

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.

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 agency or professional as having an intellectual disability as determined by their localities; or
- The person has a cognitive delay, as determined by standardized measures such as intelligent quotient or "IQ" testing or other measures which are generally accepted within the professional community in the United States as being a reliable measurement of the existence of a cognitive delay; or

- The person has a closely related developmental disability. A “closely related developmental disability” means having functional limitations in both general learning (such as IQ) and adaptive skills (such as recreation, work, independent living, self-direction, or self-care).
- Persons whose functional limitations are based solely on physical, behavioral, or emotional disability or a specific learning or sensory disability are not eligible to participate as Special Olympics athletes but may be eligible to volunteer for Special Olympics or consider becoming a Unified Sports Partner.

Unified Sports Partners

Unified Sports partners follow a similar registration process as athletes. In order to become a Unified Sports partner, an individual must be a class A volunteer.

Athlete Registration

Athletes must submit the required paperwork to participate and compete. These forms may be on the Special Olympics Wisconsin website:

<https://specialolympicswisconsin.org/medical-info-forms/>

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>

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 & Agencies 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 agencies 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.

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

Target Local Schools

With support from your Accredited Program, 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.

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 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, Athlete Health Messenger, Fitness Captain, and more!

Consult your Accredited Program about additional opportunities to advance your athlete leaders through their offerings. Additional athlete leadership resources can also be found at: <https://resources.specialolympics.org/governance-and-leadership-excellence/athlete-leadership>

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 Health Programs for more information.

Health & Fitness Programming

Healthy Athletes is a Special Olympics 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://resources.specialolympics.org/health>

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

Special Olympics Wisconsin has endorsed a fitness model, which have been created for Local Programs to implement: SOFit. This model is outlined at

<https://resources.specialolympics.org/program-models>. In addition, Fit 5 materials have been developed and are available for use at

<https://resources.specialolympics.org/health/fitness/fit-5>.

Inclusive Health aims to integrate people with intellectual disabilities into mainstream health systems to ensure accessible, inclusive, and equitable healthcare for all. Inclusive Health is founded on the idea that the health disparities faced by people with ID can be addressed by removing barriers and making the necessary accommodations to include people with ID in the mainstream health care system,

health promotion, and public health efforts. Sustainable inclusive policies and practices can address, reduce and often eliminate many of these barriers. Inclusion allows for people with ID to take full advantage of the benefits of the same health programs and services experienced by people who do not have ID, resulting in improved health outcomes.

Consult your Accredited Program about additional opportunities to advance inclusive health in your community. Additional inclusive health resources can also be found at: <https://inclusivehealth.specialolympics.org/>.

Athlete Code of Conduct

The following is a sample code of conduct for Local Programs. Check with your Accredited Program to ensure you are using their most current, Board-approved Code of Conduct.

Special Olympics Athlete Code of Conduct

Special Olympics is committed to the highest ideals of sport and expects all athletes to honor sport and the mission and vision of Special Olympics. All Special Olympics athletes and Unified Sports® partners agree to the following code:

Sportsmanship

- I will practice good sportsmanship.
- I will act in ways that bring respect to me, my coaches, my team, and Special Olympics.
- I will not use bad language.
- I will not swear or insult other persons.
- I will not fight with other athletes, coaches, volunteers, or staff.

Training & Competitions

- I will train regularly.
- I will learn and follow the rules of my sport.
- I will listen to my coaches and the officials, and ask questions when I do not understand.
- I will always try my best during training, divisioning, and competitions.
- I will not hold back in preliminary competitions just to get into an easier finals competition division.

Responsibility for My Actions

- I will not make inappropriate or unwanted physical, verbal, or sexual advances on others in person or through any form of communication (social media, email, phone calls, etc.)
- I will not bully or harass any individual.
- I will not smoke in non-smoking areas.
- I will not drink alcohol or use illegal drugs at Special Olympics events.
- I will not take drugs for the purpose of improving my performance.
- I will obey all laws and Special Olympics rules, the International Federation, and the National Federation/Governing Body rules for my sport(s).

I understand that if I do not obey this Code of Conduct, I will be subject to a range of consequences by my Program or a Games Organizing Committee, up to and including not being allowed to participate.

Name

**Athlete or Unified Sports®
Partner** *Circle Role*

Date