

Special Olympics Massachusetts General Orientation (updated February 2025)

Special Olympics
Massachusetts





Welcome to General Orientation

The goals of this orientation are to provide:

- The basic overview of Special Olympics and Special Olympics Massachusetts.
- The history and organizational structure of Special Olympics
- The initiatives, sports offerings and opportunities available to join and support the mission of Special Olympics.

Special Olympics unleashes the transformative power and joy of sports to reveal the full potential of athletes with intellectual disabilities, creating more inclusive communities, everyday around the world.

-- Preamble to the Special Olympics General Rules



General Orientation

Part I – Mission, History, Philosophy & Organizational Structure of Special Olympics

Part II – Special Olympic Athlete, Sports and Initiatives

Part III – Opportunities to Join, Volunteer and Support Special Olympics

Please be sure to take the test at the end of the slideshow to receive your certification!!

Special Olympics
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PART I – THE MISSION, HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF SPECIAL OLYMPICS

“Let me win;
but if I cannot win,
let me be brave in the attempt.”

The Special Olympics Athlete Oath

Special Olympics
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Mission Statement



To provide year-round sports training and competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, prepare for entry into school and community programs, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in the sharing of gifts, skills and friendships with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community.



Components & Outcomes

Components	Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Year-roundTraining and CompetitionOlympic-type SportsIndividuals with Intellectual Disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Physical FitnessCourage and JoySharing of Gifts and SkillsInclusionFriendship<ul style="list-style-type: none">FamiliesAthletesCommunity

Founding Principles of Special Olympics



The principles on which Special Olympics was founded, and which must continue to guide the operation and expansion of the global Special Olympics Movement, include the following:

- People with intellectual disabilities can, with proper instruction and encouragement, enjoy, learn and benefit from participation in individual and team sports, adapted as necessary to meet the needs of those with special mental and physical limitations.
- Consistent training under the guidance of qualified coaches, with emphasis on physical conditioning, is essential to the development of sports skills, and competition among those of equal abilities is the most appropriate means of testing these skills, measuring progress and providing incentives for personal growth.
- Through sports training and competition: people with intellectual disabilities benefit physically, mentally and socially and spiritually; families are strengthened; and the community at large, both through participation and observation, is united with people with intellectual disabilities in an environment of equality, respect and acceptance.



Founding Principles (cont.)

- Every person with an intellectual disability who meets the eligibility requirements set out in the General Rules should have the opportunity to participate in and benefit from the sports training and athletic competition programs offered by Special Olympics.
- Special Olympics must transcend all boundaries of race, gender, religion, national origin, geography, and political philosophy, and offer sports training and competition opportunities to all eligible persons with intellectual disabilities in accordance with uniform worldwide standards.
- Special Olympics celebrates and strives to promote the spirit of sportsmanship and a love of participation in sports for its own sake. To that end, Special Olympics aims to provide every athlete with an opportunity to participate in training and competition events which challenge that athlete to his or her fullest potential, regardless of the athlete's level of ability. Special Olympics therefore requires that Special Olympics Games and Tournaments offer sports and events which are appropriate for athletes of all levels of ability, and in the case of team sports, provide every athlete with an opportunity to play in every game.
- Special Olympics encourages sports training and competition opportunities at the local, area and community level (including schools) as a means of reaching the greatest number of eligible athletes.



Special Olympics is unique from other sports organizations

Special Olympics

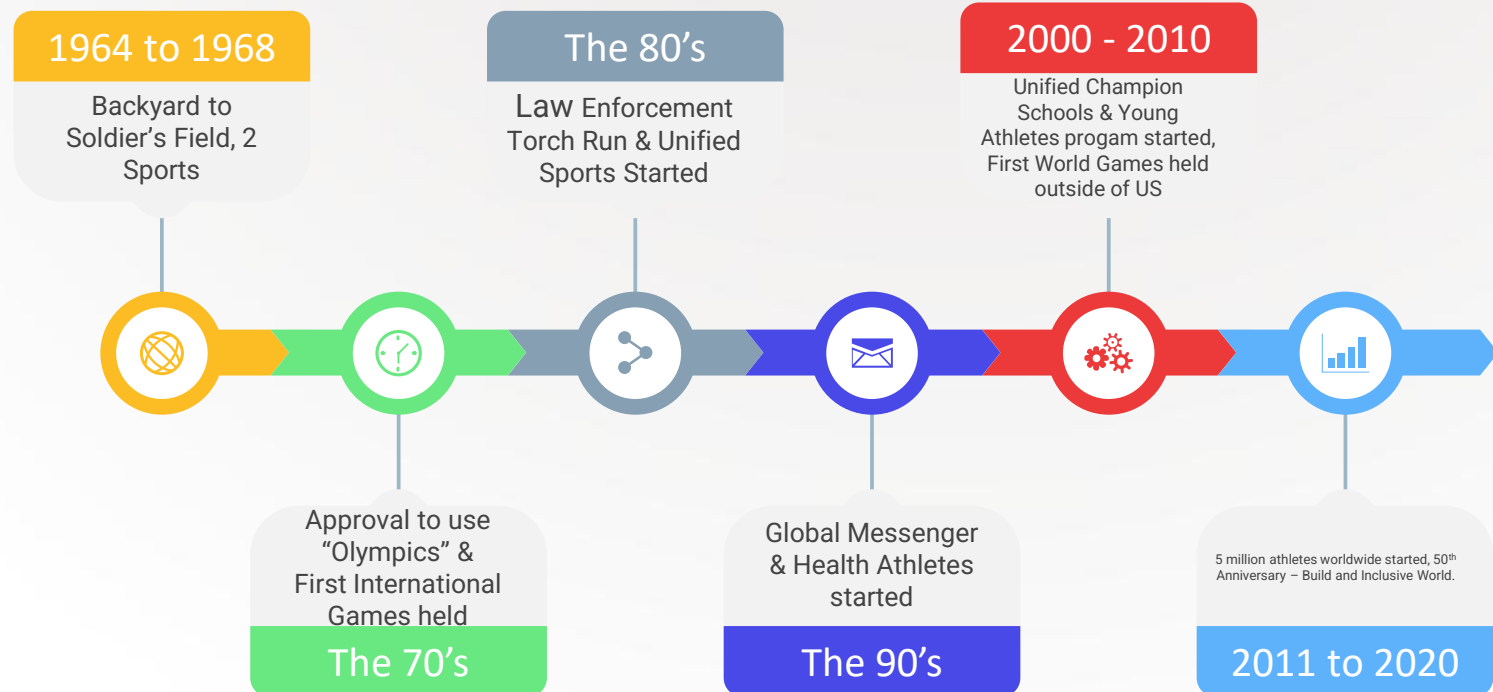
- Sports for all ability levels
- Awards for all participants
- “Divisioning” for equitable competition
- Random drawing to national and international competitions

Special Olympics’ philosophy does not emphasize “winning at all costs,” but emphasizes the importance of participation, inclusion, effort and personal achievement.

