be responsible for finding a mentor as well as transportation to and from practices and/or trainings as part of this program.
- 3) The athlete, with the help of their mentor, must adhere to all current coaching certification policies.
- 4) In addition, athletes must complete a one-time ACC face-to-face workshop (a 4-hour training offered periodically throughout the state).

An athlete-coach may serve as the only certified coach for a team. However, if an athlete is the only coach, please contact SOWI staff to assess if any accommodations are necessary. No athlete-coach will be allowed to register in a coach's role with any of the Unified Sports® offered by SOWI.

To preserve the integrity of the AAC position, SOWI does not allow athletes to participate and coach within the same sports season (i.e. an athlete will not be allowed to attend State competition as a coach if you have competed in that sports season as an athlete). Athlete coaches who no longer participate as an "athlete" do not have to renew their *Athlete Participation and Release Forms*, but must keep their Class A volunteer registrations current. If the AAC maintains a current Athlete Participation form, they can attend all Healthy Athletes screenings.

#### **Advanced Competition Opportunities**

SOWI encourages registered athlete coaches to consider applying for coach positions at USA and World Games when applicable. Please contact the VP of Sports and Programs for more information.

**For a copy of the Athlete Code-of-Conduct, please reference the document located in the Appendix of the Local Program Guide.**