



**FAMILIES**

# FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PHASE 1 STRATEGY REPORT

---

*Prepared by* **Hannah Helton**



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

## **03 SECTION 1: GLOBAL FAMILY STRATEGY PHASE 1 OVERVIEW**

**04** Building the Family Strategy

**07** Staircase of Engagement

## **09 SECTION 2: ACHIEVEMENTS AND REFLECTIONS**

**10** Global Impact Snapshot

**11** Engage Pillar Report

**17** Educate Pillar Report

**22** Empower Pillar Report

**27** Family Engagement Research

## **29 SECTION 3: 2025 PRIORITIES AND PHASE 2 STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT**

**30** 2025 Priorities

**31** Family Strategy Phase 2 Development

## **33 CONCLUSION**

## **34 APPENDIX**







SECTION 1

# GLOBAL FAMILY STRATEGY PHASE 1 OVERVIEW





## KEY FOCUS AREAS

Focus 1

**Support Families**

Focus 2

**Increase awareness**

Focus 3

**Build Relationships**

# GLOBAL FAMILY STRATEGY: PHASE 1

## BUILDING THE FAMILY STRATEGY

Since 2023, Special Olympics has made intentional and strategic progress in advancing family engagement across the movement. Recognizing that families are not just supporters—but key stakeholders in athlete development, inclusion, and community advocacy—we launched the Global Family Engagement Strategy to unify our approach and amplify impact (see [Appendix A](#)).

Prior to 2023 when this strategy began there was no existing framework or centralized oversight for family engagement. The first step to developing a

strategy and formally launching family engagement at the international level needed to be foundational: building relationships, establishing credibility, and earning buy-in from the Regional teams. We knew from the outset that a successful strategy could not be imposed—it needed to reflect and uplift the diverse family work already underway in each Region. That’s why the strategy was built collaboratively, designed to support families at all levels of their engagement, and tailored to regional realities.

The initial focus was to strengthen Regional relationships and infrastructure. Through consistent touchpoints—Bi-Monthly Region calls, cross-collaboration



meetings, and quarterly family health calls—we fostered a culture of collaboration and knowledge-sharing across Regions. We saw an increase in participation, greater alignment across the organization, and a rise in family-focused initiatives. This work led to the appointing of a dedicated SONA Regional staff for family engagement. This was the final Region to assign dedicated staff to families. It **marked a turning point solidifying Special Olympics’ commitment and signaled to Programs that family work is no longer peripheral, but core to our mission.** Additionally, the creation of the Family Icon has been a meaningful in uniting the movement—giving families a visible place in our branding and communications and reinforcing their importance within the movement.

With regional engagement now well-established, we are ready to shift the focus toward deeper program integration—particularly pursuing greater collaboration with departments like Health, Sport and Competition, and GYE. While collaboration with these programmatic teams has always existed, we now have the foundation to move from opportunistic collaboration to strategic integration. This intersect would be witnessed at headquarters and within each Region, strengthening family integration in all areas of Special Olympics movement. This is a critical next step to ensuring family engagement is embedded and implemented across all priority areas of the Strategic Plan.



STRATEGY OVERVIEW

Phase 1 of the Global Family Engagement Strategy was developed around three pillars and will continue to guide our work:

- Engage: Increase family participation through outreach, local adaptation of tools, and sharing family stories.
- Educate: Provide families with information and resources through forums, pilot health models, and digital platforms like the Young Athletes Mobile App.
- Empower: Equip families and siblings to lead through dedicated advocacy training, leadership councils, and innovation grants.

We have also established a three-part Global Research Plan to better understand family needs, leadership potential, and barriers to engagement.

This work is not about creating a separate track for families—it’s about ensuring they are embedded into every aspect of what we do. Families are

VISION

Families become active participants, movement leaders, and teachers of inclusion.

MISSION

Build a solid **foundation** for family engagement work that will engage, educate, and empower family members.



uniquely positioned to support athletes across the lifespan, advocate for inclusion at all levels, and move our priorities forward. They are the heartbeat of our movement, and it is our responsibility to honor, support, and empower them with intention.

### **ACHIEVING OUR GOALS: KEY ACTIVITIES**

To bring this strategy to life, we've launched a series of targeted activities and initiatives that align with each pillar of the Family Engagement Strategy. Each activity is key to achieving our strategy goals:

- Region Cross-Collaboration Meetings
- Global and Regional Family Leadership Councils
- Family Database
- Website Updates
- Family Resources
- Train Program Leadership
- Host Workshops and Forums
- Media Campaign
- Best-practice Sharing
- Regional Family Engagement Funds
- Innovation Grants
- World Games
- Family Health

These initiatives not only reflect our strategic priorities but also create meaningful entry points for families to engage, grow, and lead within Special Olympics. Central to this approach is the





*staircase of engagement*, a guiding framework that illustrates how families can deepen their involvement over time in increasingly impactful ways.

## STAIRCASE OF ENGAGEMENT

The Staircase of Engagement for Special Olympics families shows a progressive journey that **transforms initial involvement into lasting advocacy and leadership**. Families begin their journey at the *engaged* level, participating in events, cheering from the sidelines, and engaging on social media. As they move to the *educated* stage, they gain a deeper understanding of the mission, programs, and impact of Special Olympics, often through training, workshops, and shared experiences. This knowledge equips them to climb to the *empowered* level, where they take on active roles as advocates, leaders, and changemakers—helping shape inclusive communities, support other families, and influence policies that advance the rights and opportunities of people with intellectual disabilities.



Join Special  
Olympics



*This model served as the foundational framework in the development of the Global Family Strategy Phase 1, ensuring that we are supporting families at every level of their journey.*





## CONCLUSION

As we reflect on the progress we've made since the launch of the Global Family Engagement Strategy: Phase 1, it's clear that we have laid a strong foundation for ongoing success. The strategic efforts of 2023 and 2024 have helped us build lasting relationships, establish crucial infrastructure, and foster collaboration across Regions, ultimately reinforcing the pivotal role families play within Special Olympics. However, this is only the beginning. With two years remaining in the current strategy, there is much more to achieve. The next section will delve into the key reflections and milestones of 2023 and 2024, highlighting our achievements and the ways in which these successes set the stage for the continued growth and integration of family engagement within Special Olympics.





