



***Special
Olympics
Pennsylvania***

**Special Olympics Pennsylvania
Volunteer Reference Guide**

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Mission and History

The mission of Special Olympics PA is 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, demonstrate courage, experience joy, and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills, and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes, and the community.

All training and competition opportunities are provided free of charge to the athletes and their families, enabling everyone to experience the benefits of Special Olympics that extend well beyond the playing field.

Special Olympics was created by the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation. Special Olympics Pennsylvania (SOPA) is authorized and accredited by [Special Olympics Inc.](#) for the benefit of persons with intellectual disabilities.

Our History

The movement known worldwide as Special Olympics began simply as the idea of one extraordinary woman with a vision. Eunice Kennedy Shriver believed that people with intellectual disabilities were far more capable in sports and physical activities than many experts thought. And so, the world's largest amateur sports organization began in 1962 as a day camp in the backyard of Eunice and Sargent Shriver, with the first International Games taking place in 1968. Today, the movement thrives in more than 172 countries throughout the world.

In 1969, 187 Pennsylvania athletes traveled to Maryland to participate in the Special Olympics Mid-Atlantic Invitational. It was not until months later, however, that these athletes would have a state program to call their own. In May 1970, the first-ever Special Olympics Pennsylvania (SOPA) competition was held when 135 brave athletes participated in a small track and field competition at West Chester University. Despite its size and scope, an official Special Olympics program came into being that day thanks to the dedication, determination and vision of event organizers and volunteer directors, Dr. Ed Norris and Hank Goodwin from West Chester's Physical Education Department. The event was funded by a grant from the Department of Special Education in Harrisburg and spurred increasing state-wide interest in Special Olympics' mission in the years that followed.

Two familiar names in SOPA lore played a role in its beginnings, including one of Pennsylvania's most acclaimed athletes, Loretta Claiborne, who participated in athletics and the late former Chairman of the Board, Al Senavitis, who served as a timer during the West Chester track and field event. Making the program's establishment particularly ceremonious, then-Governor Raymond Shafer designated May 24 - 30, 1970 as "Special Olympics Week" in Pennsylvania by marking the occasion with an official proclamation.

As the organization evolved through the 1970s, under the directorial guidance of Joseph N. Lantzer (who also served on Eunice Kennedy Shriver's Board of Directors) competitions grew around the state, with various colleges serving as hosts, including Cheyney, Slippery Rock, and Edinboro

Universities. In 1978, a milestone of significant note occurred with the appointment of Frank Dean as the first Executive Director of SOPA.

The organization grew rapidly through the 1980s as the staff grew, county programs were founded, and local events were held across the state. Similar growth continued through the 1990s and early 2000s leading up to current President & CEO Matthew B. Aaron taking over in November 2008. In the years since, SOPA has enjoyed robust growth and is on the verge of a reorganization that will continue to draw even more athletes and volunteers to the program.

Today, Special Olympics Pennsylvania trains 13,000 athletes who compete annually in 21 Olympic-type sports at over 300 local, sectional, and state level competitions.

For The Past 50 Years...

For 50 years, SOPA has used the power of sports to transform the lives of people with intellectual disabilities and unite everyone by fostering community and building a more acceptable and civil society. Through what has now blossomed into [54 local programs](#) across the state, most of which are county or city-based, SOPA provides services that promote physical fitness and leadership skills development. [Athlete Leadership Programs](#) are offered to empower athletes to assume meaningful leadership roles, influence change within the Special Olympics movement, and create inclusive communities around the world. Through these programs, athletes take on roles as Global Messengers (trained as public speakers for Special Olympics), athlete representatives, coaches, board members and more.

