

Input Councils

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Input Councils

What are they?

On the State or National level, this council is a forum for athletes to report to other athletes and Program leaders what is happening in their areas, voice their opinions about important issues, and gain leadership training and experience. Each area should have representatives that sit on the Council for a two-year term.

On the Area or Local level, each area should have an ALPs Input Council. This council should operate much like a Program-wide council, but focus on area issues. The area councils allow athletes more opportunities to become involved in all aspects of Special Olympics operation on a personal level.

Why would you have an ALPs Input Council?

Having an ALPs Input Council provides athletes opportunities to develop leadership skills, serve as volunteers, provide valuable input to the operation of Special Olympics, be role models for other athletes, and serve as ambassadors in the community. Having athletes involved in meaningful ways conveys how much we respect and value them as an integral part of our organization. It also gives program leaders valuable insight into what interests and motivates athletes in the program. This insight will help us develop programs that will attract new athletes and retain existing athletes.

How do you know you are ready as a program to start an ALPs Input Council?

The first criterion is that you have a program! While it is certainly beneficial to have athletes involved in the setup and design of a new Special Olympics Program (they can comment on which sports to start with and where to find athletes!), a structured ALPs Input Council is designed for Special Olympics Programs that are ready to hear from athletes regularly about how to improve their existing program or to address challenges.

Because the process of selecting and orienting a new group like this always includes training about what they should expect to see in a Special Olympics program, it helps to have addressed the most basic of those needs before you start asking ANYONE how to improve. If it is obvious that you need to work on providing more quality training and competition, there is no need to ask for input on the subject. There is no need to ask what you already know.

You know you are ready to have an ALPs Input Council when your Program is starting to make decisions about what to add next, how to address an outreach challenge (e.g. finding more athletes), or how to improve what you have so that fewer athletes will drop out of the program as they get older.

Finding an ALPs Input Council facilitator

The ALPs Input Council at each level of the organization will have the best results if there is a volunteer or staff member who will guide and facilitate the Input Council. This person could be a coach, volunteer, speech coach or other individual that would be interested in supporting this group.

The role of the facilitator is to be just that, a facilitator. One thing that a facilitator does is to provide the structure and safety for athletes to express their opinions, brainstorm for ideas, and formulate ideas for possible solutions. The facilitator needs to be aware of issues that concern both program administrators and athletes. Any volunteer, including the ALPs Facilitator will need to have a volunteer registration form on file. This allows us to best recognize volunteers and ensure the safety of our athletes.

How should we select athletes to be a part of the ALPs Input Council?

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 does not mean that the athletes 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:

- The athlete must be 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.
- Athlete must 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 communication assistive devices.
- Athlete 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.
- Athlete must be able to attend Input Council meetings on a consistent basis.
- Athletes should be at least 16 years old or older.

Athletes should be nominated to sit on the ALPs Input Council by the area staff, a coach, a key volunteer, or a family member. For the initial selection of members, the nominations should be reviewed and selected by the Director of the level of the organization that is assembling the Council and the designated ALPs facilitator. Once the committees are in operation, the athlete members of the ALPs Council can review and vote on new members, or determine how athlete selections will be made.

One should not eliminate athletes based on group home placement, or other such factors. Given the encouragement and opportunity many of these athletes can develop leadership qualities and provide valuable input to the Special Olympics community.

How many athletes should be on an ALPs Input Council?

The council should have a facilitator that will assist the athletes in putting together and running their meetings and events. The number of athletes on the council will vary depending on the size and needs of the Special Olympics Program. It is important to have enough athletes to get a variety of input and perspectives from various athletes. It is equally important to keep the group at a manageable number so that the meetings are meaningful and productive. It is suggested that a minimum of 2-3 athletes be recruited to get the program started. As the council grows and more members are needed to ensure adequate representation from all segments of the athlete population, be reminded that discussions will be most productive when the group can be split into discussion groups of 8 or less. Programs with enough council members to have more than one discussion group should be reminded that each group should have a facilitator/recorder, and that it is best if groups are as diverse as possible. Leaders from each group should serve as part of an “Executive Committee” that brings comments from each group.

Who should facilitate meetings?

Good facilitators are made, not born. A good facilitator can listen, probe, restate comments and keep discussion on a logical track all without ever giving a hint about their personal beliefs. Good facilitators can be teachers, Special Olympics staff, key volunteers or someone from outside the organization. The key is that they understand their role and that they have enough background information about Special Olympics to allow them some context for the discussions they facilitate.

Some programs have recruited high school or college debate teams to help in this role as they have experience with tracking the flow of a discussion. Other programs have recruited law students who are studying mediation or how to take a deposition. Both of those skills require listening and tracking comments without leading the participants.