SECTION 2

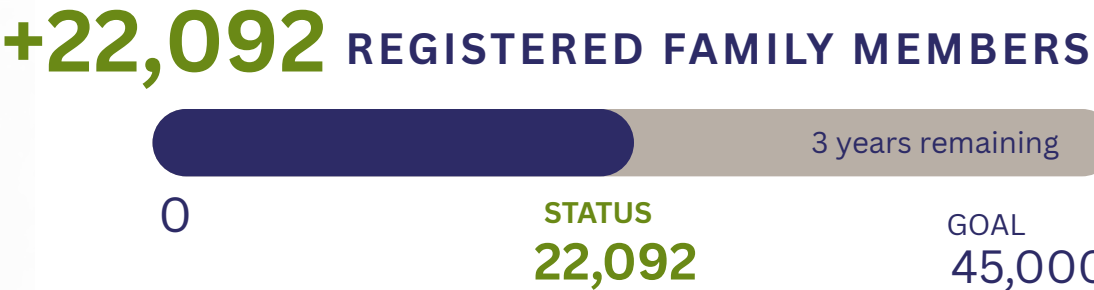
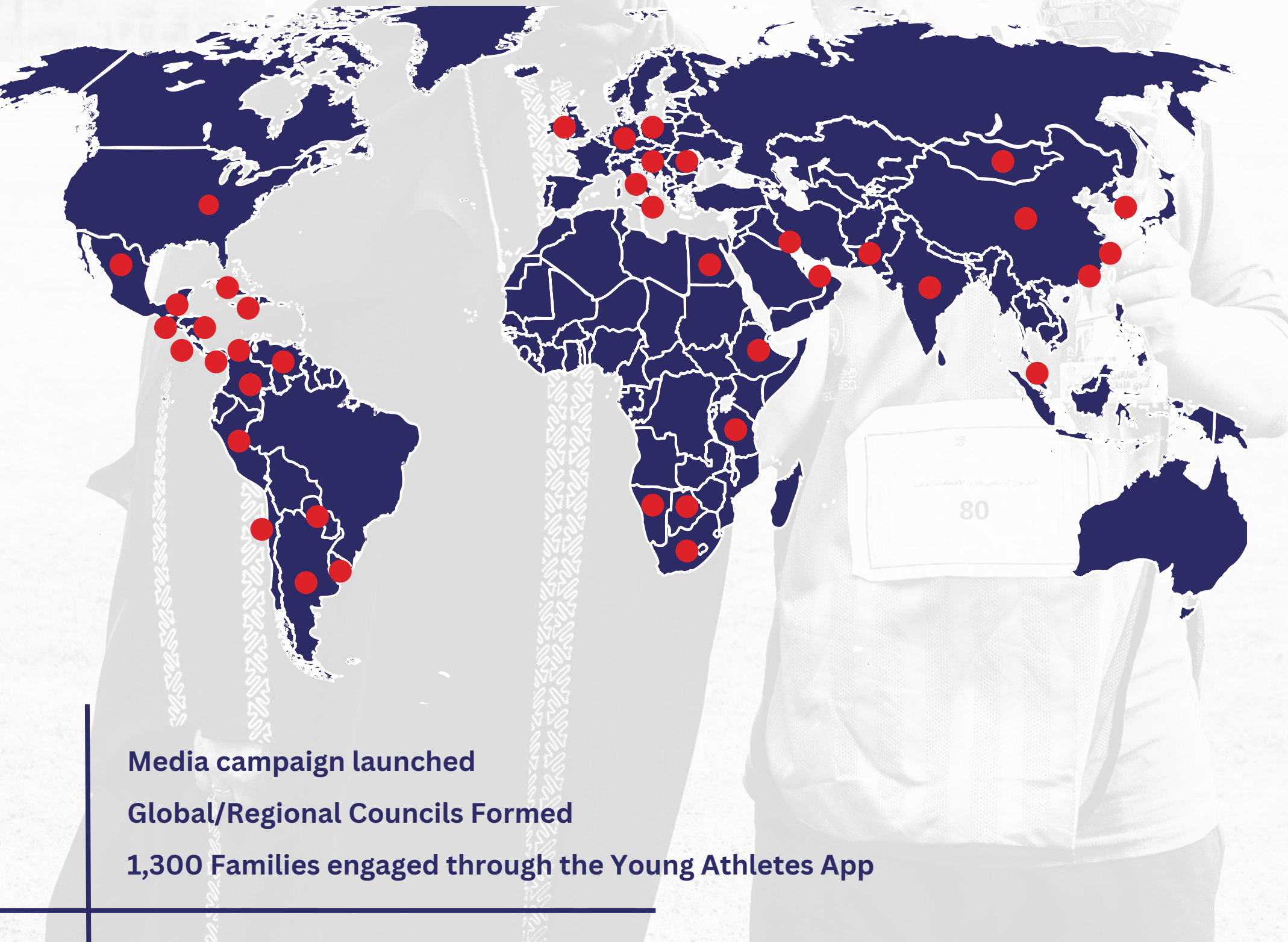
# PHASE 1 ACHIEVEMENTS AND REFLECTIONS

EXPLORE OUR GLOBAL IMPACT THROUGH AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT EACH PILLAR



# GLOBAL IMPACT

## SNAPSHOT



**42** PROGRAM WEBSITES UPDATED TO INCLUDE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INFORMATION

**\$175,000 USD**  
INVESTED IN LOCAL AND REGION FAMILY INITIATIVES

**15** NEW FAMILY RESOURCES LAUNCHED



Media campaign launched  
Global/Regional Councils Formed  
1,300 Families engaged through the Young Athletes App



The background features a large, dark purple diagonal band running from the top-left towards the bottom-right. To the right of this band, there is a cluster of colorful, abstract geometric shapes. These include several large, curved, arrow-like shapes in shades of light purple, light green, light orange, and light pink, all pointing towards the center. Interspersed among these shapes are four light blue circles. The overall composition is modern and dynamic.

PILLAR 1

# ENGAGE

PILLAR REPORT





# ENGAGE HIGHLIGHTS



**42** program websites and social media accounts updated to include family engagement information



**15** new family engagement resources launched



Families website page **launched** on Special Olympics' global website with **7,581** views in 2024



**91** Program Leaders trained in Family Engagement



Family registration numbers increased by **22,000**

| 2019    | 2021    | 2022    | 2023    |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 861,776 | 537,495 | 539,071 | 561,163 |
| -35%    |         | 2%      | 4%      |





# ENGAGE

## DEEP DIVE

The Engage Pillar is a cornerstone of the Special Olympics Family Engagement Strategy. It centers around a powerful goal: **to engage family members so they become active participants in the Special Olympics movement.** Families are more than supporters—they are connectors, advocates, and champions of inclusion. The purpose of the Engage Pillar is to increase the number of family members involved in meaningful and sustainable ways.

The Engage Pillar is being driven by four key enablers: program leader development, increased communication channels, awareness campaigns, and the creation of family resources. Together with the Educate and Empower Pillars, these initiatives are cultivating a global community where families are encouraged to contribute, lead, and thrive within the Special Olympics ecosystem.

### STRENGTHENING LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY TIES

One of the clearest markers of progress has been the training of Program leaders. In 2023 and 2024, **91 leaders from multiple Regions** were trained on family engagement—a figure more than double the original goal of 40. These leaders are now better prepared to include families in sports, schools, health initiatives, government advocacy, and leadership structures. This training laid the groundwork for long-term, program-level transformation and inclusion.

### TURNING AROUND A DECLINE IN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Family registration has also seen a turnaround. In 2019, 866,798 family members were registered across all Programs. However, by 2021, this number dropped to 537,495—a dramatic 38% decrease due to COVID-19. When the new engagement efforts began in 2022, the trend began to reverse. Registrations inched up to 539,071 that year and then rose more significantly to 561,163 in 2023, reflecting a 4% growth. **This reversal is a positive sign that the renewed focus on families is working.** In 2023 we set a goal to increase registered family members by 45,000 by the end of 2026 and we are on track to meet and exceed that goal.





Get to know us!



Families are the number one family support resource for Special Olympics athletes. They offer a unique type of support, love, and encouragement that no one else can. Special Olympics is a support network that brings families together in a caring, positive way—and that makes the cheers for our athletes even louder!



#### SIBLING RESOURCES



Siblings are connectors of three groups central to our movement: athletes, families, and youth. Through Special Olympics, siblings can find a supportive community, a platform to share their experiences, and an opportunity to develop as leaders. This section will provide resources for youth-age siblings of individuals with intellectual disabilities.



#### BECOMING A SPECIAL OLYMPICS ATHLETE



Athletes are the heart of Special Olympics. Our athletes are children and adults with intellectual disabilities from all around the world. They are finding success, joy, and friendship as part of our global community. They're also having lots of fun!



#### BECOMING A COACH



Was there a mentor, teacher or coach who made a difference in your life? The one who gave you the courage and determination to strive to be your best? The one who helped shape both your performance and your life? You can be that important person!