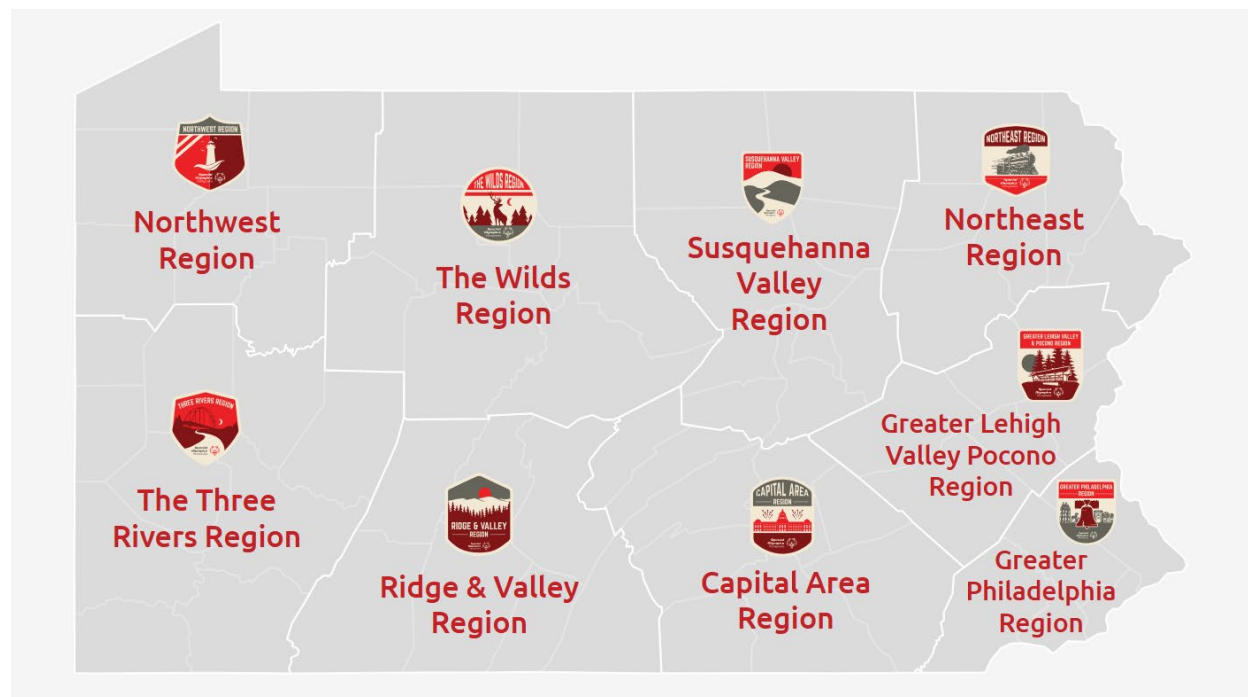
Special Olympics also helps to address major challenges facing its athletes: obesity, healthcare and employment. Obesity is more common among individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) than in the general population. Likewise, far too often persons with ID go without medical treatment, not by their choice, but because there are very few physicians, dentists, optometrists/ophthalmologists, and podiatrists that are actually trained in treating this population.

In response to these health challenges, SOPA provides free athletic training and competition year-round in Olympic-type sports for persons with ID. With sports at the core, Special Olympics directly addresses the problem of obesity by promoting healthy, active lifestyles. In addition, SOPA's [Healthy Athletes](#) initiative, a program offering free health screenings in the form of eye, ear, dental and podiatry assessments, is provided for athletes during select statewide Games. These screenings are conducted in fun, welcoming environments, and for some athletes, are the first time they have ever seen a doctor.

Additionally, SOPA strives to create a unified world by promoting inclusion, uniting communities, and changing attitudes. Through [Unified Sports](#), SOPA brings together individuals with and without intellectual disabilities as equal teammates in training and competition. This growing statewide program builds fully inclusive schools and communities, promotes respect and acceptance, and facilitates meaningful relationships between people of all abilities.

Special Olympics Pennsylvania Regions and Staff

Special Olympics Pennsylvania has 54 active county and city programs that fit into 9 regions across Pennsylvania.



Typically, each region has the following staff members to support:

- **Regional Executive Director** – responsible for the overall vision and leadership of the region. Reach out to the Regional Executive Director if you have a finance or leadership-related question or idea.
- **Regional Sports Director** – responsible for developing and managing sports teams and training sites. Reach out to a Regional Sports Director with questions about training sites, sports offered, competitions and anything else sport related.
- **Regional Administrative Manager** – responsible for assisting athletes and volunteers with the required paperwork to participate. Reach out to a Regional Administrative Manager with any questions about paperwork, registration or how to get started.
- **Regional Development Director** – Responsible for leading fundraising efforts in a region. Reach out to a Regional Development Director with questions about hosting or supporting a fundraiser.