The key is providing training and then watching to see how the groups interact with the facilitator. If the discussion is open, free and on message, then you know the facilitator is

good. If athletes are quiet and looking for permission from the facilitator, you may have the wrong person in the facilitator role.

How do we train facilitators?

Once you have the facilitator(s) selected, you should get together with them just before the initial session to go over expectations and to remind them of techniques that have worked in the past. SOI has written resources on “facilitative language” and a list of facilitation experts that might be of help in preparing both yourself and your facilitators. Below is a sample agenda used to prepare facilitators.

FACILITATORS AGENDA

A. Question and Answers about the Athlete Input Council

B. What is facilitation?

Webster’s Dictionary: To make easier.

C. Your role as a Facilitator

To keep discussions going by providing facts and making sure comments are understood. Helping each member of the group come to a conclusion on each topic without ever leading the discussion or giving your opinion. The goal is to hear individual athlete perspective and opinion; so coming to consensus isn’t as important as ensuring that each athlete has an opportunity to give meaningful, informed input, and to form an opinion or stance on each issue.

D. Review of the Agenda

Go through each agenda item to be sure that facilitators know what the topic is about and what you hope to learn from the discussion. Make sure facilitators have time to ask questions and talk to each other about how to approach each subject without leading. They may also want to anticipate problems with understanding and how best to clarify issues. Explain various options for assisting with understanding such as role playing or having other athletes paraphrase someone’s ideas.

E. Thoughts and Notes

1. Starting Off - Ideas for getting the group working
2. Mechanics – Who takes notes? Is there a leader? When is lunch?
3. Clarification - The art of a clarifying what an athlete says without leading.
4. Words of Validation – Words to use to make athletes feel good about what they said even if no one else in the room agrees with them.
5. Handling Inappropriate Behaviors/ Disruption: Redirection, Validation

F. Oh yeah - and have fun!!

What is the recommended structure for input meetings?

Organizing your first meeting can be somewhat intimidating. Once you have identified and selected a few athletes to invite, you can start working on the logistics of the meeting. Included here is a checklist for you to use.

Find a time and location that is fairly central and convenient for the athletes and facilitators to meet. This location will depend on the facilities available in your area. After setting the time and location, notify nominated ALPs Input Council athletes several weeks prior to the meeting so that they have time to make arrangements for transportation or to make arrangements with an employer if necessary.

In some areas there are geographical barriers to getting one ALPs group started. If there is a large geographic distance, you may want to consider getting one area started, and then possibly expand into the other area as time goes on. The important thing to remember is that you have to make this program work for you in your area. Each area's program will take on its own flavor and design. Athletes from each area may want to focus on different goals depending on the needs that they outline. This is great, so long as the core principals of athlete empowerment and participation are followed.

Set your purpose and focus. Don't overwhelm yourself with trying to do all the ALPs programs when you are getting started. You want the athletes to set goals on what activities and programs that they would like to focus on first. Getting your Input Council started will help facilitate the development of other programs. Here is a sample agenda for a first meeting. Use it as a guide, but feel free to add, adjust or make changes to it.

I. Welcome and Introductions (15-20min)

Introduce yourself, and provide some sort of icebreaker activities for the athletes to get to know each other better. You can choose any good icebreaker you know of, but here are some ideas:

1. Have athletes interview each other and introduce their partner to the group.
2. Have a roll of toilet paper. Tell athletes that this is the only roll they have for the meeting and to take as much as they think they will need. Then have each athlete tell one thing about himself or herself for each piece of TP that they took.
3. Play the Name Game – Sitting in a circle each athlete has to tell their name and one thing about them. The next person has to tell theirs, and repeat the person's information before them. The next must give theirs, the person's information before them, and all the people who came before that person. It continues around the circle until all people have had a chance. If a person can't remember the information, they can go to the end of the circle to try again.

II. What is an Input Council? (15-20 minutes)

Give the athletes a general overview of the ALPs programs and what its purpose is. Let them know that they are very valuable to Special Olympics, in fact they are the reason we have Special Olympics. They need to know that they are important and that we want their input. Describe the purpose of the Input Council as a place where they can let their opinions and ideas be known so that they can participate in making important decisions that affect them and their Special Olympics Program.

III. Where are we now, and where are we going?

This part of the meeting you want to get athletes interacting and thinking.

- A.** Have the athletes write down on a chalkboard or chart paper all the programs that they currently participate in, what committees or management teams they serve on, and what other leadership opportunities they have available to them on the area level.
- B.** Have the athletes work in small groups (if you have a large group) and create a list of what they would like to do in their area. This may include sitting on committees, being coaches or official, special volunteer jobs, planning for the area wide games, doing global messenger training, or any other activity or project they would like to be involved in
- C.** After they have generated a list, have them prioritize their list from most important to the least important. Share those ideas with the group, and set some realistic goals for ALPS programs.