## ELEVATING THE FAMILY VOICE AND ENHANCING RESOURCES

In the past two years, **15 new family resources** have been introduced, with three more set for release in 2025, including a government advocacy curriculum aimed at empowering families as local changemakers. A webinar series for Program Leaders was launched to present these new tools, followed by targeted follow-up engagement with Regions to drive usage. Designated Regional Family Staff are responsible for sharing the materials and ensuring Programs are expanding family engagement. A standout example of success is Special Olympics Pakistan, who took the initiative to translate these resources into their local language, Urdu, enabling them to train local families as leaders within their community.

The development and rollout of these new resources were informed by a family engagement survey, which assessed the usage of existing resources and identified gaps in family support. This research highlighted the need for programmatic best practice guides, family leader training, and additional resources specifically tailored for family members.

In response, resources for siblings were reimaged to better reflect their unique role in the movement, while a comprehensive **family guide for sports** was developed in collaboration with the Sport and Competition team. Additionally, valuable contributions were made to the global MATP strategy and the upcoming redesign of the MATP Coaches Guide, further strengthening the integral role of families across various programmatic areas.

## >> A Parent's Guide for Supporting Siblings



## Family Leader Training

Welcome to the Family Leader Training!



### THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS HANDBOOK FOR EFFECTIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

ADVICE, STORIES, OBSERVATIONS, AND TIPS FROM SPECIAL OLYMPICS FAMILY AND PROGRAM LEADERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD



## THE DATABASE CHALLENGE: CREATING A GLOBAL FAMILY CONTACT SYSTEM

Perhaps the most complex and persistent challenge facing the Engage Pillar has been the creation of a **centralized, global family contact database**. This project has been a top priority since 2022, but it has also proven to be the most difficult to realize due to systemic, logistical, and technological barriers.

The effort began in **August 2022**, when the Leadership & Organizational Development team wrote a proposal to develop a standardized, scalable system for collecting and managing family contact information. The intention was to ensure families could be regularly and effectively reached, invited to events, and included in programming at every level.

However, progress has been slowed due to an emphasis on the Center of Excellence as the collection tool by DPT. However, the roll out of the CoE is too long to ultimately be the solution to introducing family directory model in this 4-year strategy. There is also overarching complexity of developing a solution that works across vastly different technological landscapes. Many Programs still rely on paper records

or Excel spreadsheets to track family contact data.

Others face infrastructure limitations, lack of staff capacity, or limited funding to invest in digital systems. The ambition to connect families globally through a shared system has encountered multiple setbacks—not due to lack of effort, but because the solution requires collaboration across several departments, systems, and geographies.

In **2023**, a global research project was conducted to better understand the status of family contact collection and identify a realistic path forward. **Twenty-seven Programs** across Asia Pacific, Latin America, East Asia, Africa, MENA, and Europe/Eurasia participated in a study examining how family contact data is collected and used. The research revealed that most Programs gather contact details during in-person events such as Family Health Forums or competitions. The data, when collected, is often used to invite families to events, share updates, or coordinate programming. However, without digital storage or centralized systems, much of this information is lost over time—especially during staff transitions.

## Resource HIGHLIGHT

### Program Quality Standards: Family Engagement Guidance

*Expanding on the Special Olympics Program Quality standards above, the PQS: Family Engagement Guidance resource provides step-by-step guidance and best practices for building and maintaining quality family engagement initiatives. The information in this resource is aligned with the family engagement stages found in the Special Olympics Program Quality Standards and support programs in advancing their family engagement strategy from one stage to the next.*



Based on this research, several recommendations were developed:

- Maintain **multiple channels** for collecting contact information (both virtual and in-person) to ensure accessibility.
- Use **cloud-based storage systems** and train Programs to manage data securely and sustainably.
- Employ an **opt-in approach** to communications, preserving privacy while enhancing outreach.
- Where possible, designate a **Family Coordinator** at the Program level to manage data and communications.

The final version of the **Family Contact Collection Project Proposal** was formally submitted to DPT on June 24, 2024. This comprehensive document outlined the vision, goals, and technical requirements for a digital system that would allow Programs to collect, store, and use family contact data in alignment with athlete data. Despite these efforts, the project is still pending active collaboration for development and implementation.

In the meantime, forward momentum has come from Region innovation. A **pilot project** launched in partnership with Special Olympics **Bangladesh and Bharat** is currently testing new IT tools and data collection models. These pilots aim to register family data in a system that syncs with athlete data, ensuring both continuity and accessibility. If successful, this model could be replicated in other Regions, allowing the us to offer a practical, tested framework for global rollout. The expectation is that the collected data would be included in the Center of Excellence once these countries adopt this technology

This experience has shown that while the ambition to create a global family contact system is complex, it is not impossible. The work done to

date—from early proposals in 2022, to global research in 2023, and regional pilots in 2024—lays the ground work for eventual success. What’s needed now is sustained advocacy, dedicated technical support, and long-term investment in the digital infrastructure that will make this vision a reality.

## VISIBILITY, AWARENESS, AND STORYTELLING

The Engage Pillar also saw major advances in storytelling and communications. In partnership with the Global Youth and Education Team, a storytelling campaign was launched in 2024 that showcased the voices of families impacted by Unified Champion Schools. These deeply personal stories—from [Jamaica](#), [South Africa](#), [Paraguay](#), and [Egypt](#)—highlight the powerful ripple effects of inclusion in education and community life.

Digitally, the movement took a major step forward with the creation of a dedicated [Families page](#) on the global Special Olympics website. This page attracted 7,581 views in 2024 and serves as a hub for parents, caregivers, and siblings seeking resources and connection. In addition, 42 Program websites and social media platforms were updated between 2023 and 2024, ensuring consistent messaging and greater visibility of family engagement across all regions.

## CONCLUSION

The Engage Pillar has made meaningful strides in reversing the decline in family participation, expanding capacity, launching relevant resources, and elevating family voices. By continuing to invest in systems that support them, amplifying their stories, and supporting their involvement, the Engage Pillar ensures that families will not only be included but will stand at the center of the movement for years to come.



An abstract graphic featuring a large, bright blue triangular shape on the left side. To its right, three stylized human figures are depicted in light green, light purple, and light pink. Each figure has a light blue circular head and one arm raised high. The background is white. The text 'PILLAR 2' is centered above the word 'EDUCATE', and 'PILLAR REPORT' is centered below it.

PILLAR 2

# EDUCATE

PILLAR REPORT





EDUCATE  
HIGHLIGHTS



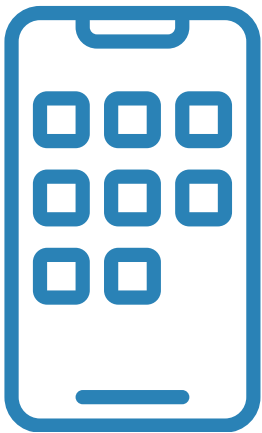
200 family and sibling forums hosted



\$175,000 USD invested in Region family engagement initiatives



10,309 family members engaged in Family Health Forums



1,300+ families using the Young Athletes app across 30 countries and 31 states





# EDUCATE

## DEEP DIVE

The **Educate Pillar** of the Special Olympics Family Engagement Strategy is rooted in the belief that empowered, informed families create a stronger future for the well-being of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This pillar focuses on educating family members to improve their quality of life and emotional resilience, while simultaneously building a sense of community and connection among them.

To bring this vision to life, the organization leverages two primary enablers: the delivery of workshops and forums, and the provision of Regional Support Grants. These elements work together to equip families with practical knowledge, health education, and emotional support while reinforcing the global movement toward inclusive communities.