For more information on our regions, please visit our website:

<https://specialolympicspa.org/find-a-program>

Special Olympics staff support

In addition to the team of regional staff, we have staff around the state who can assist you with your questions/concerns:

- For questions about background checks and other volunteer requirements:
classAsupport@specialolympicspa.org
- For questions about using the Volunteer Online Portal:
portalsupport@specialolympicspa.org
- For questions about coaches training and certification:
sportstraining@specialolympicspa.org
- For support with recruiting volunteers, helping at volunteer events and all other volunteer questions: volunteer@specialolympicspa.org

Expected Communications from Special Olympics staff

Depending on your role and involvement, you can expect to receive communications from Special Olympics staff throughout the year, including:

- Auto notifications and staff notifications if you are missing any volunteer requirements, or if they are about to expire
- Sport registration reminders, at the start of each season
- Bi-weekly emails from Regional Sport Directors (if you are participating in a sport)
- Post-season thank you messages and survey links
- Holiday messages
- Quarterly newsletters
- Emails with info about state competitions (if you choose to attend)

Special Olympics terminology

There are a lot of acronyms and terms that you might hear during your time as a volunteer. Here are some frequently used terms/abbreviations:

- SOPA – Special Olympics Pennsylvania
- SONA – Special Olympics North America
- SOI – Special Olympics International
- HOD – Head of Delegation
- Region – One of the nine areas within Pennsylvania that has a team of staff supporting our athletes and volunteers
- Team – One of the 54 counties/cities that participate in Special Olympics Pennsylvania programming. The team is the direct service unit for athletes and their family members. This was previously called Local Program.
- RAM – Regional Administrative Manager
- RSD – Regional Sports Director
- RDD – Regional Development Director
- RED – Regional Executive Director
- Class A – Term used to describe the set of requirements that volunteers who are in some sort of supervisory role need to complete. Typically, this includes a background check and trainings. We have previously named our volunteer roles either “Class A” or “Class B”, but now have shifted to use more descriptive names (ex – Assistant coach, mentor)
- Class B – Used to describe the set of requirements that volunteers without any supervisory responsibilities complete. (Ex – event volunteers, general volunteers)
- LOI – Letter of Intent; this is the form that a head coach submits if (s)he would like to send athletes to a state competition
- SMT – Sports Management Team
- ID – Intellectual Disability
- DD – Developmental Disability
- YA – Young Athletes
- GOC – Games Organizing Committee, group of volunteers who come together to plan and execute events at all levels.

Healthy Athletes:

Special Olympics is the world’s largest public health organization for individuals with intellectual disabilities! Through our Healthy Athletes program, we provide access to free health services for a population with significant, unmet health needs.

Athlete Leadership:

Our Athlete Leadership program empowers athletes to develop leadership skills and utilize their voices and abilities to assume meaningful leadership roles, influence change within the Special Olympics movement and create inclusive communities around the world. Athletes interested in completing Athlete Leadership are matched with a volunteer mentor who provides support and guidance.

Working with Special Olympics athletes

Special Olympics is one of the most exciting movements today, combining sports with the opportunity to interact with athletes with intellectual disabilities. All of us vary in our experience level with Special Olympic athletes.

The suggestions below are meant to help you feel more comfortable in your interactions.

1. People with intellectual disabilities and people without intellectual disabilities are more alike than different. Athletes with intellectual disabilities may learn at a slower pace; however, they do learn.
Athletes with intellectual disabilities experience the same likes, dislikes, pressures, insecurity, and affronts to their dignity as any other person does. Working with people with intellectual disabilities usually requires no specialized training. Good sensitive human relations are the basics to working successfully with athletes with intellectual disabilities. If you are unsure how to respond to a Special Olympics athlete, ask yourself how you would want someone to treat you.
2. A common misconception is that Special Olympics athletes need to be talked down to or talked to as if they were very young children. While athletes' reasoning abilities may be delayed, talk with them and treat them according to their age.
3. