Special Olympics Health

MADE POSSIBLE BY Golisano FOUNDATION

Health Messenger Activation Guide

LAST UPDATED MAY 2026

Table of Contents

Overview 03

Activation Ideas 04

- Prevention: Fitness, early childhood development, family support 04
- Assessments: Healthy Athletes screenings, care linkage, refferals 08
- Training: Training current and future health workers 10
- Healthy Systems Strengthening 11

Tips for Activating 13

More Resources 15

Overview

This guide will help Special Olympics Program staff effectively activate Health Messengers as leaders in meaningful roles. In this guide, you will find ideas for Health Messenger roles, best practices, and additional resources to support you.

All newly trained Health Messengers are required to be activated as a Health Messenger at least once within the first year of completing their training to officially earn the Health Messenger title. Health Messengers should be empowered to plan how they want to be leaders; staff and mentors can support Health Messengers by sharing ideas and providing guidance.

Activation means a Health Messenger is serving in a health leadership role. Activation will look different depending on the strengths and interests of the Health Messenger.

For more information on the Health Messenger training, please visit the Health Messenger webpage.[1] If you are hosting a Health Messenger training, be mindful of the minimum training standards.

Key

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS
You will find these in lightly shaded boxes containing strategies to consider for a leadership role. They are not required but may help.

CONTINUING EDUCATION!
These boxes contain reminders for other leadership trainings that could help your Health Messengers learn about the role.

Activation Ideas

Health Messengers help you achieve your goals. As Special Olympics International, Regional, or Program staff, you have your own work goals. Health Messengers are trained, passionate leaders, and activating them will help you accomplish your goals.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of Health Messenger activation ideas. Engage Health Messengers to accomplish your objectives and make your work stronger.

PREVENTION

Fitness, early childhood development, family support

BECOME A YOUNG ATHLETES ASSISTANT COACH

Increase capacity for Young Athletes programming by recruiting Health Messengers to serve as assistant coaches. Their role can vary depending on their interests and abilities. They could help set up, welcome participants, run warm-ups/cool-downs, lead or demonstrate activities, support participants one-on-one, and/or tear down.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS
The head coach should meet with the Health Messenger before each practice to provide instruction.

LEAD/VOLUNTEER AT A YOUNG ATHLETES EVENT

Health Messengers can support at local, regional, or national Young Athletes events as volunteers or leaders. Health Messengers might set-up, welcome and check in participants, lead or support stations, participate in activities with the Young Athletes, tear down, and more.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS
Designate 1 person to support any volunteer Health Messengers. Give them clear roles and expectations.

PREVENTION

Fitness, early childhood development, family support

START/LEAD A WALKING OR RUNNING CLUB

Walking and running clubs are great ways for Health Messengers to engage their communities. These could be hosted as stand-alone events, activities within a Special Olympics team, or as Unified Fitness Clubs that meet regularly. A Health Messenger could help recruit participants, send out participant reminder texts, share health information, or plan the session's activity.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

It could be helpful for a Health Messenger to have a mentor to support them in this project. A new club will require paperwork, logistical planning, and communication.

RUN A PERFORMANCE STATION AT AN EVENT/COMPETITION

Many of the topics covered in the Health Messenger training align with Performance Stations – nutrition, hydration, physical activity, competition readiness, and Game Day Minds. Health Messengers can run stations at events and educate other athletes.

Learn more here.[2]

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Include the Health Messenger in event planning from the beginning. Assign a volunteer to support the Health Messenger at the Performance Station (if needed). Meet with the Health Messenger ahead of time to review their role and debrief afterwards.

CO-FACILITATE A FAMILY HEALTH FORUM

Include Health Messengers at Family Health Forums. Health Messengers might help determine the Family Health Forum topic, share their health story at the event, and/or co-present additional material.

Learn more here.[3]

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Make sure to hold prep meetings with the Health Messenger ahead of time and debrief afterwards.