### EDUCATION THROUGH FORUMS

Over the course of 2023 and 2024, one of the most visible efforts has been the increase of **Family or Sibling Forums**, with over **200** family or sibling-focused events occurring during this period. However, this figure likely underrepresents the full scope of activity, as many forums go unreported or are independently conducted by local programs. These forums serve as a foundation for learning and relationship-building, offering family members a space to share experiences, gather knowledge, and support one another.

A highlight in the Educate Pillar was the Family Forum held during the World Games in Berlin, where SSGM's and their family members led discussions on the journey toward inclusive employment. During these sessions, family members shared their personal experiences, shedding light on the unique challenges they've faced and how they continue to overcome them. The speakers delivered an inspiring call to action, urging families to keep advocating for inclusion while promoting the Unified Leadership approach, empowering others to embrace this vision for change.



# Family Forum

## HIGHLIGHT

### Strengthening Family Engagement Across Latin America

*Special Olympics Latin America recently hosted a Regional Family Forum titled "Empowering Families to Become Advocates for Inclusion." This impactful event brought together national family coordinators from 18 Special Olympics Programs across Latin America to exchange strategies for growth, strengthen family engagement, and promote leadership within the movement.*

*Designed as a catalyst for greater family participation and leadership, the forum encouraged parents and siblings to take active roles in Special Olympics initiatives while also stepping into leadership positions within their communities.*



### FAMILY HEALTH AND YOUNG ATHLETES

Running parallel to these are the **Family Health Forums**, the most widely implemented type of family-focused event within the movement. These forums create vital opportunities for parents, caregivers, and siblings to engage with health professionals, community leaders, and social service providers. In doing so, Family Health Forums not only introduce new families to Special Olympics but also bring to the forefront systemic challenges, such as barriers to healthcare and limited access to inclusive health. In total, Family Health Forums engaged **10,309 family members** globally over the two-year period, with strong participation both internationally and within the United States.

Building on the success of Family Health Forums, Special Olympics launched the Family Health Education Model, a more structured approach designed to provide consistent, in-depth education to family units over an **eight-week period**. The model integrates support networks, including coaches, Unified Partners, and support workers—who participate alongside families and athletes. Currently in its pilot phase, this initiative is being rolled out in collaboration with the University of Houston, with test sites in Colorado, Vermont, Maine, Texas, and Louisiana. Its goal is to eventually broaden the scope of education to

cover a variety of health-related topics while offering Programs flexibility in implementation—ranging from one-time forums to the full eight-week curriculum.

Another significant development is the **Child and Family Health Model**, which takes a holistic view of health and learning. This model consists of three interconnected components: child intervention, family education and support, and community health. In 2023 and 2024, the Child and Family Health Model engaged 288 family members, deepening the impact of early intervention and emphasizing the vital role families play in their child's long-term development.



Digital engagement also took a major step forward with the global launch of the **Young Athletes Mobile App in July 2023**. Available on Google Play and the Apple App Store, the app is designed to support families of young athletes with learning tools, engagement opportunities, and access to resources. Since its release, the app registered more than **1,300 family members across 30 countries and 31 U.S. states**. While this is a promising start, it also highlights opportunities to grow digital access and further integrate the app into the broader family engagement strategy.

To support these expanding initiatives, Special Olympics has continued its commitment to providing **Regional Family Support Grants**. In both 2023 and 2024, seven grants at **\$25,000USD** each—one per Region—were distributed to fund family education efforts tailored to Regional needs. These grants not only support the implementation of forums and workshops but also help deepen the regions' ownership and customization of family programming.

## CHALLENGES

A primary challenge in the Educate Pillar lies in tracking and data collection. While the number of hosted forums is high, not all of them are being centrally recorded. This creates gaps in reporting, limiting the ability to fully understand the global scope of family engagement or to share best practices across Regions. Addressing this issue will require improved systems, clearer reporting expectations, and the expansion of digital tools for data collection and impact measurement.

## CONCLUSION

Looking forward, the strategy for the Educate Pillar is clear. Scaling structured education models—such as the Family Health Education Model—and continuing to build strong connections with the Health team will be key. As Special Olympics continues to deepen its investment in families, the Educate Pillar will remain a critical driver of connection, knowledge, and empowerment across the movement.





An abstract graphic featuring two stylized human figures, one in pink and one in purple, both with light blue circular heads. They are positioned behind a large, light green arrow that points to the right. A large, solid green shape occupies the upper left portion of the image, with a dark green diagonal line separating it from the rest of the background. The text is centered in the lower half of the image.

PILLAR 3

# EMPOWER

PILLAR REPORT



# EMPOWER HIGHLIGHTS



Global Family Leadership Council  
formed



Share Your Story Training **Launched**



**319** Family Leaders formally  
trained using the Family Leader  
Curriculum






**Launched** the *Family Leader Training*



**14** Sibling Innovation Grants  
distributed



Family Leaders increased by **10%** globally

| 2019   | 2021   | 2022   | 2023  |
|--|--------|--|---|
| 42,748   | 30,587 | 31,449   | 34,694  |
|  -19% |        |  5% |  10% |





# EMPOWER

## DEEP DIVE

The **Empower Pillar** of the Global Family Strategy focuses on enabling family members to become leaders in advocating for inclusion. One focus area of this pillar is to empower families to influence governments to adopt policies that support inclusive education. The strategy structured around three main enablers: **Training Family Leaders, amplifying Family Voices in Government, and providing Sibling Youth Leader Innovation Grants**. These efforts work in tandem to foster an environment where families can take on leadership roles, advocate for policy change, and be teachers of inclusion within their communities.

### TRAINING FAMILY LEADERS

A key objective of the Empower Pillar is to train and engage family members who can champion the cause of inclusion and establish local

programs. To accomplish this, we launched a **formal family leader training**. This comprehensive two-day training is designed to equip parents, caregivers, and siblings with the skills needed to take on leadership roles within the Special Olympics movement. In 2023 and 2024 alone, **319** family leaders were formally trained, far surpassing the **original goal of training 100 family leaders over four years**. This success highlights the growing interest of families to engage meaningfully in the movement.

Despite some fluctuations in family leader participation in recent years, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, family involvement is on the rise. In 2019, Special Olympics saw 42,748 family members actively engaged, a number that dropped to 30,587 in 2021. However, engagement rebounded with a 5% increase in 2022 and a further **10% increase in 2023**, bringing the total to 34,694 family leaders. These trends emphasize the resilience of the community and the importance of ongoing efforts to expand family leadership, particularly by fostering sibling involvement. As we continue in

in the leadership space, addressing some challenges with the terminology around “family leader” is essential for clarifying the distinction between informal family leaders and those who have undergone formal training.

**FAMILY VOICES IN GOVERNMENT**

In addition to leadership training, Special Olympics is empowering families to be effective advocates for inclusive education through its Family Voices in Government initiative. A major component of this effort is the creation of a **government relations curriculum** that trains families on how to advocate for inclusive education policies at the governmental level. This curriculum will be completed in 2025, providing families with the tools they need to navigate political and social systems to demand change.

To strengthen advocacy efforts, we launched the "Share Your Story" Training—an interactive, one-hour session designed to equip families with the skills and confidence to share their personal experiences in ways that are meaningful and persuasive to external audiences, including decision-makers. Rolled out globally in 2023, the training includes optional breakout sessions that allow participants to practice storytelling techniques and receive peer feedback in a supportive environment. To ensure long-term sustainability and a broader reach, we also implemented a train-the-trainer model, empowering regional leaders to deliver the training nationally and tailor it to the needs of their communities. This approach has significantly expanded the impact of the initiative, enabling more families and constituents to become effective advocates.





