ATHLETE LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

If you are a Special Olympics Program and are considering creating an Athlete Leadership Council (ALC), here is a guide to help you get started.

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**What is an Athlete Leadership Council?**

The Athlete Leadership Council is a structure where athletes:

* Report to other athletes and Program leaders information relevant to Special Olympics.
* Voice their opinions about important issues related to Special Olympics.
* Develop, plan, and implement projects.
* Serve as a liaison in different areas of the organization providing support and expertise.
* Gain leadership training and experience.

**Why should you have an Athlete Leadership Council?**

Having an Athlete Leadership Council provides athletes opportunities to share leadership skills, serve as volunteers, provide valuable input to the operation of Special Olympics and be role models for other athletes. Having athletes involved in meaningful ways conveys how much we respect and value them as an integral part of our organization. It also gives Program leaders valuable insight into what interests and motivates athletes in the Program. This insight will help achieve programmatic goals and develop actions that will attract new athletes and retain existing athletes. The ALC was formerly known as the Athlete Input Council.

**Purpose of ALC**

There are many ways an ALC can support your Programs efforts, here are some examples:

* Can assist with R-word campaign
* Promoting health education and healthy habits
* Participation in the Polar Plunge as an athlete leadership team
* Participation in the LETR
* Present ideas and provide feedback to staff
* Plan and host sessions at Leadership Conferences
* Athlete Leadership booths as State and Area events

**Selecting athletes for the Athlete Leadership Council**

ALC members should be athletes who demonstrate leadership qualities. This does not mean that the athletes all need high level of abilities; just that they are willing to take on a role as a leader.

Some of the selection requirements that should be considered are:

* Leadership and Skills Curriculum Core Modules Completed:

1. Introduction to Athlete Leadership
2. Understanding Leadership

* Have a minimum of five years of Special Olympics experience

1. Currently registered athlete
2. Involved in Athlete Leadership
3. Participated in a sport competition/program within the last five years

* Be knowledgeable about Special Olympics
* Have effective communication skills (oral, written or listening)
* Ability to contribute opinions and ideas during meetings
* Commits to time, requirements, and expectations of the role

Mentors should be appointed to athletes who need assistance and support during their term on the ALC.

Suggested selection process:

* Open call for athletes interested in participating and create an evaluation committee of SO staff, coaches and athletes.
* Athletes could also be nominated to sit on the Athlete Leadership Council by the Program staff. For the initial selection of members, the nominations should be reviewed and selected by the National Director or CEO.

The suggested term for each member is three years.

*\*Athletes on ALC should be representative of the geographic regions of the Program and varying ages and interests.*

**How many athletes should be on an Athlete Leadership Council?**

The number of athletes on the council will vary depending on the size and needs of the Special Olympics Program. It is important to have enough athletes to get a variety of input and perspectives from various athletes. It is equally important to keep the group at a manageable number so that the meetings are meaningful and productive. It is suggested that a minimum of 2-3 athletes be recruited to establish the council. As the council grows, more members can be added to ensure adequate representation from all segments of the athlete population.

**How often should the Athlete Leadership Council meetings take place?**

The suggestion is to hold monthly or bimonthly meetings at minimum. As the members of the ALC participate in a project the frequency can increase.

**Finding an Athlete Leadership Council facilitator**

The Athlete Leadership Council will have the best results if there is a volunteer or staff member who will guide and facilitate the meetings. This person could be a staff member, coach, volunteer, family member or other individual that would be interested in supporting this group.

The role of the facilitator is to be just that, a facilitator. One thing that a facilitator does is to provide the structure and safety for athletes to express their opinions, brainstorm for ideas, and formulate ideas for possible solutions.

**Who should facilitate meetings?**

A good facilitator can listen, probe, restate comments and keep discussion on track. They should do this without sharing their personal views. Good facilitators can be teachers, Special Olympics staff, a family member (not related to a Council member), volunteers, or someone from outside the organization, for example a university student. The key is that they understand their role and have enough background information on Special Olympics to provide context for the discussions..

They should partner with the Chair of the ALC and co-facilitate meetings. The key is to provide training and observe how the group interacts with the facilitators. If the discussion is open, free and on message, then you know the facilitation is good. If athletes are quiet and looking for permission from the facilitator, you may have the wrong person in the facilitator role.

**What is the recommended structure for Athlete Leadership Council meetings?**

Once you have identified and selected the athletes, you can start working on the logistics of the meeting. Included here is a checklist for you to use.

* Find a time and location that is central and convenient for the athletes to meet.
* After setting the time and location, notify the Athlete Leadership Council members (and mentors) several weeks prior to the meeting so that they have time to make arrangements for transportation or to make arrangements with an employer, if necessary.
* If the athletes are from different regions and far from one another, meetings can be conducted using Skype or Zoom. If possible, they should be able to meet face-to-face at least once a year.
* Ask the athletes to think of activities they would like to focus on in the ALC. Confer with program leadership and staff on topics pertinent to organizational goals or strategic plan to ensure the ALC work aligns with the Program and is valuable.

Here is a sample agenda for the first meeting:

**Welcome and Introductions**

The facilitators should introduce themselves and provide an icebreaker activity for the athletes to get to know each other better. Here are some examples:

1. Have athletes interview each other and introduce their mentors to the group.
2. Ask each member to tell the group something interesting about themselves, the others can then be quizzed on who said what.

**Purpose of the Athlete Leadership Council?**

Give the athletes a general overview of an Athlete Leadership Council and its purpose. Let them know that they are very valuable to Special Olympics and that we want their input. Describe the purpose of the ALC as a place where they can let their opinions and ideas be known so that they can participate in making important decisions that affect them and their Special Olympics Program.

**Where are we now? Where are we going?**

This part of the meeting you want to get athletes to interact and discuss their plans for the year.

* Have the athletes write down their current activities, committees and roles, and completed athlete leadership trainings.
* Ask the athletes to create a list of responsibilities for the ALC. . These may include sitting on committees, assistant coach or official, Health Messenger, special volunteer jobs, planning for the Games and events, doing Global Messenger training, or any other activity or project they would like to be involved in.
* After they generated a list, ask them to prioritize it from most important to least important. Share those ideas with the group and set realistic goals.

**Plan for the next meeting**

Ask the athletes to come up with ways to involve more athletes and set a date and time for the next meeting. Determine a list of topics they want to discuss at the next meeting.

**What should happen at regular Athlete Leadership Council meetings?**

The Athlete Leadership Council structure is very simple. It is a place for athletes to get together, express their opinions and ideas, and plan leadership activities with Program leadership. How that is done will depend on the athletes, facilitator, and needs of the Special Olympics Program. Many of those decisions will be made along the way, and therefore no meetings should reflect the goals for the council. Here are a few ideas that you may want to incorporate into your Athlete Leadership Council meetings.**Member Reports/Updates:** Reports from athletes should be included so that they can bring information to athletes and gather input from athletes.

* **Special Olympics Program Updates**: Program staff provides members with information and updates about future goals of the Program.
* **Leadership Development**: Athlete Leadership training from Leadership & Skills Curriculum: Leadership Skills, Special Olympics Roles, Personal and Professional Development.
* **Regional/National Games and Competitions:** It is important to include athlete leaders in competition planning, implementing and evaluating.. They could serve as Event Coordinators and be on Games Organizing Committees, host a Fit 5/Health & Fitness station, help with different activities at the Games, or be involved in sponsor recognition activities.
* **Volunteer activities:** Every athlete can volunteer to support Special Olympics. Members could share and discuss ways to become more involved as volunteers. These athletes could help with various projects as a group.
* **Elect Roles/Officers**: It is recommended to elect a Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, or other leadership roles. The goal of the council is that they are self-sufficient and led by athlete leaders.

**Can the Program bring issues for athlete discussion and input?**

Yes. The key purpose of the Athlete Leadership Council is to discuss their ideas and opinions. If there are decisions that need to be made by the Program, they should bring the issue to the next Council meeting for input.

**Can athletes bring issues for Program consideration?**

Yes. If the Athlete Leadership Council comes across an issue that the members are in agreement on and that involves a policy or practice change, they can send their recommendations for review of the policy and ask for an response from the Program.

The goal of the ALC is to establish an environment where athletes, volunteers and staff members work together as partners to support Special Olympics. The dialogue that takes place when these recommendations are made is a sign of a strong Program.

**What follow up is required?**

Regular reports should be made of all ALC meetings. Copies of these reports should be kept on file for future reference. At the end of each year and certainly before any strategic planning takes place, these reports should be reviewed to help evaluate progress to date and to set goals for the immediate and long-term advancement of the Program.