PREVENTION

Fitness, early childhood development, family support

BECOME A PHYSICAL ACTIVITY LEADER IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Health Messengers with a specific interest in leading others in fitness and physical activity can complete additional free training to become a Community Physical Activity Leader. After completing training, Health Messengers can work with their local Programs, community centers, parks and recreation, or community fitness facilities to offer fitness programming to athletes, Unified Partners, and community members.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Health Messengers interested in this role can take the Community Physical Activity Leader course through the American Council on Exercise.[4] It may be helpful to connect Health Messengers to places they can serve in this role.

ADVOCATE FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY!

Advocating for physical activity allows Health Messengers to increase access to fitness opportunities for people with IDD in their communities. An example of physical activity advocacy includes leading a school or workplace wellness fitness program and sharing the impact with key stakeholders, such as a school board or leadership in one's workplace, to advocate for more fitness programming. Another example is meeting with fitness professionals to train leaders on inclusivity strategies. Additional training will be provided for Health Messengers interested in physical activity advocacy in the future.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Programs may wish to connect their Health Messengers to any fitness partners they have to maximize physical activity activations.

LEAD VIRTUAL OR IN-PERSON MEETINGS TO SHARE HEALTH INFORMATION

Health Messengers can lead virtual or in-person health education sessions to provide health information, practice wellness activities, or host a cooking class. The Health Messenger could select their own topic or choose from a list of topics provided by their Special Olympics Program or coach.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Provide logistical support where needed, make sure to hold prep meetings with the Health Messenger ahead of time!

PREVENTION

Fitness, early childhood development, family support

SHARE REGULAR HEALTH TIPS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Health Messengers can create content for social media posts about how they are staying healthy. This could be a video about a healthy meal or workout, or a photo from practice.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Provide support with camera use, ensuring that videos are recorded in a vertical view. Find a quiet place to record videos. Use natural light, like sunlight, but avoid bright lights behind the Health Messenger. Check to ensure that the Health Messenger can be heard clearly on the video.

CONTINUING EDUCATION!

Health Messengers who want to share health tips are encouraged to take a Healthy Habits Leader training. These trainings provide more detail on healthy behaviors and how to educate others.

CONTINUING EDUCATION!

Health Messengers who want to be physical activity leaders can take the Community Physical Activity Leader course through the American Council on Exercise[4] to learn proper safety and program design skills to lead community fitness classes. This course was developed in partnership with Special Olympics to meet the needs of people with IDD.

CONTINUING EDUCATION!

Health Messengers can also train to be Fitness Captains to support warm-ups, cool-downs, and sharing health tips with their teammates on the field of play. When completing these activities, it is in their role as a Fitness Captain, and it would not count towards Health Messenger activation.

CONTINUING EDUCATION!

Health Messengers with a specific interest in leading physical activity can participate in a Physical Activity Advocacy training as part of the Health Change Champions Health Messenger Continuing Education training. Upon receiving training in physical activity advocacy, Health Messengers will have the option of connecting with a global physical activity leader to support them in completing a required physical activity advocacy activation within 12 months of training.

ASSESSMENTS

Healthy Athletes screenings, care linkage, referrals

LEAD ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE STRONG MINDS DISCIPLINE

The Health Messenger training covers activities from the Strong Minds discipline of Healthy Athletes. Health Messengers can volunteer at the Strong Minds activity stations and share tips.

Special Olympics
Strong Minds

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

It is recommended that this role be performed as a Unified pair. Make sure the Health Messenger and Unified partner know where to direct athletes if they have questions or mental health concerns.

RECRUIT ATHLETES AND TEAMS TO GO THROUGH HEALTHY ATHLETES SCREENINGS

Health Messengers can spread the word about screening opportunities at events. Assign Health Messengers to promote the event by sharing flyers with teams during breaks.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Make sure the Health Messenger knows which disciplines will be offered at the screening. Give the Health Messenger updated information and a floor plan. This is a good role to offer as a Unified role.

GIVE TOURS OF THE HEALTHY ATHLETES SCREENINGS TO VISITORS

If you have partners, sponsors, or other visitors at your Healthy Athletes events, Health Messengers are perfect tour guides to show them around.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

It is recommended that this role be performed as a Unified pair and that both have participated in and/or observed screenings first. Make sure the Health Messenger is prepared with talking points. Give them a chance to practice ahead of time.

ASSESSMENTS

Healthy Athletes screenings, care linkage, referrals

ASSIST AT HEALTHY ATHLETES DISCIPLINES

Health Messengers can provide additional assistance to Clinical Directors at specific screenings. Their presence may help other athletes feel more comfortable in a healthcare setting.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Make sure the Health Messenger has time to meet the Clinical Director ahead of time. Provide specific instructions for how the Health Messenger can and cannot support.

SUPPORT TRAINING FOR HEALTHY ATHLETES CLINICAL DIRECTORS AND VOLUNTEERS

Health Messengers can share Healthy Athletes success stories or their own health stories at trainings for Clinical Directors and Healthy Athletes volunteers.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Share teaching materials with the Health Messenger in advance. Provide instructions regarding their speaking role and support in developing speaking notes if needed.

CONTINUING EDUCATION!

Health Messengers who want to become involved in Healthy Athletes screenings are encouraged to take the Healthy Athletes Aid training. This module provides more detail on supporting at a Healthy Athletes event.

TRAINING

Training current and future health workers

CO-LEAD AN INCLUSIVE HEALTH TRAINING

Health Messengers can co-present Inclusive Health Trainings to community partners or healthcare students. They can share both the content and their personal health story depending on their comfort level.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

If virtual, take the time to ensure the Health Messenger knows how to use the online communications tool (e.g. Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc.). If in person, give the athlete the chance to be in the room early to become familiar with the layout, systems, and technology.

BE A STANDARDIZED PATIENT FOR A CLINICAL SIMULATION OR INTERPROFESSIONAL EDUCATION EVENT AT A UNIVERSITY

Healthcare students will often have clinical practice sessions called clinical simulations. These take place in specialized simulation laboratories or on interprofessional education days. Programs can work with local universities to have Special Olympics Heath Messengers serve as mock patients for healthcare students to practice working with individuals with IDD.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Have a prep call for the Health Messenger to meet with people they will be working with. Ensure athletes have a tour of the clinical simulation space prior to the event. They will need to practice the character they are playing, which can be supported by both the Program and the university. Give specific instructions for what to do and not do.

HEALTH SYSYEMS STRENGTHENING

CO-FACILITATE A HEALTH MESSENGER TRAINING

Who better to present Health Messenger content than a Health Messenger? Health Messengers can co-lead the whole training or present a specific section of the training. They can also share examples of their roles as Health Messengers.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Have a prep call to prepare stories and examples. Hold a practice run through for the sessions the Health Messenger is presenting—in-person if the training is in-person.

PARTICIPATE IN PARTNERSHIP MEETINGS, SHARE PERSONAL HEALTH STORY

Invite a Health Messenger to join meetings with partners, sponsors, or other community members to share their personal health story. Including people with IDD is a direct demonstration of inclusion.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Prepare talking points with the Health Messenger ahead of time and make sure they understand the meeting topic going into the meeting.

ATTEND MEETINGS WITH LOCAL AND/OR NATIONAL POLICY MAKERS

Invite Health Messengers to attend advocacy meetings and events. A Health Messengers personal health story adds impact to advocacy work.

SUPPORT CONSIDERATIONS

Work with the Health Messenger to prepare talking points and a specific story to share. There may be security checkpoints to go through; explain what to expect ahead of time and what you can and cannot bring.

HEALTH SYSYEMS STRENGTHENING

CONTINUING EDUCATION!
Health Messengers who want to get involved with advocacy work are encouraged to take the Health Change Champion training. This training covers how to make advocacy plans and how to share your own story.

CONTINUING EDUCATION!
The Athlete Leadership Advanced Leadership Modules and Personal and Professional Development Handbooks offer more great resources for Health Messengers to learn to be more prepared for their leadership roles.

Check them out on the Athlete Leadership webpage.[5]

Tips for Activating

Below is a non-exhaustive list of best practices when activating Health Messengers.

BEFORE

- Take the time to explore the Health Messenger's interests. Even if you give them a specific task, that doesn't have to be the only way for them to be involved. Make sure the role is valuable and interesting to them.
- Provide options and allow the Health Messenger to decide how they want to engage their leadership skills.
- Ask the Health Messenger how they want to communicate and how they want to be supported. Do they have any accommodation needs?
- Share your contact information with the Health Messenger for use during the activation opportunity (to access support as required).
- Provide all information in plain language/easy read, and use audio (recording of you reading the message aloud) in email communications where possible.
- If activating during an event, provide a detailed schedule, including the event address, room layout and/or photos of the building, and specific instructions for entering the building and signing in (if required). Send information well in advance and give time for Health Messengers to ask questions.
- Offer to meet ahead of time to prepare, practice, or review the plan.
- Make sure the Health Messenger has transportation to the event (if relevant).

DURING

- Print off and bring any notes or slides (if relevant) for the Health Messenger.
- Meet the Health Messenger at the entrance to the event.
- Follow the plan you discussed ahead of time with the Health Messenger.

AFTER

- Hold a debrief with the Health Messenger after the activation. How could the Health Messenger and/or staff improve next time? Are there ways to expand or change for next time?

Mentors

Mentors are an essential component of Athlete Leader support. Mentors are there to provide support where needed or requested, but not to do the activation for the Health Messenger. It can be helpful to be very clear in setting expectations of the mentors that support Health Messengers.

ROLE OF A MENTOR:

- Attend the activation event with the Health Messenger
- Meet with the Health Messenger one or more times ahead of the activation event to prepare for the event
- Ensure the materials prepared for the activation reflect the words and opinions of the Health Messenger
- Manage the travel logistics as needed (see travel logistics section)

Note: the above list of mentor roles will vary depending on the unique needs of each Health Messenger.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE HEALTH MESSENGER (GENERAL)

- How do you like to communicate? Email, phone call, text, WhatsApp?
- Who should I communicate with when I'm trying to reach you?
- What accommodations would help to best support you? (translation, companion support, extra time)

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE HEALTH MESSENGER WHEN ARRANGING TRAVEL

- Have you travelled by (mode of transport) before? Do you have any questions?
- Do you want to room by yourself, with another Health Messenger or family member? (if applicable)
- What time of day would you prefer to travel? (provide multiple options)
- Do you need extra luggage?
- Do you need extra boarding time?
- Are you comfortable using Uber/Lyft and/or public transportation?
- Do you feel comfortable handling your own money?
- Do you have any dietary restrictions?

Resources Mentioned

1. Health Messenger webpage
https://resources.specialolympics.org/health/health-messenger

2. Preformance Stations
resources.specialolympics.org/health/fitness/fitness-through-sport/performance-stations

3. Family Health Forum.
https://resources.specialolympics.org/community-building/families/family-health-forums

4. American Council on Exercise
www.acefitness.org/continuing-education/course/4a5x67vzw/community-physical-activity-leader-cpal/

5. Athlete Leadership Webpage.
resources.specialolympics.org/leadership-development/leadership-and-skills-training

More Resources

The Mentor e-learning course provides information on what is expected of mentors.
https://resources.specialolympics.org/leadership-development/leadership-and-skills-training/athlete-leadership-mentor-course

Hiring People with IDD – A Program Considerations Guide is helpful if you are planning to hire a person with IDD. It has resources for creating job descriptions, potential roles and tips from SO Programs, current staff with IDD and their supervisors.
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/hxti6uwwfzllk5c2kimun/Hiring-People-with-IDD-A-Programs-Consideration-Guide_Letter.pdf?rlkey=721g9mdkzwdrkmbqkv7uqh0b4&e=1&dl=0

Easy Read and Accessibility provides training and tools to help you develop easy read and accessible materials. As a global organization, Special Olympics needs to reach as wide an audience as possible. This not only involves translating material into our official languages but also creating materials in Easy Read format, as stated in the organization's translation policy.
https://resources.specialolympics.org/easy-read-accessibility?locale=en

Special Olympics Health

MADE POSSIBLE BY Golisano FOUNDATION

Special Olympics Health activities are supported by many sources, including in the United States, by Grant Number NU27DD000021 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), with $18.1 M (64%) financed with U.S. federal funds and $10.2 M (36%) supported by non-federal sources. The contents of this resource is solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Department of Health and Human Services