## INNOVATION GRANTS

The Innovation Grants initiative under the Empower Pillar is designed to empower sibling youth leaders to develop grassroots social impact projects that promote inclusion in their communities. In 2023 and 2024, 14 Sibling Innovation Grants were dispersed, supporting creative, community-driven solutions to challenges faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities. These grants are a crucial part of fostering a culture of innovation and leadership among siblings, who are often key advocates for inclusion within their families and communities.

## GLOBAL FAMILY LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

A major accomplishment under this pillar has been the creation of the Global Family Leadership Council. This council is tasked with supporting the development of global family strategies, providing feedback on initiatives, and promoting family engagement across different regions and local programs. The council holds bi-monthly virtual meetings and organizes an in-person meeting every year. For example, the council met in Berlin during the 2023 World Games, strengthening the global network of family leaders. The council is currently led by Nauman Mehboob from Special Olympics Asia Pacific, and has seen participation from a diverse group of family leaders across various regions. With the goal of strengthening family leadership locally and regionally, members of the council are often invited to speak at regional conferences, acting as ambassadors for the family strategy in their respective Regions. Regional councils have also been reinstated in Special Olympics Asia Pacific (SOAP), Special Olympics Eastern Africa (SOEA), Middle East North Africa (MENA), and the Caribbean since the relaunch of the Global Family Leadership Council.

## Sibling Youth Leader

### HIGHLIGHT

#### Leading with Love: Siblings Building a Better Tomorrow

*Fabiola Links, 21, from Windhoek, Namibia, joined Special Olympics in 2024 to support her two brothers with intellectual disabilities. After receiving youth leadership and coaching training, she paused her studies to assist Special Olympics Namibia with athlete leader training.*

*Her brother, Al-ticious, 22, is a unified basketball player turned coach who also leads football sessions, works with the Basketball Artist School Project, and serves as a FIBA youth ambassador. Both siblings are dedicated to creating inclusive opportunities for youth with intellectual disabilities.*

*Together, they're launching an environmental awareness campaign in their local youth complex, promoting recycling and conservation. Through clean-up days, contests, and workshops, they aim to unite students of all abilities—especially siblings—to foster inclusion and sustainability in their community.*

## CONCLUSION

The Empower Pillar's work is transforming the Special Olympics movement by ensuring that family members are equipped with the tools, training, and opportunities to become true leaders and advocates for inclusion. Through initiatives such as leadership training, government relations initiatives, innovation grants, and the Global Family Leadership Council, we are creating a robust network of families who are actively shaping the future of inclusion.

The background features a large red diagonal stripe on the left. On the right, there is a stylized illustration of a person in a purple shirt and grey pants standing in front of a large screen. The screen displays various data visualizations: a pie chart, a bar chart, a line graph, and a 3D pie chart. Above the screen, there are two interlocking gears and a plus sign. The word "RESEARCH" is written in large, bold, dark blue capital letters across the bottom of the illustration.

# RESEARCH

THE FOUNDATION OF OUR WORK



# RESEARCH PLAN

## THREE-FOLD

Our global family research initiatives have significantly deepened our understanding of family engagement within Special Olympics, shedding light on ways to promote inclusivity, connection, and well-being among families. This research not only informs, but also influences, all pillars of our organization, creating a holistic impact.

In 2024 we launched a three-part global research plan:

- 1. Family Engagement Internally:** We are examining various methods, initiatives, structures, and barriers to family engagement within the organization. We are currently finalizing a comprehensive global family landscape survey, which will be distributed to all Programs by the end of April 2025.
- 2. Inclusive Mindsets and Behaviors:** Our research explores how family engagement strategies within Special Olympics foster inclusive mindsets, behaviors, and contribute to the social and emotional well-being of families worldwide. This initiative aims to provide a thorough understanding of how family-focused initiatives impact inclusivity on a global scale.
- 3. Global Leadership Coalition:** Families engaged in inclusive schools through the Global Leadership Coalition will be surveyed to better understand their involvement in unified education and their advocacy efforts within governmental and policy spheres.



We have also managed the Samuel Center for Social Connectedness Research Fellowship for the past three years. This fellowship promotes inclusivity by pairing an athlete leader with a unified researcher as co-researchers. The fellowship explores a range of topics, including family advocacy in the realms of government, policy, and education, as well as enhancing sibling connections.

These collaborative research efforts continue to shape and strengthen the future of family engagement within Special Olympics.



SECTION 3

# LOOKING AHEAD

## 2025 PRIORITIES AND PHASE 2 STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT



# 2025 PRIORITIES

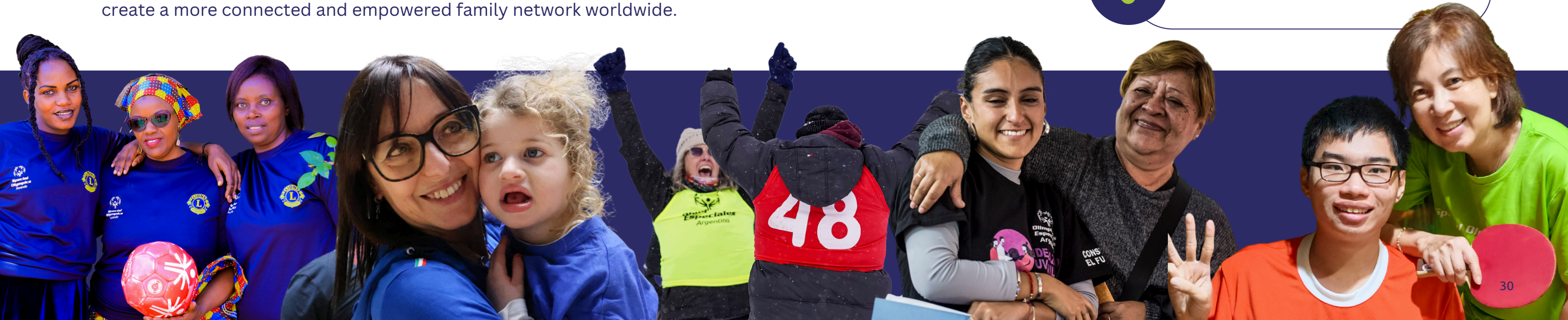
In 2025, our priorities are centered on enhancing connection, building capacity, and amplifying the voices of families across the Special Olympics movement. A key focus is improving the family experience at the Special Olympics World Games. As we look ahead to the 2027 Games in Chile, we're working to incorporate learnings from World Games Turin to streamline logistics and create more meaningful on-site engagement opportunities for families (See Appendix B for a full report on our learnings from World Winter Games Turin 2025).

We're also strengthening collaboration across Special Olympics programmatic areas to better integrate family engagement throughout the organization. Internally, we're focused on improving how we communicate the impact of this work—ensuring staff have access to tools, updates, and success stories that can inform and inspire family engagement efforts across the movement.

This year, siblings will also have a spotlight as we place a special emphasis on siblings engagement. We're updating existing resources and developing new initiatives to elevate sibling voices and expand their involvement across all levels of the movement.

To support these efforts, we're investing in training for program leaders, with new family-centered modules and practical tools designed to build confidence and strengthen local engagement strategies. These trainings, paired with improved systems—such as a centralized global family contact database—will help us create a more connected and empowered family network worldwide.

