



"We are all **peaceful protestors** against the stigma and indifference which has plagued every person who has a disability. We share a collective humanity. It is what drives us to move forward. **Everyone deserves the same right to health.** Don't wait for someone else to make it happen."

- **Parker Thornton**, Special Olympics athlete and Health Messenger from New Hampshire, declared this in a speech at the Igniting Change: Inclusive Health Summit in Seattle, Washington in June 2018.

The only way to find a solution to end exclusion is to have the solution driven by the people who face these challenges daily. People with intellectual disabilities (ID), like Parker, must guide us toward solutions. The Special Olympics Health Messenger program was born out of this notion. In order to create more effective public health programs, improve health systems and engage communities to support the health of people with ID, people with ID must have leadership roles. The Special Olympics Health Messenger program empowers athletes to serve as leaders through a training program that helps them:

- Develop healthy lifestyles,
- Build skills and confidence to influence other people to lead healthier lives,
- Advocate within their communities for inclusion around health and wellness services, education and resources, and
- Advocate for the health needs of people with ID.

What is a **Health Messenger**?

Health Messengers are Special Olympics athletes who have been trained to serve as health and wellness leaders, educators, advocates and role models within their Special Olympics communities, and the community at large. They are critical to ensuring Special Olympics achieves its goal of equitable health for all people with ID.

Leadership roles for a Health Messenger include:

- **Spokesperson:** Speaking to health influencers and the media on behalf of people with ID about the health and wellness needs and barriers faced.
- **Healthy Athletes Coordinator:** Recruiting and guiding athletes through Healthy Athletes screenings, serving as peer educators at health education stations and assisting with logistics of the screenings.
- **Healthy Habits Leader:** Leading health education stations at events.
- **Health & Fitness Leader:** Creating ongoing health and fitness education or activities for athletes, unified partners and families.
- **Peer Role Model:** Inspiring athletes to be their healthiest through their own healthy behaviors.

PROGRESS in 2018:

2018 has been one of vast expansion and activation for Health Messengers globally.

Training:

More than 165 Health Messengers were trained from 6 Regions from trainings hosted across the United States, South Africa, Nigeria, Singapore and the Dominican Republic. The goal was that all newly trained Health Messengers went home with increased confidence and a clear understanding of the steps involved to lead activations, raise awareness, and mobilize and influence community members and key decision makers to be more inclusive of people with ID.

**Resource Development:**

The [Health Messenger Resources page](#) was developed to help Special Olympics Program staff easily plan and execute Health Messenger trainings in their Regions, Programs or communities, support their Health Messengers in this important leadership role, and capture activation data.

Turn-key resources created include:

- A facilitator's guide including step-by-step instructions for creating an effective training.
- A guide to activating Health Messengers through the completion of a practicum.
- Template educational presentations (including facilitator tips, talking points, and suggestions for group discussions) teaching athletes how to be effective Health Messengers.
- Hands-on activities providing Health Messengers with tools they can use to teach athletes in their communities.

**Activation:**

Each Health Messenger is required to do one health and wellness focused project/practicum in their community within one year of receiving training to demonstrate their leadership in health and wellness. As a result of these practicums, Health Messengers have:

- Led weekly walking groups, created health and fitness Facebook pages, posted fitness and Movband instructional videos and vlogs, and used their social media handles to issue fitness challenges.
- Developed relationships with their local health influencers and advocated for inclusive health to key health policy makers.
- Wrote Special Olympics newsletter articles, spoke to the medical community, and served as media spokespeople for the Special Olympics Health movement.
- Assisted with Healthy Athletes clinical director trainings and screenings, implemented Healthy Athletes strategies with their teammates and collected health data on their local athletes.
- Presented health education to Athletes Leadership Groups and at athlete training camps and offered adaptive cooking classes in person and online.

HEALTH MESSENGERS IN ACTION!

Influencing the Influencers

- Garrie Barnes from Maryland presented at the United Nations Convention on Human Rights. She highlighted how people and organizations can make much-needed progress towards the inclusion of people with ID and shared real-life examples from Special Olympics Programs.
- Nell Coonen-Korte (Minnesota), Jason Gieschen (Nebraska) and Parker Thornton (New Hampshire) joined the “Intentional Inclusion: A Health Equity Necessity” panel alongside the US Surgeon General, Dr. Jerome Adams, at the American Public Health Association annual conference - one of the biggest public health conferences in the US.
- Seven Health Messengers participated in meetings with members of Congress during Capitol Hill Day to raise awareness about Special Olympics’ work in the inclusive health space and to seek continued support. They shared their firsthand expertise and stories, strengthening their asks.



Leading By Example

- Special Olympics Nigeria trained a group of Health Messengers to deliver the Skillz for Life HIV/AIDS and malaria curriculum and to educate other athletes on the importance of nutrition, hydration and physical fitness. These Health Messengers have been leading soccer practices that incorporate their newfound knowledge.
- Elaina Camacho from Maryland used FIT 5 to teach her soccer teammates how to live healthy and active lifestyles.

Raising Awareness

- Hilary Kern from Texas produced 11 videos for Wellness Wednesdays for Team Texas to talk about Movbands, nutrition, hydration and fitness. Additionally, she spoke at the Team Texas training camp about choices at buffet-style venues, nutrition and hydration, and presented to the Athlete Leadership group about nutrition and fitness.
- Amber Gertsch from Utah engaged with the Special Olympics community and her personal network by posting fitness tips and encouragement leading up to the 2018 Special Olympics USA Games. She also became her mom’s personal health coach, lost 25 pounds and began living a more active lifestyle.
- Ryan Colpitts from Ontario ran a Healthy Lifestyles store visit at a local grocery store. He worked with store staff to cover a wide array of educational topics such as healthy versus unhealthy food choices, the importance of reading labels, and sugar and sodium content. Participants also benefited from tips on proper food storage, meal prep ideas and healthy food samples.

The success of 2018 laid a strong foundation to further grow the Health Messenger program in 2019 – with more Programs holding their own trainings and more Health Messengers being activated across the globe to improve the health status of people with intellectual disabilities, their families and communities. Want to host your own Health Messenger training? **Contact: healthmessenger@specialolympics.org**

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