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SPECIAL OLYMPICS
ATHLETE LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS (ALPs)

“The freethinking of one age is the common sense of the next.”
Matthew Arnold
1875

In 1968 when Special Olympics began, the idea that people with intellectual disabilities might be able to compete in Olympic-type sports training and competition was considered “freethinking”. Today, it is common sense.

Many people at the outset of the 21st Century believed that the idea of athletes in full and meaningful participation on Special Olympics Boards of Directors was “freethinking” and tokenism. The next age has arrived. In both cases, our athletes proved that their abilities were greater than the world’s perception of their disabilities.

It is now common sense to expect that a board of directors charged with governance and long term survival of an organization whose mission is to provide sports training and competition for people with intellectual disabilities – would include people with intellectual disabilities. It just makes sense to include the consumers of our programs in deciding the future of the organization at all of its levels.

It is common sense to expect that athletes who have been coached for years would want to one day try their hand at being the coach themselves; that they would want to volunteer at the games, help with fund raising, and speak on behalf of the movement and themselves.

**ALPs initiatives are designed to boost athlete retention in the Special Olympics movement.**
As athletes mature, they seek new challenges and for ways to utilize the wisdom that comes from their life and Special Olympics experiences. ALPs initiatives are designed to provide those challenges and opportunities for the maturing athlete.

ALPs initiatives also provide an excellent way to demonstrate to the larger community that our athletes have talents and interests that may have gone unnoticed before. First, our athletes amaze their communities with their commitment, drive and athletic skill; then they go further to show that they are capable of helping direct and provide the program for others.

ALPs initiatives make better Special Olympics programs! As our administrators learn the art of building inclusive decision-making structures, they learn how to be better listeners to everyone, not just the athletes. They also ensure development of programming options and priorities that are of interest to new and existing athletes.

It is common sense to ask athletes what they like and how to get more people to join the program, and then employ them to carry out their recommendations. But where do you start? Here!
What are SO-ALPs Programs?

Special Olympics-Athlete Leadership Programs (SO-ALPs) allow athletes to explore opportunities for Special Olympics participation in roles previously considered “non-traditional.” Such participation might come in the form of an athlete serving on the Board of Directors or local organizing committee; or it might find an athlete as a spokesperson, member of an Athlete Input Council, a team captain, coach or official.

**ALPs initiatives are designed as management tools for Special Olympics staff and volunteers.** While on the surface, these programs look and feel like self-improvement programs for athletes, those benefits are secondary to the primary goal of Athlete Leadership Programming. These programs are designed to provide avenues for administrators and leaders in the program to stay in touch with the athletes they seek to serve and to keep programs vital and attractive to the athletes that we seek to recruit and retain.

To achieve those goals of inclusive decision-making we will need to offer training and support at all levels of the program; for both the athletes and for the Special Olympics volunteers and staff who will welcome them into new, leadership roles.

Participation in ALPs may be in addition to or in place of participation in traditional programs. We track participation in ALPs through the annual Athlete Census. Programs are asked to report how many athletes they know of that meet the following definition:

**Athlete Leaders (including ALPs) Definition**
An Athlete or Participant who serves in at least one Athlete Leadership role listed below:

**Athlete Leadership Examples:**
- Athletes as Volunteers (games or events)
- Athletes as Coaches or Assistant Coaches
- Athletes as Sport Officials
- Athletes as Public Speakers (Global Messengers)
- Athletes on Boards, Committees or Input Councils
- Athletes assisting with Fund Raising
- Athletes assisting with technology or other office work
- Athletes serving as peer mentors or team captains
- Athletes attending regional or national meeting about ID
SO-ALPs Ideas

Below are some initiatives that Special Olympics Programs have already instituted. Many may already be occurring in your local Special Olympics programs!

| • Athletes on the Program Boards of Directors | • Athletes as coaches |
| • Athletes on Board Committees | • Athletes as Officials |
| • Athletes on Local/Area Management Teams | • Athletes as Volunteers |
| • Athletes on Games Management Teams | • Athletes as Donors |
| • Athletes on Games Evaluation Teams | • Athletes employed by Special Olympics |
| • Global Messenger Training | • Athletes as contributors to newsletters |
| • Athlete Congress | • Athlete Input Councils |
| • Athlete sessions at Leadership Conferences | • ALPs Universities |
ALPs Training and Resources

Special Olympics, Inc. monitors ALPs initiatives in the field as well as athlete input relating to roles that they would like to play in the organization.

As new initiatives are reported that demonstrate promise for standardization and strong athlete interest, curricula are developed so that other Special Olympics Programs can replicate those initiatives begun elsewhere in the field.

ALPs Programs already standardized and available are:

- **Global Messenger Beginner Course** - to provide training and presentation skills for athletes interested in representing Special Olympics and Special Olympics Athletes in formal or support settings.

- **Global Messenger Graduate Course** - follow-up training to the Beginner Course that works on refining public speaking skills, focusing speeches to get the desired action by the audience, and preparation for various media/presentation situations one encounters as a public speaker for Special Olympics.

- **Governance Workshop** - to prepare athletes to participate in Special Olympics programming and policy dialogue via instruction and practice in forming and articulating opinions, group discussion and techniques for gathering input. Equally important is the enhancement of awareness and listening skills of volunteers, staff and family members as they interact with athletes during this training.

- **Athlete Congress** - To provide a formal, deliberative process for the representation of athlete input in programming, policy and/or governance processes of Special Olympics. A Global Athlete Congress is convened every 5 years in conjunction with the preparation of the Strategic Plan for the movement. Program level Athlete Congresses have been convened in several Programs.

- **Athletes as Coaches or Officials** – To provide background and practical experience on the role of the Head Coach, and Assistant Coach in targeted sports, and the role of officials. This can either be a lead up to participation in regular coaches’ education workshops or as an inclusive workshop which, after a trial period working with an actual team, can qualify attendees for Special Olympics Coaches’ Certification. Athletes seeking certification as Sport Officials must go through that sport’s National Governing Body to take the required courses. It is suggested that they have a mentor who is already an official (or who is taking the class as well) to help with the certification process.

- **Athletes on Boards, Committees and Management Teams** – A printed resource to provide guidance for athletes/support persons/ Boards of Directors and committees that seek inclusive decision-making through athlete participation on the board. This resource assists with the recruitment process and has tips for inclusive governance models.
• **Athletes Assisting with Fundraising** – A workshop designed to explain the relationship between Special Olympics and the people who support us financially. There is a discussion about the process of developing a request for sponsorship and setting up a meeting review a funding proposal; as well as what role an athlete might play in such a meeting.

• **Healthy Lifestyles** – Our athletes have told us that they want more information on how to get and stay healthy, as well as how to help their fellow athletes do the same. This workshop covers the basic principles of health and where in the Special Olympics Program to find information and support to help athletes be healthier and be good health role-models.

• **Technology** – Starting with how to use the internet and social media and advancing to using technology tools to help your local program keep databases or do public awareness, this series of classes has been designed by athlete leaders who saw a need and a way to help.

• **Athletes as Volunteers** – Volunteers are essential to all Special Olympics Programs. Athletes are eager to step up to help do everything from helping to set up or picking up the trash after the games, to serving on the games evaluation or games management team. This workshop reviews the reasons why people volunteer and what to expect if you become a volunteer for your local Special Olympics Program.
How Do I Plan an ALPs Workshop?

When conducting any Athlete Leadership Workshop it is recommended that a staff member or volunteer oversee its implementation. (NOTE: It is ideal if the same person handles all Athlete Leadership Program training.)

1. Determine Program goals for Athlete Leadership Programming. Sample goals include:
   - More athletes reported serving in leadership roles at the sub-program level
   - More athletes serving on Boards, committees, Input Councils, and management teams
   - Increase awareness of ALP’s and athlete potential for various leadership roles

2. Develop a timeline for implementation of the goals noted above and thus which workshop best meets your need. Here is a handy guide to help you decide!

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<td>Sargent Shriver Global Messenger Workshop (3 levels)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Helping Local Programs with Technology</td>
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3. Then decide whether you need ALPs printed materials from SOI or an ALPs workshop. Both are available at: [http://resources.specialolympics.org/Topics/Athletes/ALPs_Training_Resources.aspx](http://resources.specialolympics.org/Topics/Athletes/ALPs_Training_Resources.aspx)

4. If you decide that an ALPs Workshop should be conducted;

   Consideration should be given to:
   - Who is responsible for planning and for covering the costs?
   - Target number of participants (should be equal numbers of athletes and staff/volunteers)
   - Target demographic representation (geographic, ethnicity, gender, age, etc.) of participants.
♦ How many workshops will be run in this budget cycle? Where? (To meet the target numbers identified above)
♦ How much is budgeted for conducting the workshop and for subsequent follow-up?

Once you decide WHICH workshop to run…

5. Prepare all correspondence relating to the training decided upon. Samples are included with the Workshop description and guidance document:
   ➢ Letter from Program Executive Director/President to target audience seeking participation
   ➢ Application Packet
   ➢ Participant acceptance letter with information sheet and travel form
   ➢ Workshop information memos
   ➢ Workshop Agenda and Thank you letters
   ➢ Evaluation and follow-up forms

6. Coordinate selection of workshops participants to ensure match with target set earlier.

7. Set-up Workshop logistics:
   ➢ Date
   ➢ Location for workshop (office, hotel, conference center, retreat, etc.)
   ➢ Housing Contracts
   ➢ Travel
   ➢ Meals
   ➢ Schedule for ancillary presenters (Board, dignitaries, staff, etc.)
   ➢ Order gifts for participants if budgeted

8. Select Workshop Trainers (At least one should be from your Program).
   ➢ Be sure they have a copy of the curriculum (PPT) and know your Program goals related to ALP’s.
   ➢ Arrange travel and housing if someone is from another Program.
   ➢ The training team should include an athlete and a staff/volunteer that have experienced the workshop being presented.

9. Conduct the workshop.
   ➢ Note participants that seem to excel in various aspects of the training;
   ➢ Watch for participants (athletes and staff/volunteers alike) that would make good trainers for future workshops;
   ➢ Note which sections of the training seem to work for the group and the trainers;
   ➢ Note which sections didn’t!

9. Evaluate the Workshop’s effectiveness in moving your Program toward its ultimate ALPs goal and adjust the plan accordingly.
Metrics and Strategies

The Special Olympics Movement Strategic Plan sets a target of 150,000 athletes serving in leadership roles by the end of 2015. The definition of ALPs for this metric is:

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A Global ALPs Task Force and several Regional Leadership Councils have met to address expansion and measurement strategies related to ALPs. The key to our success will be in teaching our existing leadership to invite athletes to serve alongside them AND then to count those athletes as ALPs athletes when they complete the Annual Athlete Census.

ALPs workshops are designed to help Programs prepare athletes and the rest of their leadership for participation in inclusive leadership and program delivery.

Recommendations related to metrics and accountability:

- Start by finding out how many athletes are already serving in one or more of the roles listed above. That is your baseline from which you can grow.

- Talk to existing athlete leaders about how to expand and what goals are reasonable to set for your Program related to increasing the number of athletes serving in leadership roles.

- Program evaluations should include a line of questioning around ALPs to help gather best practices. Interviews with ALL constituency groups need to include their perception of the ALPs program. (Athletes, families, sponsors, board, local coordinators.)
How to Get ALPs Started!

Before you start focusing on Athlete Leadership Programs be sure you have good programs for them to lead! The most important ingredient for good athlete leadership initiatives is regular, high quality sports training and competition. Without that, athlete input will be very predictable, “We want better training and competition!”

Once you have a solid basic program with regular, predictable training and competitions, you can start to focus on enhancing those programs and planning for the future with athlete input and participation. To start ALPs programming you must be willing to step out of a comfort zone of doing things the same as in the past. You as a leader must demonstrate your ability to listen, partner with, and at times even follow athletes.

The truly successful ALPs initiatives are driven by ATHLETE interest. A program for athletes to gain certification as coaches will not be successful if the athletes involved don’t WANT to be coaches! Likewise, a program that certifies athletes as “coaches” but then never allows them to actually coach, is a waste of everyone’s time. Thus, ALPs initiatives are usually born when we listen to athletes and commit ourselves to breaking down barriers that keep them from participation in roles within Special Olympics they want to perform.

Here are some basic steps to take:

1: Get the word out to athletes, family members, coaches, etc. that your program - no matter what level - is interested in Athlete Leadership Programming. The best way to do this is to talk about it in newsletters and meetings.

2: Ask your local programs or coaches for existing examples of athletes serving in leadership roles or directing their own participation. Use the definition of ALPs given below to help explain the program. If you are a Program staff person, ask Area Directors, if you are an Area Director, ask Coaches. ALPs programming happens where athletes participate!

