

*Special
Olympics*



Athlete Leader Engagement

Sport Competitions

July 2024

**ATHLETE
LEADERSHIP**

? Why?

The motto **“Nothing About Us Without Us”** relies on this principle of participation for people with disabilities. Athletes represent Special Olympics daily at our events. They should be involved in the planning and execution of all events.

Special Olympics is for people with IDD (intellectual and developmental disabilities), so it should be led by people with IDD as well. They should be involved in every decision we make as an organization. To truly become a movement led by people with IDD, they must be given the opportunity to share their abilities, experiences, and knowledge.

Special Olympics hosts many types of competitions, and to execute successful competitions, athletes must lead these efforts and not only be beneficiaries. This includes sport competitions at a local, national, and international level.

The experience that athletes have **participating** in some of these events could prove useful and applicable in **planning, executing, and evaluating** similar events for other athletes. They understand what other athletes need and want.

✓ What?

Athletes are trained in many **leadership roles** that can lead to meaningful involvement in the planning, execution, and evaluation of Special Olympics competitions.

What is meaningful involvement?

For an engagement to be meaningful you must consider two aspects:

1. It must be meaningful for the group or person engaging the athlete: meaning that this is a role that they need to assign to someone, that the tasks the athlete would be given need to be done to have a successful event.
2. It must be meaningful for the athlete: must be an experience that contributes to the athlete’s development, that they feel motivated and interested in doing. That can vary depending on their experience, ability level and skills.

What training does Special Olympics offer athlete leaders that can help them engage in meaningful leadership roles in competitions?

Some of the trainings offered to athlete leaders in the [Special Olympics Leadership & Skills Curriculum](#) are:

Leadership Role	Description	Examples of Leadership Roles
Athlete Representatives	Participating in committees. For example: transportation committee, policies and	-Planning committee members.

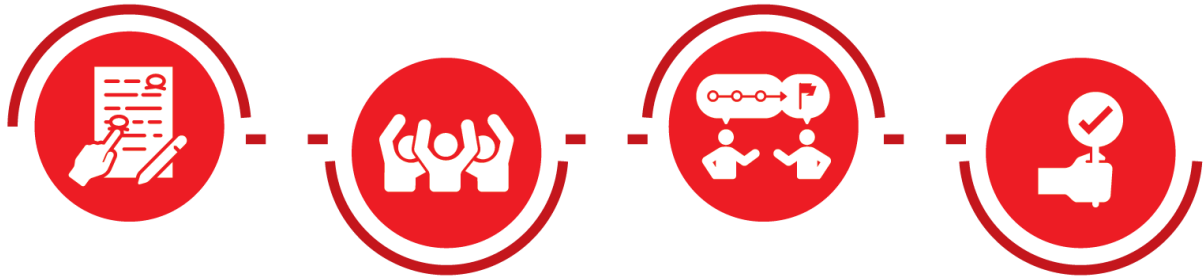
	procedures, volunteer recruitment, etc.	
Athlete Spokespeople	Participating in the promotion of the event and sharing the message of Special Olympics mission. They can connect with the media, authorities, or the general public.	-Delivering speeches for Opening Ceremonies and other events. -Panelists. -Honorary SSGM role (athlete member of the host Program serving during 2 years leading up to the Games).
Event leaders	Participating as staff or volunteers in the planning, promotion, and execution of Special Olympics competitions.	-Supporting the Honored Guest and Families Program. -Serving in roles with the Youth Summit.
Health Messengers	Healthy Athletes aid: plan and implement Healthy Athletes events, support athletes during their screenings, encourage athletes to obtain follow-up care.	-Healthy Athletes volunteer. -Healthy Athletes ribbon cutting event.
Fitness Captain	Fitness Captains work closely with their coaches to make sure health and fitness is a key component of the sports experience by participating in these leadership roles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching healthy habits • Leading warm-ups and cool-downs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead warm-ups and cool-downs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For their team ○ For all athletes competing at a venue Performance Stations volunteer
Sport Assistants <i>*Resources and implementation are in pilot phase</i>	Assisting the Coaching staff, being on the sideline to assist where needed and helping other athletes improve their performance.	-Delegation Sport Assistant

Below are other roles that we don't offer training through the Special Olympics Leadership & Skills Curriculum, but that Special Olympics Programs develop through the support from Sport Federations and may participate in competition events according to the obligations in the Technical Manuals:

Examples of Leadership Roles
Games Evaluator
Coach
Official
Match Commissioner
Assistant Technical Delegate
Technical Delegate



How to engage athlete leaders



Selection process of the athlete leader:

Step 1:

- Make a list of all the roles you want to engage athlete leaders in.
- Create a job description for each of the roles vacant.

Step 2:

- Share this list with the Special Olympics Program hosting the competition. They might have athlete leaders already trained or will have enough time to train a group of athlete leaders to engage in the roles that are vacant.

Step 3:

- Interview athletes that are interested in the vacant roles, walk them through the job description, schedule, conditions of payment, etc.

Onboarding Checklist:

Athlete leaders, like any other person engaging in an event, need time to prepare. To guarantee successful participation for athlete leaders, there are several steps that need to be considered.

- Once an athlete is selected, send them a communication with confirmation they have been selected and consider copying their mentor or SO Program.
- Set up a meeting (or more than one if necessary) and go over the job description and ask for the athletes' ideas and make sure they feel comfortable and confident managing the role. Ask if they need any adaptations or accommodations to succeed in this role (language interpretation, sign language, slow pace, transportation support, etc.).
- Identify a supervisor or point of contact for the athlete. It's important they know who to go to in case of questions, feedback and to report on their work. Set up an initial meeting with both so they can exchange expectations and clarify their roles.
- Provide an Easy-to-Read agenda or schedule of activities beforehand, so the athlete knows where they need to be and at what time each day.

- ❑ If this is a paid opportunity, please beware of your national regulations on paying people with disabilities who may be getting state/national funding to support their needs. Make sure this income does not affect the benefits they get from the state. Also, be mindful of any legal considerations around hiring people with IDD, ensuring the workforce has completed background screenings and protective behaviors training, etc.

Offboarding Checklist:

- ❑ Communicate with the athlete thanking them for their participation and ask for feedback related to the engagement (what went well, what could be done better to support the athlete leader, what they struggled with, etc.).
- ❑ Take this feedback into consideration and make necessary changes for future athlete engagements.



Engaging athlete leaders in international events

Engaging athletes for international events adds another layer of complexity. To gather this following list of recommendations, we interviewed a group of Athlete Leaders and Mentors from all regions that have been engaged at International Events with different roles and levels of engagement.

Here is a list of recommendations:

Before the Event

- Mentor participation: don't assume all athlete leaders need to travel with a mentor. Mentor support goes from transportation and meals logistics to preparation work. Mentors are not supposed to work alongside their athlete in their role if it's not discussed previously. Most times, they stand back as the athletes perform their duties independently.
- Mentor training: mentors need training on how to support the Athlete Leaders; most of them learned how to become a Mentor on daily experience with the Athlete Leader. There is an eLearning mentor training course available at [SO Learn](#) and resources for in person trainings [here](#).
- Provide opportunities for athletes, mentors, and competition staff to engage before the event. It can be camps or all-day retreats, providing in-person experience for all.
- Receiving last minute agendas gives anxiety. They understand the importance of being flexible but would like to have the agenda some time before the event so they can prepare better.
- Lodging: Don't assume the athlete will room with their mentor. Athlete Leaders having opportunity to choose if they want to share a room with their Mentors or a room by themselves could be an option. It could help them to be more independent.

- Highlighting priority requests when sending the agenda or schedule; they will understand what they need to deliver first.
- Prioritize when it comes to sending a lot of information; letting them know what they need to know before reading all the information, because some of them, especially Mentors, are volunteers and may not have a lot of time to read all the pages of a document.

During the Event:

- Set up a welcome meeting the day the athlete arrives, debrief their role and responsibilities going through the agenda together.
- Receiving their agenda printed will help them to organize themselves during the event.
- Athletes in leadership roles at international events is a big deal! Make sure you are communicating and giving the publicity it deserves. It could also bring more attention and interest from athletes to get involved.



Additional Resources:

1. [Hiring People with IDD – A Program Considerations Guide](#): this is helpful if you are planning to hire a person with IDD, it also has resources for creating job descriptions, potential roles and tips from SO Programs, current staff with IDD and their supervisors.
2. [Easy Read and Accessibility](#): here you will find training and tools to help you develop easy read and accessible materials. As a global organization, we need 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.