Special Olympics History



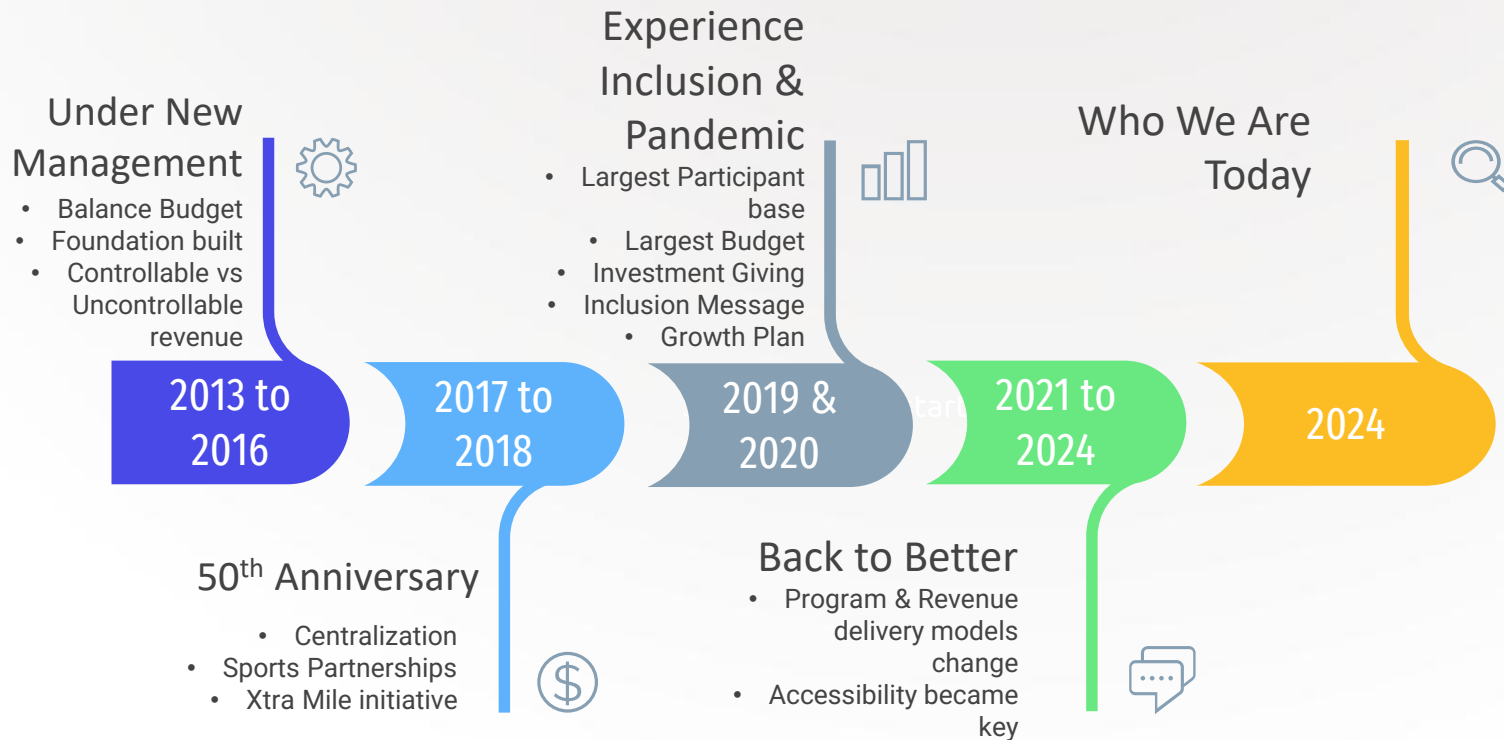
Special Olympics since 1968



Special Olympics History



Shift in Focus: Special Olympics Massachusetts Since 2013



RELATIONSHIP WITH THE INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE



Through a Protocol of Agreement signed on February 15, 1988, the International Olympic Committee (the "IOC") officially recognized SOI and agreed to cooperate with SOI as a representative of the interests of athletes with intellectual disabilities. The IOC's formal recognition of SOI carries with it a solemn duty and responsibility, which must be discharged by SOI and all of its Accredited Programs, to conduct Special Olympics training and competition in accordance with the highest ideals of the international Olympic movement, to guard and protect the use of the term "Special Olympics," and to protect the word "Olympics" from unauthorized use or exploitation. The IOC's Protocol of Agreement with SOI prohibits SOI, Programs and GOCs from using the 5 ring Olympic logo, the Olympic anthem, or the Olympics motto. Each Accredited Program agrees to fulfill these responsibilities by accepting accreditation from SOI, as provided in its Accreditation License and Article 5 of the General Rules.



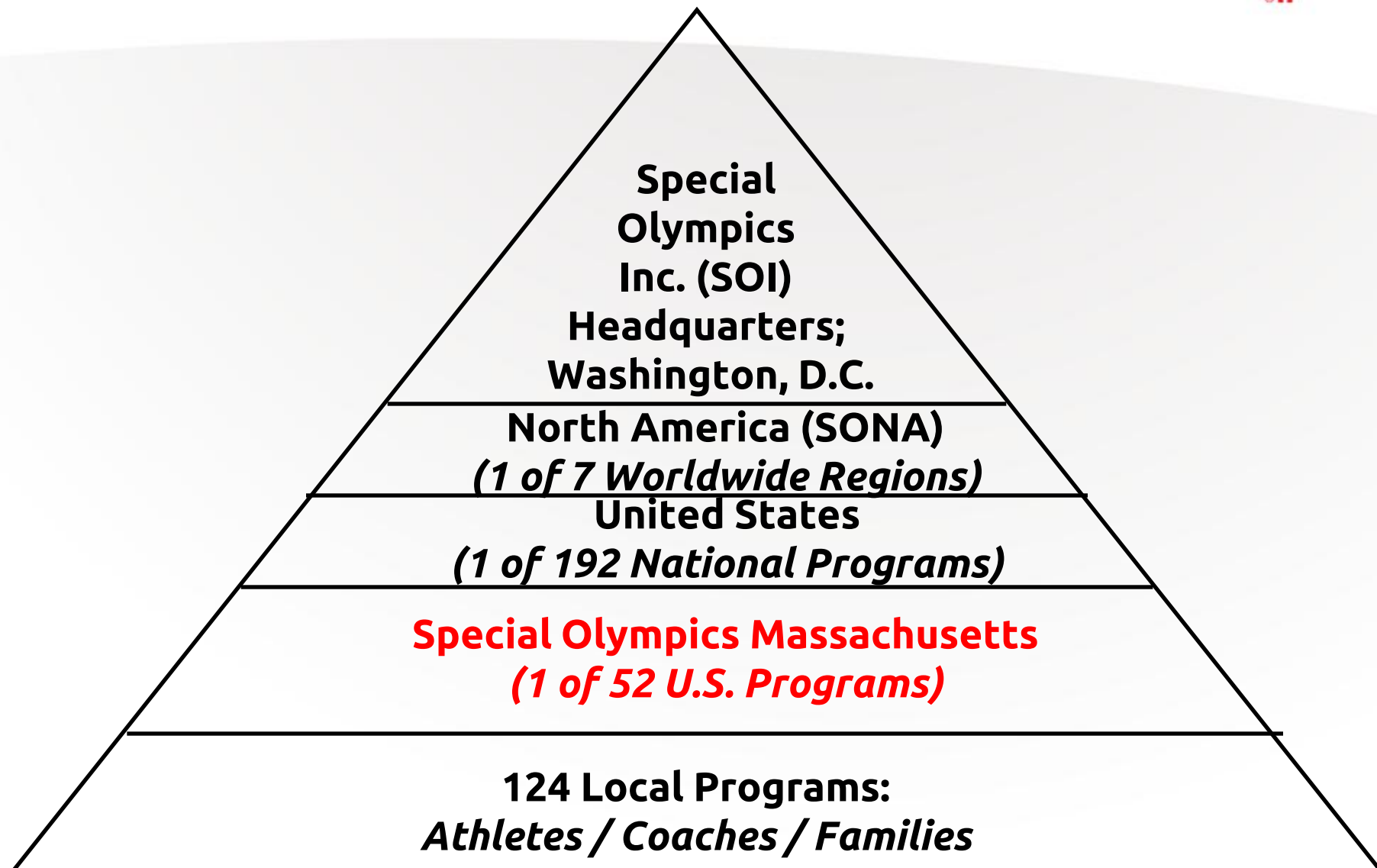
SOI - Special Olympics Inc.

SOI is the international governing body of the Special Olympics Movement, founded by Eunice Kennedy Shriver.

In discharging its responsibilities as the world governing body of Special Olympics, SOI establishes and enforces all official policies and requirements of Special Olympics, oversees the conduct and expansion of Special Olympics accredited programs throughout the world, and provides training, technical assistance and other support to Accredited Programs and GOCs.

SOI is a not-for-profit corporation organized under the laws of the District of Columbia, USA, with its principal office in Washington, D.C., USA.

Organizational Structure – Worldwide



Massachusetts Organizational Structure



SOMA
Board of Directors

SOMA Staff
Headquarters in Marlborough, MA
Yawkey Sports Training Center
512 Forest Street
Marlborough, MA 01752

124 (+/-) Local Programs:
Athletes / Coaches / Families

Local Programs



Special Olympics Massachusetts accredits qualified local programs throughout the state to operate Special Olympics training and competitive programs. Local programs register their athletes with SOMA, provide coaches and training and bring athletes and teams to competitions.

SOMA Local Programs may be run through a community parks and rec – such as Shrewsbury Parks and Rec Dept.; through an agency – such as Northeast ARC; as a public or private school – such as Latham Schools; or may be a group of one or more athletes and coaches that have organized together under the policies and procedures of SOMA to participate in Special Olympics programming. Local Programs work closely with the SOMA staff in their section.



Facts & Figures

2024 Census

- Sports offered: **24**
- **Competitions: 1,073**
- **Athletes: 13,374**
- **Unified partners: 6,030**
- **Volunteers: 10,914**
- **Coaches: 1,398**
- **Staff: 35**



Part II – Special Olympics

Athletes, Sports & Programs

Special Olympics
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Eligibility for Participation in Special Olympics

Every person with an intellectual disability who is at least eight years of age is eligible to compete in Special Olympics. There is no maximum age limitation for participation in Special Olympics. The minimum age requirement for participation in Special Olympics competition is eight years of age.

The **Young Athletes** program introduces children, two to seven years old to the world of sports, with the goal of preparing them for Special Olympics sports training and competition. Children who are at least six years old may participate in age-appropriate training programs. No child may participate in a Special Olympics competition before his or her eighth birthday.

Identifying Persons with Intellectual disabilities



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:

- The person has been identified by an agency or professional as having an intellectual disability as determined by their localities;
- or the person has a cognitive delay, as determined by standardized measures such as intelligent quotient or "IQ" testing;
- or 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 be a Unified Sports® Partner or to volunteer for Special Olympics.

Real Sport Experience

SOMA offers training and competition opportunities in 24 sports. Each sport season requires a minimum of eight weeks of training prior to competing in a season ending tournament.

Special Olympics
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Sports Offered in Massachusetts



Alpine Skiing & Snowboarding
Athletics (*Track & Field*)
Basketball
Bocce
Bowling (*10 pin & Candlepin*)
Cheer
Cornhole
Cycling
Equestrian
Flag Football
Floor Hockey

Golf
Gymnastics
Pickleball
Powerlifting
Sailing
Skating (*Figure, Roller & Speed*)
Softball
Swimming
Tennis
Volleyball

Sports Rules



Special Olympics Sports rules are:

- Outlined in [Article 1](#)
- Based on National Governing Body or International Federation official rules.
- The rules contain few modifications for Special Olympics and are approved by the Special Olympics Sports Rules Committee
- The same rules govern all Special Olympics competitions throughout Massachusetts, the United States and throughout the world – from local competitions to S.O. World Games

Coaches, officials and volunteers show respect to and help the athletes to do their best, improve their sport skill and honor their efforts by calling the rules of the sport and violations as written.

Divisioning for Athletes



To ensure fair and equitable competition, to provide each athlete an opportunity to excel, and as a tool for motivating each athlete to do their personal best, Special Olympics uses a unique process called “divisioning”. **Divisioning places athletes of similar gender, age and ability together** to compete against one and other.

Divisions are ideally comprised of 3 – 8 athletes; are of the same gender and within the same age range. **An athlete’s ability is the primary factor in divisioning for competitions. A 15% guideline is used to determine similar ability.** The variance between the fastest and the slowest competitors in a division should be no more than 15%; thereby giving all competitors a reasonable opportunity to compete with one and other.

