**Logo

Description automatically generatedBoards of Directors**

**Frequently Asked Questions**

**About Special Olympics**

**What is the Mission of Special Olympics?**

Every Special Olympics Program around the world shares the same mission statement:

“The mission of Special Olympics is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community.”

**What is the Global Vision of Special Olympics?**

Our vision is an inclusive world for all, driven by the power of sport, through which people with intellectual disabilities (ID) live active, healthy, and fulfilling lives.

**When was Special Olympics founded and by whom?**

Special Olympics was officially founded in 1968 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver. The first ever Games were held in July 1968 at Soldier Field in Chicago, Illinois, USA. [Read more about Special Olympics’ history](https://www.specialolympics.org/about/history?locale=en).

**Structure and Reach**

Special Olympics is a global movement and the world leader in sport for people with intellectual disabilities. We are focused on building a worldwide network of athletes of all ability levels, while creating communities committed to inclusion, acceptance, and dignity for all. SOI is headquartered in Washington D.C. and has an international Governing Board of Directors.

More than 250 Accredited Programs operate daily in 200+ countries and territories around the world.

**What is our Special Olympics Program’s relationship with Special Olympics North America (SONA) / Special Olympics, Inc. (SOI)?**

Special Olympics, Inc. (“SOI”, also often referred to as Special Olympics International) is the global organization that oversees seven Special Olympics Regions. Special Olympics North America is one of the seven Regions and consists of the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean. Accredited Programs (e.g., Special Olympics Michigan, Special Olympics Saskatchewan, Special Olympics Trinidad and Tobago) are independently registered nonprofit companies authorized, accredited, and ultimately governed by SOI. All SONA staff are SOI staff/employees.

There is a global strategic plan that all Accredited Programs are expected to align to: this alignment helps us create greater and more sustainable change and impact around the world.

**What does it mean to be an Accredited Program?**

Per the Special Olympics General Rules: “SOI accredits Special Olympics Programs to ensure worldwide quality, and ultimately the growth, of the Special Olympics movement. Accreditation is a method that assures that every Accredited Program has met the essential core requirements of the Special Olympics mission, and also certain minimum management and financial requirements.”

All Programs around the world gain access to numerous benefits of accreditation, including shared strategy and vision, global leadership and resources, participation in national and international competitions and summits, risk management guidance and support, global brand marketing, technical support across an array of operational and programmatic areas, and access to financial resources through grants, partnerships, and fundraising initiatives.

Once a Program satisfies the annual accreditation requirements, Special Olympics, Inc. approves that Program’s Accreditation License Agreement, which grants the Program the legal right to use the Special Olympics name, logo, and other trademarks within its jurisdiction, to conduct Special Olympics sports and related activities, and to raise funds under the Special Olympics name.

**Does our Program pay an accreditation fee?**

Yes, each Accredited Program pays an annual accreditation fee. By paying accreditation fees, Special Olympics Programs invest in a license to operate in the movement. SOI uses accreditation fees to cover a small portion of the cost of leading and supporting the worldwide quality and growth of the movement.

**What are the common revenue sources of Accredited Programs?**

We offer our ongoing programming and activities **at no cost to the athlete or their family**: as such, we are reliant upon the generous annual support of those who believe in our mission and purpose, and who choose to invest in our work. Revenue streams vary, but often include (though not limited to):

* Corporate sponsorships
* Grants from SOI (direct and/or via partner funding)
* Grants from foundations/major donors
* Government and non-governmental organization (NGO) support
* Shared revenue fundraising campaigns
* Special events
* Cause marketing
* IDMP (U.S. only)
* Individual giving (individual donations, major gifts, planned giving)
* Law Enforcement Torch Run® for Special Olympics
* Civic groups, community fundraisers

**For U.S. Programs: What is IDMP?**

Integrated Direct Marketing Program (IDMP) is individual donor solicitation through direct mail, e-mail, and online giving. Under the IDMP, U.S. Programs each share in the net revenue generated by IDMP communications in their state. SOI is responsible for conducting all IDMP communications, for the joint benefit of the Programs and SOI. All expenses related to IDMP are incurred by SOI.

Individuals can make online donations by clicking on the “Donate” button located on the Program’s website home page. Donations made this way are part of IDMP and therefore shared with SOI. Board members should speak with the CEO or staff to learn of all the ways to support their home Program.

**How are Special Olympics staffs structured?**

Organizational charts vary Program to Program. Staff (paid or volunteer) oversee the delivery of sports training and competition, coaches’ education, volunteer training and management, Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®, Young Athletes, health and fitness, Athlete and Unified leadership, family engagement, marketing and communications, fundraising, government relations, Law Enforcement Torch Run, human resources, accounting/finance, administrative functions, and more.

**Does our Program need volunteers?**

Yes! Special Olympics is a grassroots movement, highly (sometimes entirely) dependent upon volunteers. Roles for volunteers include, but are not limited to:

* Coaches
* Day-of-event support
* Games management team members
* Local management team members
* Event committee members
* Board of Directors
* Health professionals (e.g., Healthy Athletes screenings)
* Athlete Leadership mentors
* Law Enforcement Torch Run
* Fundraisers

For more information on volunteering, visit our Program’s website or contact our Program staff for individual and group volunteer opportunities.