3: Record the input as a base line and look for ideas to promote and standardize. Inform Special Olympics, Inc. of your findings so that a world-wide data base of ALPs ideas can be maintained.

4: Throughout the process, TALK TO ATHLETES about what they would like to do!

5: Be sure that you find ways to value and promote ALL athletes - not just the highly skilled.

Special Olympics is about breaking down barriers that others thought were permanent. ALPs programming is about breaking down our internal barriers that keep athletes from fully enjoying Special Olympics through self-directed, meaningful participation in virtually ANY aspect or the program.
Who Should Participate in ALPs Workshops?
Selecting athlete leaders, Mentors and Trainers

Leadership is a key component in the Athlete Leadership Programs. To maintain the integrity of the ALPs programs we must select athletes who demonstrate Leadership qualities. This doesn’t mean that athletes involved in ALPs programs all have to be high functioning; just that they are willing to take on a role as a leader. Some of the selection requirements that should be considered are:

- Athletes should be, or have been, actively involved as a Special Olympics athlete, coach or official. The athlete should be involved year round in competition so that they are familiar with the various programs and competitions in your area.

- Athletes should be able to communicate effectively. They should demonstrate adequate expressive and receptive language skills. This could include non-verbal communication methods such as sign language or effective use of other assistive communication devices.

- Athletes should demonstrate appropriate behaviors; i.e. gets along with others, has positive outlook, is dependable, and demonstrates polite behaviors and good sportsmanship. Willingness to help out when needed and motivate others are also good behaviors to look for.

- It is recommended that athletes be at least 16 years old or older, but each Program is free to set its own criteria. For Governance training it is recommended that athletes be of legal voting age for their nation.

Selecting Athletes to participate in an ALPs Workshop:

There is a tendency to assume that participation in Athlete Leadership Programs is reserved for “higher functioning” athletes. While it is true that participation in leadership roles may come easier to higher functioning athletes, it is NOT true that they are the only athletes that should be encouraged to participate in these programs.

The greatest indicator of an athlete’s qualification to participate in one of these workshops (or ANY Athlete Leadership Program) is one’s genuine interest. Not every athlete, regardless of mental capacity, is interested in serving in a leadership role! Respect the first tenet of Athlete Leadership Programming when selecting athletes and rely on athlete choice and interest. Our athletes have proven throughout our history that if they really want to do something they can do it. It is our job to help facilitate their success.

Skills that will be helpful for these workshops include:
- Ability to form and articulate their own opinion
- Participation in Special Olympics either currently or in the recent past;
- A willingness to express themselves in small group settings (6-8 people);
- Ability to travel to where ever you conduct the workshop;
• Enthusiasm relating to participation in Special Olympics;
• Ability to be understood when speaking (assistive technology and/or trained speech facilitators should be encouraged when necessary)

Selecting Staff/Volunteer Participants

Look for participants that are already in leadership positions within your organization. These are the people that need to gain first-hand experience in both the value and challenges of athlete participation in leadership roles. Try to avoid recruitment of staff or volunteers that would come simply as escorts or guardians for the workshop. The inherent relationship between these people and the athlete participants makes it difficult to achieve the workshop goals for either population when there is no option for follow-up or longer range planning.

Who can/should lead a workshop?

Anyone can! The most important qualification for conducting an ALPs workshop is belief in the ALPs principle that athletes have wisdom to give and the goal of the workshop is to unleash that wisdom.

Using the tools included here and that are available from SOI, anyone who likes to teach can be effective in presenting these workshops. The more comfortable and creative the presenter is, the better the workshop will be.

The program initiatives presented here are designed to be adjusted to fit each Program’s needs. Presenters need to know that they should talk with Special Olympics Program staff to determine the overall goals for the workshop and how long you will have to present it. From there, you can use the power points provided in the TRAINER section of the ALPs page on the Special Olympics Resources web page. http://resources.specialolympics.org/Topics/Athletes/ALPs_Training_Resources.aspx

Trainer notes are provided in the notes section for all workshop power points

No Special Olympics trainer certification is required to lead an ALPs workshop, although it is highly recommended that if possible, presenters attend an ALPs University or a similar workshop in a nearby Program to see how the curriculum works and to talk to other trainers.