IV. Plan for the next meeting

Have the athletes come up with ways to get more athletes involved, and plan a time for the next meeting.

What Athlete Input Council reports should cover

The Input Council structure is a very simple one. It is simply a format for athletes to get together, express their opinions and ideas, and plan leadership activities in their area. How that is done will depend on the athletes, facilitator, and needs of that area. Many of those decisions will be made along the way, and therefore no rigid format is provided. There are a few ideas that you may want to incorporate into your Input Council Meetings that will maintain the focus of the group.

- **State Reports-** Reports of athletes sitting on the State Input Council, Program level committees or Board of Directors. This is an opportunity for these representatives to bring information about what is happening on the state level and to gather feedback from the group to take back.
- **Committee Reports** - Reports from athletes that sit on various committees in the area should be included so that they can bring information to the other athletes, and gather input from the athletes.

- **Area Report-** area staff can give the ALPs members information and updates about what is happening on the area and state level.
- **State/National or Area Director Reports** - In addition, the facilitator or area director may bring up a topic to gather athlete input. This could be ideas on: What new sports to introduce; ideas for improving area games, or how to recruit new athletes. Any topic where the coordinator feels athlete input may be valuable. They always have a perspective that is very helpful. The focus could be on brainstorming for ideas, problem solving, or prioritizing goals.
- **Global Messenger Reports-** Global Messengers could report to the group about the various speeches that they have given, explain what their role is, and encourage others to get involved. They may ask for ideas about good places to speak in the future.
- **Leadership Development-** This is another important component to include in the Input Council agenda. This could include:
 - additional Global Messenger training (bringing in the Toast Masters is a great resource),
 - doing an athlete coaches training,
 - give information about how to go about becoming an official, exploring volunteer opportunities and the expectations we have for volunteers,
 - training on dealing with conflict and crisis situations,
 - team or consensus building activities,
 - social skills activities,
 - or any other topic that would help them develop into more powerful leaders.
 - Planning area games activities for the athletes is another idea your athletes may want to be involved with. They could host an ALPs booth at the area level games, help with the dance or social activities at the games, or be involved in sponsor recognition activities.
 - Volunteer activities- every athlete in ALPs can be asked to donate time to Special Olympics and other civic organizations. Members could share and discuss ways to become more involved as volunteers. These athletes could help with various service projects as a group.
 - Elect officers- you may want to elect a president, vice president, or create other leadership roles within the group.

Can the Program bring issues for athlete comment?

Yes! The whole point of bringing an ALPs Input Council together is to hear their ideas and opinions. If there are decisions that need to be made and the staff or volunteers in charge of those decisions want to hear athlete opinion on the subject, they should be encouraged to bring the issue to the next Input Council meeting.

Be advised however that raising the issue frequently requires that you provide background information and that you haven't already decided what you want to hear. ALPs Input Councils should NOT be viewed as an opportunity to get athletes to endorse predetermined decisions.

Can athletes bring issues for Program administrator consideration?

Yes. If the Input Council comes across an issue that the members are in agreement on and that involves a policy or practice change on the part of those who are in charge of Special Olympics, then the council can write a recommendation for review of the policy and ask for an answer from the program administrator.

The goal of ALPs programming is to establish an environment where athletes, volunteers and staff members all work together as equals to improve Special Olympics. The dialogue that takes place when these recommendations are made is a sign of a strong program.

What follow up is required:

From local council chair ?

From facilitators?

From Program leaders?

Regular reports should be made by all of the above. Copies of these reports should be kept on file in local, state and national Special Olympics offices for future reference. At the end of each year and certainly before any strategic planning takes place, these reports should be reviewed to help evaluate progress to date and to set goals for the immediate and long term advancement of the program.

Athlete Evaluation



















Athlete Leadership Programs (ALPs)

Input Council

What ALPs programs are you participating in?

- Sargent Shriver's Global Messenger
- Input Council
- Athlete on the Board
- Athlete Congress
- Athlete as a Coach
- Athlete as an Official
- Athlete as a Volunteer
- Athlete as an Employee
- Athlete as a Committee Member
- Other _____

How do you feel about it?

1. Our ALPs Input Council meets regularly.   
2. I have the opportunity to share my opinions.   
3. People listen to my ideas and opinions.   
4. Special Olympics responds to what the athletes think is important.   
5. Special Olympics keeps me informed about what is happening in the organization.   
6. Athletes in my area know about ALPs   

Tell us what you think:
