

Health Messenger Overview

# Who is a Health Messenger?

A Health Messenger is a Special Olympics athlete who has been trained to serve as a **health and wellness leader, educator, advocate, and role model** within their community and beyond.

# Why are Health Messengers needed?

People with intellectual disabilities experience many barriers to accessing quality healthcare and services. As a result, they are facing health disparities and die on average16 to 20 years earlier than people without intellectual disabilities!

To create inclusive health systems, people with intellectual disabilities have to be included in the conversation.

The aims of Health Messenger training include:

* providing athletes with a technical skill set that enhances their ability to be a leader and advocate for themselves and others in all aspects of health (e.g., health, fitness, with healthcare providers),
* empowering athletes to advocate for the health needs of people with intellectual disabilities, and
* promoting athlete knowledge of health and change in health behaviors.

# What does training include?

Special Olympics Health Messenger trainings focus on three outcomes: **empowerment, leadership, and community impact.** After these trainings, Health Messengers are fully equipped to lead their teams, families, friends and communities to pursue healthy lifestyles, and to advocate for healthcare providers and governments to adopt inclusive policies around health, wellness services, education and resources for people with intellectual disabilities.

The Single Health Evaluation (SHE) asks (and has asked) in past years about the number of athletes trained as new Health Messengers. Unlike other areas of Special Olympics Health programming, SOI had not issued guidance about what it means to train an athlete as a new Health Messenger. As a result, there has been a lot of variation worldwide.

To ensure that all athletes who are counted and recognized as Health Messengers have a minimum level of training, SOI is implementing the ***New Health Messenger Minimum Training Standards*** below.

# New Health Messenger Minimum Training Standards

**Athletes reported as new Health Messengers who were trained on or after October 1, 2022 must have completed a training that meets the New Health Messenger Minimum Training Standards.** To distinguish this training from other trainings that Programs may be providing to Health Messengers, this can also be called the “Becoming a Health Messenger” training.

## Requirement 1 – Time

The training must include at least 8 active training hours.

* These hours can be in-person or virtual but should not include times allocated to breaks or lunch, unless there is also work occurring during those sessions
* The training hours do not need to be held consecutively – they may be divided over a number of days or weeks

## Requirement 2 – Topics

The following topics must be covered for at least the period of time listed:

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| **Topic** | **Minimum time** |
| Introduction to Special Olympics Health and the role of the Health Messenger | 1 hour |
| Health disparities of people with intellectual disabilities | 1 hour |
| Physical activity | 1 hour |
| Nutrition | 1 hour |
| Emotional health | 1 hour |
| Communications | 1 hour |
| Advocacy | 1 hour |

You will notice that these minimum times add up to 7 hours of active training. That leaves a minimum of 1 hour for Programs to add additional time or topics that are tailored to their athletes’ needs.

## Requirement 3 – Registration

All newly trained Health Messengers must be registered in SOI’s Health Messenger Database (using the Health Messenger Information Form) in order for a Program to count them as newly trained. Programs will continue to report the number of new Health Messengers trained on the Single Health Evaluation (SHE). SOI will cross-check the numbers reported in the SHE with the numbers registered in the Health Messenger Database for the corresponding period. Programs may be asked to revise the information reported through the SHE number or ensure the registration of their athletes in the Database.

**Currently the Health Messenger Information Form exists in** [**English**](https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/0e1be8a1b99d41b0b43530771e890c1c) **and** [**Spanish**](https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/dc76b41833774271a02ce27021844508)**.**

## Requirement 4 – Activation Planning

Activation Planning is to plan a Health Messenger activation (Requirement 5). An activation may be less elaborate/involved than the previous practicum requirement, which many athletes and Programs found intimidating or overwhelming.

Activation Planning may be part of the training or may occur as separate calls/meetings. A staff member from the Health Messenger’s SO Program should participate in this planning session along with the Health Messenger and their mentor. For Health Messengers who don’t have in mind a specific way they would like to be activated, the SO staff member can help provide ideas and opportunities for activation within the Program’s planned activities and/or aligned with priority or strategic areas.

The idea behind shifting from a practicum to an activation is to recognize that some Health Messengers may not yet feel ready to “organize the dance” and may prefer to practice their skills with more guidance and structure.

**Programs must be very careful to avoid tokenism in activation planning. If an athlete is ready to plan their own activation, please follow their lead. If an athlete would still like more support, please be prepared to speak about different options so that the athlete still has the opportunity to choose how they’d like to be activated.**

## Requirement 5 – Activation

# All newly trained Health Messengers must be activated at least once within the first year after completing the didactic training. This activation must be reported to SOI using FORM.

Within one year of being trained, each Health Messenger must be activated. They will work closely with their Special Olympics Program to do so. Activation gives Health Messenger the chance to practice what they learned in training and to show their leadership skills. Some examples of Health Messenger activation are:

* Leading a fitness or wellness challenge
* Hosting health activities, such as a cooking demonstration for healthy and simple recipes
* Participating in a meeting with health decision-makers
* Participate in health-related media interviews discussing a new health initiative

## Requirement 6 – Evaluation

Programs must ensure that new Health Messengers complete the three evaluation forms for the training. These evaluation forms are:

* ****[pre-test](https://specialolympics.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eJUs03e5lSIk3VI),
* [post-test for immediately after the training](https://specialolympics.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_06tmoK3nMZxKMVo), and
* [post-post-test for 3 months after the training](https://specialolympics.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ePXcjlINGTRzWom).

These evaluations should be completed electronically (via the links above and on the Health Messenger Resource page). Programs may consider costs for engaging a consultant for entering this data in their Health Impact Grant.

In very limited circumstances and for compelling reasons, SOI will consider assisting Programs/Regions with data entry for scanned paper evaluation forms. Please contact the Pillar 4 team to discuss: healthmessenger@specialolympics.org.

# Training Resources

You can access all Health Messenger training resources [here](https://resources.specialolympics.org/health/health-messenger).

****The symbol on the left appears throughout this document when a training resource is referenced. Some training resources are linked directly in this document.

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The symbol appears in red when the training resource must be downloaded directly from the Health Messenger Resources site.