For example: an athlete that runs the 100m dash consistently in 20 seconds would run in a division that the fastest competitor would run no faster than 17 seconds motivating each athlete to do their best. (If an athlete that consistently ran a 30 second 100m and they were lined up to race a competitor that ran a 12 second 100m – they probably wouldn’t feel motivated to do their best for the entire race.

The “Honest Effort” rule states that an athlete may be sanctioned for obtaining a time/distant greater than 15% at a State Tournament.

Divisioning for Teams



Similar to divisioning for individual athletes, **divisioning for teams helps to ensure fair and equitable competition**, provide each team an opportunity to excel and is a tool for motivating each team to do their best.

Team divisions are ideally comprised of 3 – 8 teams; are of the same gender and within the same age range. **The teams ability level is also the primary factor in divisioning for competitions.**

To determine a Team's ability level, teams are required to submit team and player assessment forms. **Teams are also required to attend an Assessment Round tournament** prior to the State Tournament.

The information from the assessment forms, the results and observations from the Assessment Round, along with past results and input from coaches and officials are all taken into account to place teams of similar ability together for state tournaments.

Unified Sports®



Special Olympics Unified Sports® began in Massachusetts in the early 1980's. It is recognized globally as an iconic program for social inclusion which activates attitude change and community building through an inclusive sport experience between individuals with and without intellectual disabilities, while broadening the relevance and impact of the Special Olympics movement.



Unified Sports (cont.)



- An inclusive model sport program
- Approximately equal numbers of S.O. athletes and partners without intellectual disabilities as teammates for training and competition
- Athletes & partners: similar age
- 3 Models
 - Unified Sports® Competitive – Athletes and Partners of similar age and ability are teammates in competitive play
 - Unified Sports® Player Development – Teammates of lower ability not ready for competitive play are mentored by teammates of higher ability
 - Unified Sports® Recreation – An introduction to Unified Sports®



Inclusive School Communities



Special Olympics provides a platform through sports to help change the attitudes and perceptions of youth and young adults towards peers with intellectual disabilities. Through our programs Special Olympics is helping to solve the problem of isolation and misunderstanding in the classroom.

Unified Champion Schools – The Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools initiative activates youth with and without intellectual disabilities to come together as student leaders, athletes, and agents for inclusion within their school communities. Special Olympics Unified Champion Schools motivates all students to create environments full of respect, dignity, and advocacy for students with intellectual disabilities. Here in Massachusetts we partner with the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association to provide Unified Track & Field and Basketball. Additionally the Massachusetts Association of Student Councils has chosen Special Olympics as it's charity partner and participates in a Polar Plunge each year.

Unified Game Days & School Day Games - Our School –based competition days are the perfect way for class rooms, school systems and surrounding communities to come together for a fun and inclusive day of activities featuring all of the elements of a traditional Special Olympics event.

Colleges & Universities - College campuses were some of the first places to let Special Olympics host games and training. Today, the role of colleges and universities has grown to Special Olympics clubs offered on campuses, where students help run events, along with year-round training and fundraising. Many colleges have clubs that include students and others with and without intellectual disabilities taking part in Special Olympics sports and initiatives including local programming, intramurals, and fitness clubs.

Students with intellectual disabilities are two to three times more likely to be bullied than peers without intellectual disabilities. Researchers found that the bullying in this context was chronic in nature and was likely to be directly related to their disability. (*Walk a Mile in Their Shoes; AbilityPath.org, 2011*)

Sustaining Athlete Health



The Healthy Athletes Initiative

Since officially launching in 1997 as a Special Olympics program started by Dr. Steve Perlman, a pediatric dentist from Lynn, Massachusetts, Healthy Athletes has grown to provide seven different health screenings — Fit Feet, FUNfitness, Healthy Hearing, Health Promotion, Opening Eyes®, MedFest and Special Smiles® — with the goal to improve athletes' ability to train and compete. These free health screenings have been implemented globally in more than 90 countries, and nearly 500,000 screenings have been completed since its inception.

