

**CHOOSE TO INCLUDE**

**INNOVATE Sport and Health to catalyze a united world**

***Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination.***

***– Nelson Mandela***

A catalyst for social change, the power of sports can also transform lives. Through sport, the strengths and abilities of people with intellectual disabilities are recognized and appreciated while misperceptions are broken down, stereotypes are challenged, and attitudes are forever changed. The universal language of team work, competition, drive and celebration is the foundation of the Special Olympics movement—but it is not an end in itself. In addition to creating societal change, sport provides opportunities for lifelong physical activity resulting in positive health outcomes. Recognizing sport as a gateway to health promotion is perhaps one of the most transformative discoveries since the movement’s inception.

Despite a mistaken belief that people with intellectual disabilities receive the same or better health care than others, they typically receive sub-standard care, or virtually no health care at all. Special Olympics’ Healthy Athletes program seeks to remedy this dire problem. Since 1997, the Healthy Athletes program, offered at most major Special Olympics events, has provided more than 1.7 million free health screenings to children and adults with intellectual disabilities. In many cases, the program has profoundly changed or even saved lives.

Special Olympics athlete Dustin Plunkett credits Special Olympics for not only changing his life, but saving it. During a Healthy Athletes screening, a dentist noticed the poor condition of his teeth and he was later diagnosed with gum cancer. “If I hadn’t been diagnosed, I wouldn’t be alive today," Plunkett said. Plunkett who is now a member of the Special Olympics Southern California board of directors and an ESPN analyst has been involved with the Special Olympics since 1996. "I was told I was going to be worth nothing in my life," Plunkett said. "And now look at me."

Without fanfare, Special Olympics utilized its scale and scope to become the largest public health organization in the world dedicated to serving people with intellectual disabilities. Complementing the Healthy Athletes program, Healthy Communities was established as a way to create sustainable care for individuals with intellectual disabilities beyond that received through Special Olympics events.  The Healthy Communities initiative focuses on transforming existing health care systems by ensuring access to quality health and health promotion programs in local communities including initial visits and routine follow-up care. This initiative seeks to make quality health care a ready resource in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities so that Special Olympics games are not the only opportunity for health screenings.  By facilitating access to health care, we will ensure there

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to be no “wrong door” for an individual with intellectual disabilities to walk through when seeking medical assistance.

While Special Olympics has steadily grown over the course of the past 50 years, the movement is at a crossroads. *Only* two percent of the 200 million children and adults with an intellectual disability worldwide are served by Special Olympics. For every individual transformed by the movement, there are thousands who still live in fear and isolation, lack access to healthcare and suffer from preventable and treatable illness. It is clear that in order to improve the quality of outreach through sport and further engage the healthcare community, Special Olympics must usher in a new era.

For many athletes and coaches in the movement, the training, coaching and competition opportunities have remained stagnant for too long. Outdated systems, language barriers, and inconsistent sports training and competition contribute to an ever-growing list of obstacles to inclusive sports for all. Special Olympics must welcome new and innovative strategies to ensure all people, from those in Greenwich, CT to Nairobi, Kenya have the same access to, and opportunities through, sport.

Special Olympics has made life changing AND life-saving strides in health. However, alarming statistics show that even in advanced countries, many doctors are not properly trained on how to interact with or diagnose people with intellectual disabilities. Most individuals with intellectual disabilities examined through the Healthy Athletes program have not been to the doctor in years, if ever. For many, blindness, hearing loss, and life-threatening conditions have not been identified or addressed. Additionally, individuals with intellectual disabilities face very real barriers to healthcare. Globally, health promotion and prevention initiatives rarely target individuals with disabilities, a problem compounded by poverty and discrimination.

In order to course correct these embedded obstacles to inclusion, we must once again boldly, strategically and wisely pursue an innovative approach. Core to our movement and reminiscent of our earliest days, Special Olympics will lead a ground-breaking overhaul of our entire sports program as well as push the boundaries of our health outreach like we have never done before.

Special Olympics will launch the *Center for Sport and Health Justice*, an innovative and collaborative nexus of expertise aimed at galvanizing the movement’s momentum that will guide our programming into the next 50 years. The objectives of the Center will be threefold; create the highest quality sport experience for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, to influence policy that ensures health care is inclusive and accessible, and to make certain medical professionals are adequately prepared. Assembling world class professionals, scholars and leaders to conduct cutting edge research on sport, health and inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities, this highly reputable virtual center of influence will serve as a key stakeholder in ending discrimination against people with intellectual disabilities.

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The Center will:

* + - Develop new strategies for changing and improving the education of health care professionals and engaging them in creating avenues for closing the gap on the health disparities facing people with intellectual disabilities.
    - Attract 170,000 health care professionals to join in Special Olympics’ clinical training experiences around the world.
    - Create thought leadership to attract policy leaders to join with self-advocates, government leaders and health care experts in adopting equitable policies to end health discrimination.
    - Develop new and powerful digital sports tools for promoting motor development and fitness, improving sports skills, optimizing individual performance and improving coaching.

These tools are to be both broad in application to the global community as well as personalized to meet the needs of individual athletes.

* + - Forge new partnerships to develop 21st Century Special Olympics Clubs at the local community level that provide year-round sports and competition opportunities, access to national and international sport facilities, coaches, and federations, and build a deep sense of community belonging for Special Olympics athletes and their families.

The work of the *Center for Sport and Health Justice* will revolutionize health care and fitness opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities, demonstrating to the world that we can no longer turn a blind eye to the very real and pressing health care needs of children and adults with intellectual disabilities.

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