**What is “Unified” programming?**

Our movement is dedicated to promoting social inclusion through shared sports training and competition, health, and leadership experiences.

**Special Olympics Unified Sports®** combines people with and without intellectual disabilities (Unified partners), of all ages, as teammates. Unified competition is available in many/most sports.

It is inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding. Special Olympics Unified Sports® provides the opportunity for anyone to participate in Special Olympics: including board members!

**Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools®** promotes inclusion and more accepting and respectful school climates by bringing together young people with and without ID on sports teams (Special Olympics Unified Sports®), through inclusive student clubs and whole school engagement, and by fostering youth leadership. These activities equip young people and educators with the tools and training to create inclusive schools for all students.

**Special Olympics Unified Leadership** teaches leaders *without* disabilities to value and learn from people

with ID, to co-lead, and to create environments where people with ID have opportunities to hold truly meaningful and authentic inclusive leadership roles – across all levels and aspects of our organization, including the board of directors.

**Who is eligible to be a Special Olympics athlete?**

Special Olympics welcomes all persons with intellectual disabilities, of all ages and of all ability levels, to train and compete in over 32 official Olympic-type sports, as well as locally popular sports.

Every person with an intellectual disability who is at least eight years of age is eligible to compete in Special Olympics. However, children with intellectual disabilities under eight years of age can participate in lead-up training activities, as well as Young Athletes, a program that introduces children to sport readiness through fundamental movement and social skills, in age and developmentally-appropriate formats – all through the power of play. There is no upper age limit in Special Olympics.

**How does Special Olympics determine if a person is eligible to be a Special Olympics athlete?**

A person is considered to have an intellectual disability for purposes of determining his or her eligibility to participate in Special Olympics if that person satisfies any one of the following requirements:

(1) The person has been identified by an agency or professional as having an intellectual disability as determined by their localities; or

(2) The person has a cognitive delay, as determined by standardized measures such as intelligence quotient or "IQ" testing or other measures which are generally accepted within the professional community in that Accredited Program's nation as being a reliable measurement of the existence of a cognitive delay; or

(3) The person has a closely related developmental disability. A "closely related developmental disability" means having functional limitations in both general learning (such as IQ) and in adaptive skills (such as in recreation, work, independent living, self-direction, or self-care). However, persons whose functional limitations are based solely on a physical, behavioral, or emotional disability, or a specific learning or sensory disability, are not eligible to participate as Special Olympics athletes, but may be eligible to volunteer for Special Olympics.

**When are *“the”* Special Olympics?**

This is a question you might hear. If asked, use it as a teaching moment. This is your opportunity to educate others that Special Olympics is much more than the misconception of it being an annual event. Our work in sports, schools, health, and leadership takes place 365 days a year. Special Olympics offers an array of life-long engagement experiences for people with and without intellectual disabilities.

The word “the” before Special Olympics further reinforces the misconception that we are a periodic event. Unless referring to a specific event such as “…the Special Olympics Program name Summer Games,” when referring to the organization, we say “I’m with Special Olympics Program name” (no “the” before it). So, when people ask, “when are the Special Olympics?”, tell them “Always! Special Olympics has no off-season.”

**Sporting Philosophy**

Special Olympics believes in the power of sports to help all who participate fulfill their potential and does not exclude any athlete based upon ability level - so long as they are participating in appropriate sport(s) and divisions. “Divisioning” is unique to Special Olympics: athletes are “divisioned” into competition groups to ensure they have equitable and safe competition against others of like ability. This helps provide every athlete of every ability level the opportunity to pursue and experience achievement in sport. For Special Olympics athletes, excellence is personal achievement, a journey of realizing one's maximum potential - a goal to which everyone can aspire.

**How else is Special Olympics different from other sports organizations?**

Special Olympics is more similar than different from other sports organizations. However, in addition to divisioning, there are other things that make Special Olympics unique, such as:

* We do not charge a fee to athletes or their families to train or compete.
* We offer sports opportunities for athletes of all ability levels.
* All participants receive recognition for their efforts.

**What is the difference between Special Olympics and Paralympics?**

Special Olympics and Paralympics are two separate organizations recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). They are similar in that they both focus on sport for athletes with a disability and are run by international non-profit organizations. Apart from that, Special Olympics and the Paralympics differ in three main areas: 1) the disability categories of the athletes that they work with, 2) the criteria and philosophy under which athletes participate, and 3) the structure of their respective organizations.

**Where can I, or others, go to stay up to date and for additional information on Special Olympics globally?**

* SOI Website: [www.specialolympics.org](http://www.specialolympics.org)
* [Special Olympics North America webpage](https://www.specialolympics.org/regions/north-america?locale=en)
* SOI Facebook: [www.facebook.com/SpecialOlympics](http://www.facebook.com/SpecialOlympics)
* SOI Twitter: <https://twitter.com/SpecialOlympics>
* SOI Instagram: [www.instagram.com/specialolympics](http://www.instagram.com/specialolympics)
* SOI LinkedIn: [www.linkedin.com/company/special-olympics](http://www.linkedin.com/company/special-olympics)
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