Improving Athlete Wellness

Special Olympics Massachusetts recognizes that to be an athlete competing at the highest level throughout your entire life, you need to focus on living a healthy lifestyle. In partnership with the Boston Bruins B-Fit program, local fitness centers, colleges and universities, Special Olympics Massachusetts works to provide fitness, nutrition, and general wellness programs to as many athletes as possible. The Yawkey Sports Training Facility has added fitness equipment that is available for all Special Olympics athletes in the state*.

*The gym is available for use during normal business hours. Please contact our office to schedule an appointment before stopping by.



Athlete Leadership

Athlete Leadership is an initiative that allows athletes to explore opportunities for Special Olympics participation in roles previously considered “non-traditional.” Such participation might come in the form of an athlete serving on the Board of Directors or local organizing committee; or it might find an athlete as a spokesperson, member of an Athlete Input Council, a team captain, coach or official.

Special Olympics Massachusetts offers the following Athlete Leadership Programs:

- Inclusion Ambassadors
- Content Squad
- Fitness Captains
- Athletes on Boards, Committees or Input Councils
- Athletes as Volunteers (games or events)
- Athletes as Coaches or Assistant Coaches
- Athletes as Sport Officials

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Part III – Opportunities to Join, Volunteer and Support Special Olympics

Special Olympics
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What can volunteers do?

- Coach or assist with a team during training.
- Become a Unified partner and participate in team practices and competitions.
- Serve on an event planning committee for sporting or fundraising events.
- Volunteer during a tournament or fundraising event.
- Participate in one of our fundraising events.

As a Coach



- Work with a team or individuals during their training period for approximately 2 hours per week
- Attend league games, tournaments and support the athletes both during competition and throughout the season
- SOMA offers both sports specific training and training on working with Special Olympics athletes
- All coaches must submit a Class A Volunteer Registration form. A CORI and national background check are run on all coaches and assistant coaches over 18 years old. They must also complete other trainings outlined on our [Coaches Portal](#)



As a Unified Partner

- Unified Partners are individuals without an intellectual disability who participate in team sports with Special Olympics athletes of similar ability
- Regularly participate in practices. Attend league games and tournaments, as a member of a team.
- All Unified Partners must submit a Class A Volunteer Registration form. A CORI and national background check are run on all adult Unified Partners 18 years or older.



On Event Team

- Participate in the planning of sports tournaments or fundraising events.
- Assist SOMA staff in procuring venues, volunteers, and needed supplies
- During the event, oversee venue, manage schedule, manage other volunteers assigned to venue. Answer general questions regarding event.
- All Event Management Team members must submit a Class A Volunteer Registration form. A CORI and national background check are run on all Event Team members.

Event Volunteer



- Attend a sports or fund-raising event and volunteer for 4 – 8 hours, depending on the event schedule.
- Assist with registration, timing and scorekeeping, meals distribution, first aid (medical license required), and special events.
- Recruit other volunteers from company/school/civic organization.
- First aid volunteers must submit a Class A Volunteer Registration form. A CORI and national background check are run on all medical volunteers.



Participate in Fundraising Events

- Sign up and fundraise for events such as:
 - **Polar Plunge** (January through March, Nantasket and Revere Beaches host the two major ones, along with other smaller ones throughout in the state)
 - **Over the Edge** (July, Boston)
 - **The Xtra Mile running platform** (Boston Marathon, Jolly Jaunt 5Ks, etc.)
 - **And More...**

Go to www.SpecialOlympicsMA.org to learn about more fundraising opportunities.

Create a team of co-workers, friends, classmates, or family members. The more the merrier!

The Special Olympics Movement unlocks the joy of sport to inspire people throughout the world - to open their minds to human giftedness, to accept, include and value people with intellectual disabilities in all aspects of life, and thereby unite people in a shared belief of a more just and welcoming world.

To receive your General Orientation certification, [click here to take the test](#)

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