



Special Olympics PA (SOPA) has an important and compelling mission to serve individuals with intellectual disabilities (our athletes), and they deserve our very best efforts. SOPA has always been one single organization serving athletes throughout the Commonwealth. But we haven't always worked together effectively as one team because our legacy structure was actually an impediment. With 50+ local Programs and a state office, our previous structure sometimes felt like separate entities all doing their own thing and lacking clear alignment with the strategic plan or other organizational priorities. We determined that this structure and way of working together wouldn't enable us to provide the best possible programs and services for our athletes, now or in the future.

Regionalization is a transformative change aimed at creating the solid foundation that enables us to deliver on our promises. While the positive potential unlocked by this change is enormous, at the most basic level regionalization is simply an administrative restructuring of SOPA that positions us to grow and meet future needs. Volunteer roles will evolve to meet the needs of the organization and to better serve our athletes. Similarly, some existing staff roles are changing and some new roles are being created, such as Regional Executive Directors and Regional Sport Directors. By redefining and redistributing responsibilities between staff and volunteers, we are creating joint teams where everyone can give their best and be successful while working together to achieve shared goals.

1. Why are we going through regionalization in the first place?

In our previous model, local Programs were organized and operated by a dedicated management team, primarily consisting of volunteers. Many volunteers took on multiple roles, and those in key positions often dedicated 10-20 hours or more per week. This was not sustainable. Many felt overwhelmed and overworked, with many volunteers reporting being asked to do too much and expressing a lack of fulfillment in their volunteer experiences.

This operating model presented other challenges as well including:

- Significant variations in the athlete experience in different places. Some local Programs offered many sports and local tournament play in each season while others offered only a few. Some local Programs were well equipped with uniforms and high-quality sports equipment; others were not.
- Travel requirements and limited volunteer resources constrained attendance at away events.
- Communication breakdowns between local Programs and the state office were common.

Because of these challenges, we were missing opportunities and thus not doing our very best for our athletes. For example, prior to the start of regionalization, we were serving approximately 19,000 athletes (or about 4% of the population of people with intellectual disabilities in the state). While this was a large number, we know that other state Special Olympics Programs serve a

significantly higher percentage of those eligible in their state. Furthermore, we weren't serving athletes equitably around the state. There were significant variations in the quality of programs offered, and there were also areas of the state where we were serving only 1-2% of the eligible population.

We needed to make a change! Our regional operating model addresses these challenges. Volunteer engagement remains crucial for organizational success, but roles and responsibilities will undergo changes to alleviate some of the burdensome tasks traditionally managed by local volunteers. The goal is to enable volunteers to focus more on activities they enjoy, such as direct engagement with our athletes.

2. What are the benefits of regionalization?

Through regionalization we will:

- Flatten the organization – we want to put staff and volunteer support closer to our athletes
- Improve collaboration and trust – joint volunteer/staff teams working together will be key!
- Improve communication throughout the organization
- Enhance accountability
- Implement better governance practices

For our athletes, this translates to more opportunities to train and compete with equality and consistency regardless of where they reside in the state – meaning a better overall experience!

For volunteers, this means better staff support, more manageable roles focused on strengths, more opportunities to work directly with athletes, and a reduction in administrative duties.

3. What process was followed to reach the decision to move to a regional model?

The move towards regionalization was carefully considered with the goal of positioning the organization for the future and with the best interests of our athletes at the center. We knew we needed a new way of working together if we were going to be successful. To envision that new way of working, we formed a reorg task force in late 2017 that included staff, volunteers and athletes.

The overarching principles that guided this task force were that any proposed solution must help SOPA serve more athletes and provide better quality services and experiences for our athletes. It was the taskforce that developed the recommendation, with input from hundreds of stakeholders, to move to a regional model. The recommendation was reviewed and approved by the Board of Directors in 2019, and we launched our first pilot region in early 2020. As of January 1, 2024, we are now operating under a regional model everywhere in the Commonwealth (although our regional staff teams are not yet fully in place in every region).

4. Isn't regionalization like a corporate merger or takeover where our local Programs are being "swallowed up" by the larger state office?

Contrary to some misconceptions, regionalization is not like a corporate merger or takeover. As stated above, there has always been only one Special Olympics entity in the state of Pennsylvania. Local programs and the state office were all part of that one organization and were simply administrative constructs put in place years ago by the board and management to oversee the delivery of programs and services. With regionalization, we are changing that structure to better serve our athletes now and in the future.

5. What is changing?

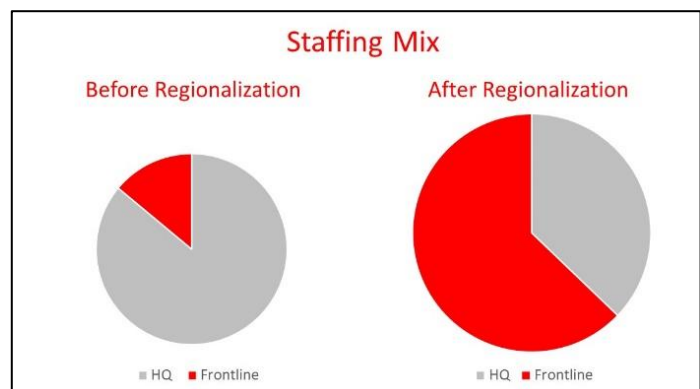
The most significant changes due to regionalization are that decision-making authority and control over financial expenditures shift to Regional Executive Directors (REDs) who now lead SOPA regions (which are now our business units). This is a change from local Program decision making via volunteer management teams to REDs now being responsible and accountable for their entire region.

What were previously local Programs that acted semi-autonomously are now local Teams (Note: "Teams" will be capitalized when referring to this new structure to differentiate it from reference to sports "teams") within a region. Because the former local Program structure no longer exists, we no longer need local Program management teams as we've historically known them. This doesn't mean we don't need and want volunteers to lead and guide local activities...we do! But we are realigning roles and responsibilities in each region to best meet our needs in the future, shifting volunteer roles away from more administrative tasks and toward more mission-centric roles such as coaches. We want everyone, volunteers and staff, serving in roles that fully utilize their talents and provide them with rewarding experiences in order to achieve the best results for our athletes.

6. How will volunteer and staff roles change and how will we work together in the future?

Under the new structure, there will no longer be management teams responsible for running local operations. Instead, volunteers on local Teams in each region will collaborate with the Regional Staff team. Planning and execution of activities will be a joint effort, but final decisions will be made by the Regional Executive Director who is ultimately responsible for delivering results in their region.

Staff roles are also changing. Under our prior model, most staff were assigned to the state office. As we form our regional teams, we will be adding more staff. But, as you can see from this diagram, most staff will be assigned to regions and not to the state office/headquarters (HQ). This puts more support closer to our athletes (our customers), and it also changes the role of our HQ team. The role of headquarters is primarily to support frontline staff/volunteer teams in our regions, helping them be successful in serving our athletes.



Through this restructuring, regional staff will collaborate with local Team Leaders in their region to enhance experiences for athletes, volunteers, donors, and community partners. For instance, Regional Sport Directors (RSDs) will coordinate with local Teams and training sites to plan sports seasons on a regional basis. RSDs will also ensure that training sites meet a minimum standard for quality and collaborate with HQ staff to provide coaches with timely, quality training. Athletes will be encouraged to explore sports and activities with other teams beyond their local one. In all of this, collaboration among a truly joint team of volunteers and staff will be crucial for our success!