- ✓ World Games Processes
- ✓ Programmatic Cross-Collaboration
- ✓ Internal Communication
- ✓ Sibling Engagement
- ✓ Program Leader Training
- ✓ Family Database





# DEVELOPING PHASE 2

## THE NEXT ITERATION OF THE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

To strengthen our global mission of inclusion and deepen the impact of families in the Special Olympics movement, we are embarking on a thoughtful, multi-phased process to develop the next iteration of our Family Engagement Strategy (see [Appendix C](#)). This strategy will be built through collaboration, research, and a strong commitment to listening to and elevating the voices of families around the world.

Our journey begins with the **Discovery phase**, where we focus on clarifying the purpose and goals of family engagement within Special Olympics. At the heart of this work is a simple question: Why do we engage families, and what are we hoping to achieve by doing so? Our objectives are to deepen the role of families as agents of inclusion, enhance family well-being through meaningful involvement in Special Olympics programs, and encourage families to take leadership roles—whether by starting local initiatives or becoming active volunteers.

These aspirations will be translated into SMART objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound, creating a clear roadmap for success.

With a defined purpose, we will then move into stakeholder mapping. This involves identifying all relevant internal and external stakeholders, including parents, caregivers, siblings, athletes, funding partners, Region staff, and various HQ staff and areas of work. **By mapping their interests, levels of influence, and current engagement with families, we can better understand where alignment exists and where there are gaps to address.** This comprehensive view of the ecosystem will guide how we approach strategic design. The discovery phase concludes with an analysis of our current family engagement initiatives. We will examine what’s working, where there are barriers, and how we can better support families in becoming more connected to the movement.





Building on these insights, we will enter the **Strategy Design phase**. The first step is the creation of a cross-departmental strategy task force. This group will include representatives from key departments such as Health, GYE, Sport and Competition, Marketing and Communications, Research, Athlete Leadership, Unified Leadership, Volunteer Engagement, Learning and Development, and Region staff. In addition, family and athlete representatives will have a seat at the table, ensuring that those most impacted by the strategy have a direct role in shaping it. The task force will review and synthesize the findings from the Discovery Phase, identifying shared priorities, gaps in service, and strategic opportunities. These discussions will inform the drafting of a new strategy framework.

Once the strategy framework is established, we move into the **Operationalization phase**. This begins with internal alignment. The draft strategy will be shared with senior leadership and all HQ departments, with discussions centered on how each team can contribute to the implementation. Regional review will ensure the strategy is applicable and adaptable across diverse cultural and geographic contexts.

Following this alignment, we will develop a comprehensive implementation plan. This plan will outline a phased rollout timeline, define roles and responsibilities across the organization, assess capacity-building needs, and present a communications strategy for both internal and external stakeholders. Budget and resource planning will also be a critical component, ensuring the strategy is realistic and sustainable.

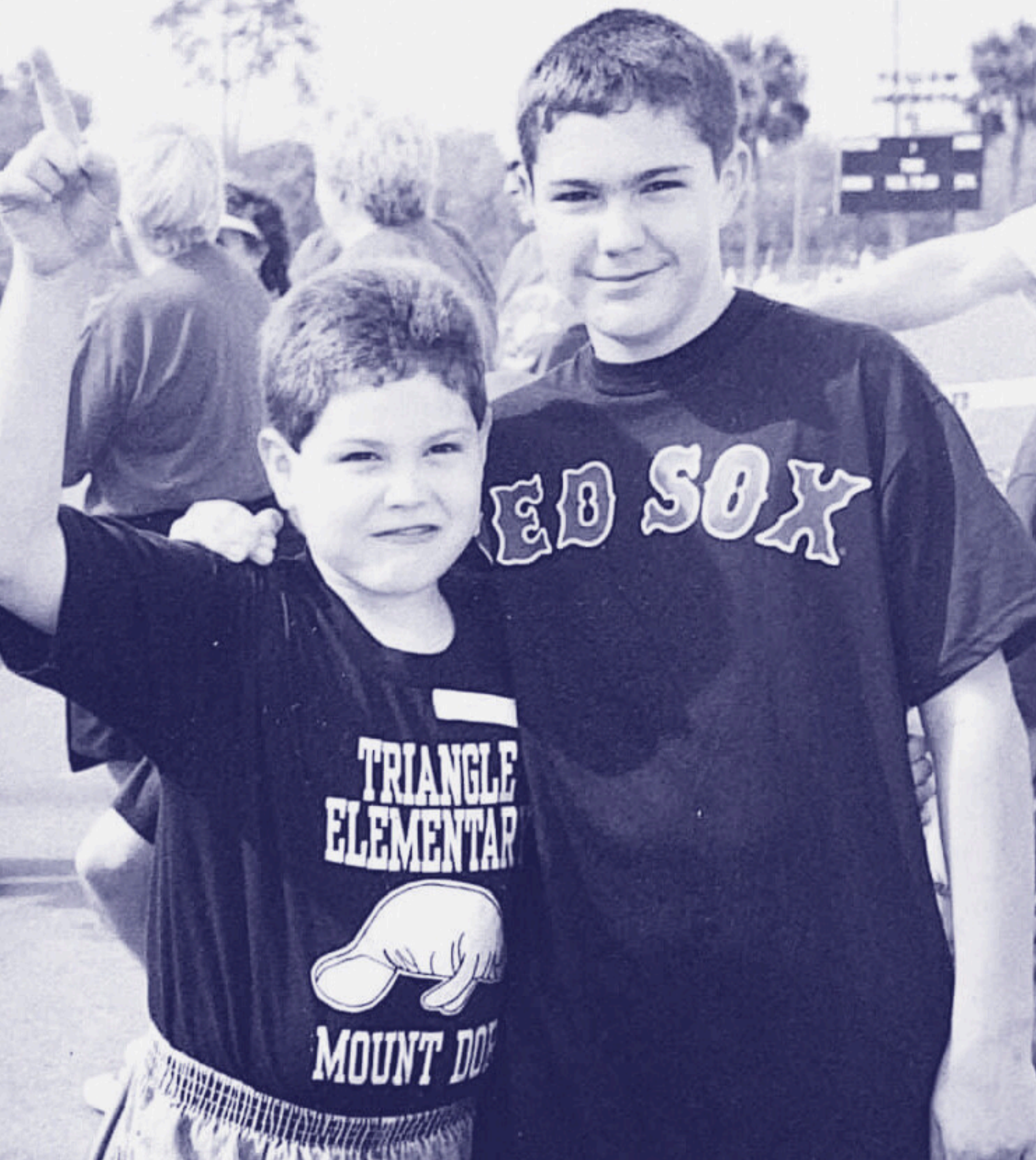
With plans in place, we will enter the **Implementation phase**. Here, the strategy will come to life through coordinated action across departments and Regions.

Finally, we will begin the **Evaluation phase**. Success metrics defined in the Strategy Design phase will be monitored, and we will collect qualitative feedback through story sharing, reflective dialogues, and continuous stakeholder engagement. These insights will provide context to complement our quantitative measures. To ensure the strategy remains relevant, we will hold periodic review sessions with the task force, fostering an ongoing cycle of reflection, learning, and improvement.

Through this process, we aim not only to strengthen our Family Engagement Strategy but also to create a global model for how families can lead and thrive within the Special Olympics movement.







# CONCLUSION

Phase 1 of the Global Family Engagement Strategy has built a strong and lasting foundation for advancing family engagement across the Special Olympics movement. Through intentional relationship-building, the creation of accessible resources, expanded training opportunities, and deeper collaboration among teams and Regions, families have been elevated from participants to powerful drivers of inclusion, innovation, and sustainability.

One Special Olympics parent captured this transformation perfectly:

*“Before Special Olympics, we felt like we were walking this journey alone. Now, we’re part of something bigger—a movement that sees our whole family.”*

As we look ahead to the next phase, we are ready to scale our impact, strengthen the global family community, and create more opportunities for families to lead and shape the movement



A blue-tinted photograph of an elderly woman with short, light-colored hair, looking down at a young man in a military uniform. The man is wearing a white dress uniform with a peaked cap and is looking up at the woman. The background is blurred, showing other people in similar uniforms. The word "APPENDIX" is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters at the bottom of the image.

# APPENDIX



# FAMILY STRATEGY

PHASE 1 (2023-2026)

## 1 ENGAGE

Engage family members so they become active participants in the Special Olympics movement and increase the number of local programs.

- **Program Leadership:** Train program leadership to sustainably engage family members within local programming. Topics will include engaging families in sports, schools, health, government, and as leaders.
- **Communication Channels:** Use technology to improve communication channels between Special Olympics and families through a family contact list and updating family sections on program, national, and global websites.
- **Awareness:** Design an awareness campaign promoting and celebrating parents, caregivers and siblings.
- **Family Resources:** Provide resources to families that invite them into the Special Olympics community.

## STRATEGY GOAL

Develop and implement a global strategy that engages, educates, and empowers families so they become impactful teachers of inclusion. With a focus on siblings as key constituents, we will build a solid foundation for the advancement of family engagement work and inspire family members to be active participants and movement leaders.

## 2 EDUCATE

Provide education to family members to improve and promote well-being through community and networking.

- **Workshops and Forums:** Provide opportunities for education and skill-building to promote social and emotional skills within families.
- **Regional Support Grants:** Grant regions funds to provide educational opportunities to families and further their Regional family engagement efforts.

## 3 EMPOWER

Empower parents, siblings and caregivers to become leaders so that they influence governments to provide inclusive education.

- **Family Leaders:** Engage and train family members to become leaders.
- **Family Voices in Government:** Family members are trained and engaged as advocates to seek financial support from governments.
- **Innovation Grants:** Provide Sibling Innovation Grants to foster grassroots social impact innovations.

## SUCCESS METRICS

**20 countries**  
engaging family members  
in government advocacy to  
increase inclusive schools

Increase Family  
registration  
numbers by **45,000**

**100** family  
members  
trained as  
leaders

**Support** the global  
goal of increasing  
local programs and  
clubs by **8,000**

**Support** the global goal  
of **\$100m**  
raised from governments  
to support inclusive  
education through sport.



# FAMILY PROGRAM

## ENGAGEMENT REPORT AND ANALYSIS

### FAMILY PROGRAM OVERVIEW

At the Special Olympics World Winter Games in Turin, families were honored with an experience that recognized and celebrated their indispensable role within the movement. When they arrived, credentialed family members were granted access to all competition venues, as well as reserved seating at both the Opening and Closing Ceremonies—ensuring they were front and center to support and celebrate their athletes.

Many venues featured designated Family Lounges, offering complimentary refreshments and a welcoming space to rest, reconnect, and recharge between events. A particularly memorable highlight was the Family Reception held on March 11. This heartfelt gathering brought families together in a spirit of camaraderie, providing a meaningful opportunity to share stories, celebrate achievements, and foster lasting connections.

To ensure families remained well-informed and prepared throughout their time in Turin, a series of newsletters were distributed, providing timely updates, event highlights, and essential information. In addition, each family received a comprehensive Family Handbook containing detailed guidance on schedules, venues, and logistical considerations to support a smooth and enjoyable experience.

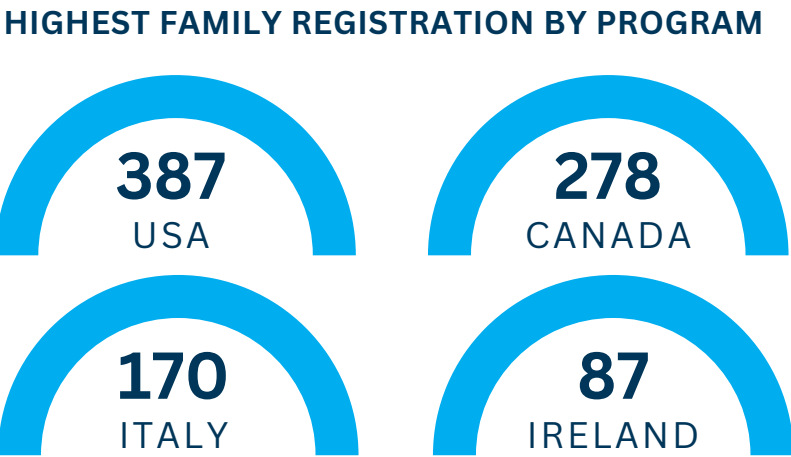
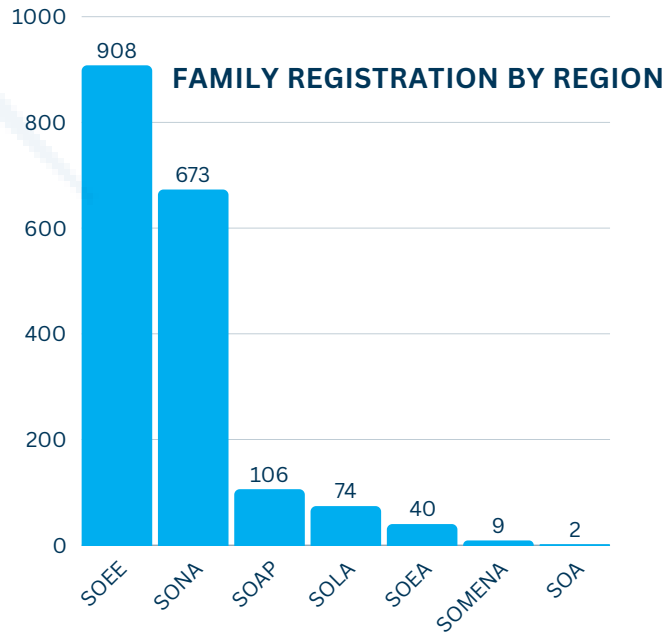
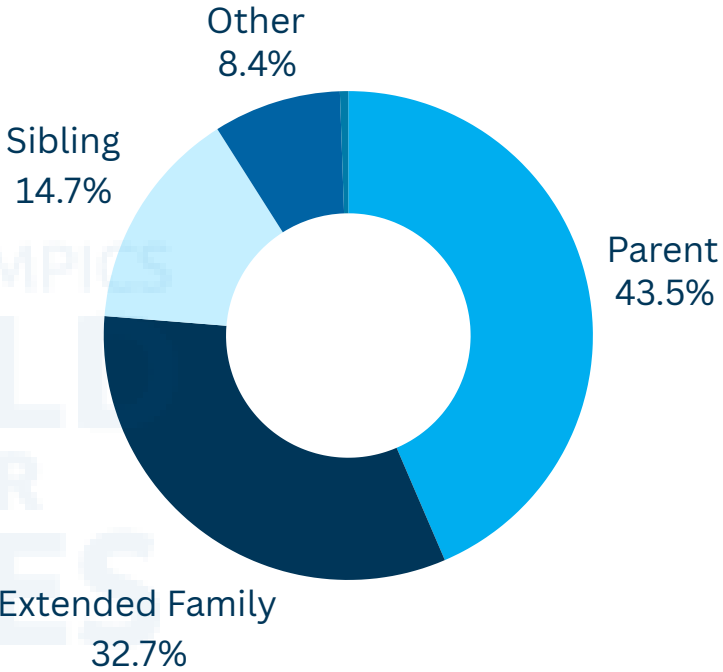
Families were also encouraged to engage in the global #WhereIsMoly campaign, creatively showcasing the Games' official mascot in photographs from around the world—further reinforcing a sense of global connection and shared celebration.

### KEY STATISTICS

**1,812**  
registered families  
attended World Games

**717**  
family members  
attended alpine skiing

**54**  
nations were proudly represented  
in the family program







---

# FAMILY PROGRAM CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

---

## CHALLENGES

- **Limited Planning Time:** As with all other Functional Areas, the Family Program faced an unusually condensed planning timeline. This significantly limited our ability to thoughtfully design, coordinate, and execute programming tailored to family engagement.
- **Lack of Dedicated LOC Counterpart:** Unlike other areas, the Family Program did not have a dedicated Local Organizing Committee (LOC) counterpart. This gap created communication challenges, often requiring outreach to multiple stakeholders to resolve one issue. As a result, critical information was delayed or missed entirely, impacting our ability to make timely and informed decisions.
- **Challenges with Atos Registration System:** The Atos registration platform presented considerable difficulties both internally and externally. Internally, staff spent extensive time manually sorting through family data to verify registrations. Externally, many families found the system confusing and unintuitive. A significant number either abandoned the registration process or opted to attend as spectators without registering, reducing the accuracy of our data regarding family attendance.
- **No On-Site Registration Option:** Due to staff availability and time constraints, we were unable to offer on-site registration for families. Given the widespread challenges with the online registration system, having this alternative available would have alleviated frustration, increased participation accuracy, and provided a more inclusive experience for families.

## SUCCESSES

- **Exceptional Family Registration Turnout:** Despite encountering challenges with the registration system, we successfully exceeded our projected number of family registrations—an outstanding accomplishment. A total of 1,812 families were registered and approved, thanks to the dedication and leadership of SOI staff member, Catherine Smith. Catherine worked closely with the Regional teams to ensure a seamless and thorough registration process, reflecting a strong commitment to family inclusion and support.
- **Effective Communication through Family Program Newsletters:** Given the condensed planning timeline for these Games, timely and effective communication became even more critical. The Family Program newsletters proved to be a vital tool, providing families with essential, real-time updates both in the lead-up to and during the Games. Feedback from staff and families alike highlighted the newsletters as a reliable and appreciated source of information and connection.
- **Meaningful Family Reception:** With the collaborative support of SOI staff and SSGMs, we successfully organized and hosted a Family Reception at Edit Restaurant in Turin. This special evening provided a platform to formally launch a new family engagement resource and offered families a warm and welcoming environment to connect with each other. The reception was a meaningful and memorable event, honoring the essential role families play in the Special Olympics movement.
- **Launch of New Family Resource:** During the Games, we proudly launched a new family engagement resource designed to help local programs implement and strengthen family involvement. This tool will serve as a valuable asset for programs seeking to deepen connections with families.
- **Family Program Guide:** To support families on their journey to the World Winter Games, our team developed a live, continuously updated Family Program Guide. Recognizing the fast-paced and evolving nature of the Games, we prioritized making this guide a living document. One week prior to the Games, we translated the guide to ensure greater accessibility for our international families.



# CONCLUSION

Despite a range of significant challenges—including a condensed planning timeline, the absence of a dedicated LOC counterpart, and difficulties with the Atos registration system—the Family Program at the World Winter Games delivered exceptional outcomes. Most notably, we achieved an unprecedented 1,812 approved family registrations, far surpassing expectations and underscoring the unwavering commitment of our team. Through strategic communication tools like the Family Program newsletters and innovative resources such as the live Family Program Guide and newly launched engagement tool, we prioritized clarity, accessibility, and inclusion. The meaningful Family Reception further exemplified our dedication to creating welcoming spaces for connection and recognition. While opportunities for improvement remain, particularly in registration processes and on-site support, the success of this year’s Family Program highlights the power of collaboration, adaptability, and a steadfast belief in the central role families play in the Special Olympics movement.

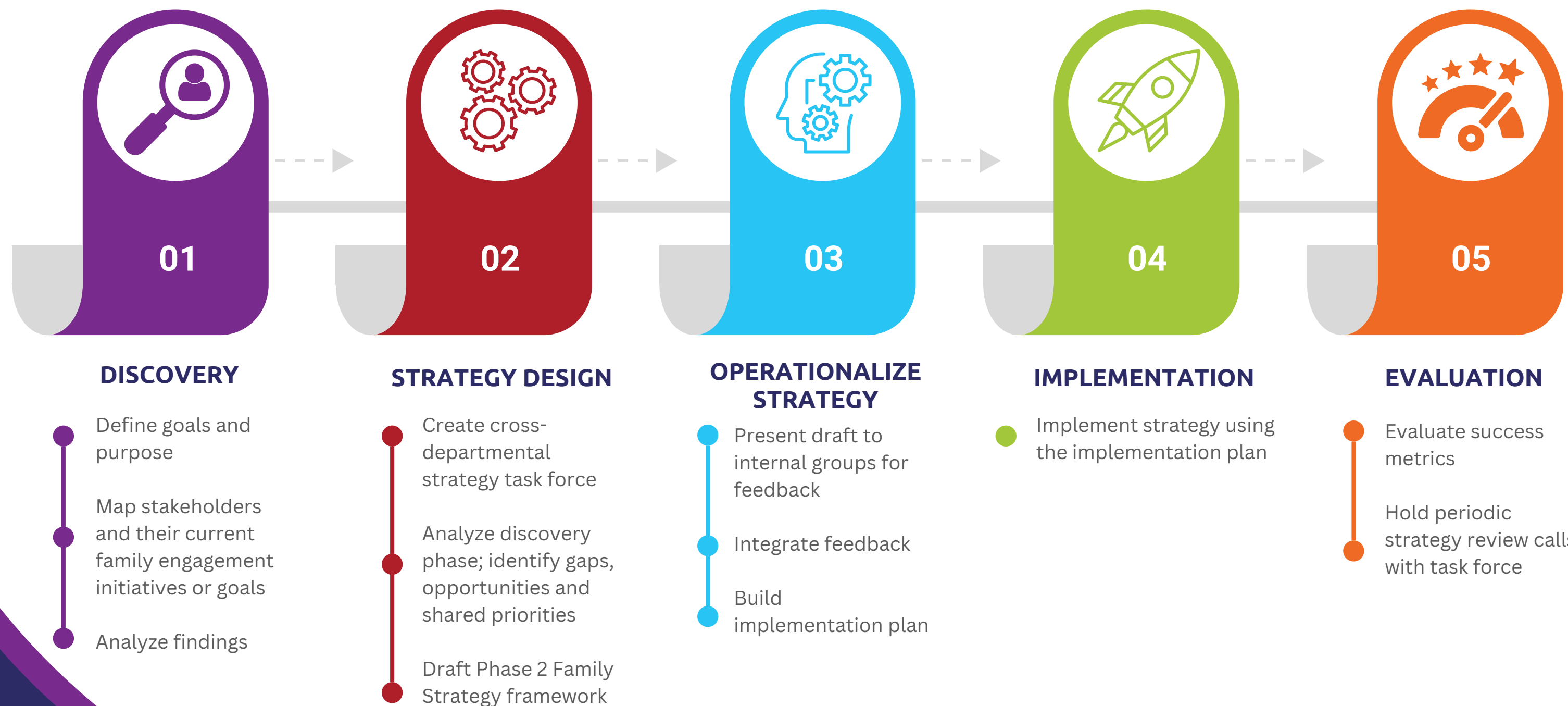
A detailed look into Family Program learnings and suggestions for future World Games can be found [here](#).





# PHASE 2 STRATEGY

## 5-STEP DEVELOPMENT PLAN







**FAMILIES**

**Special  
Olympics**

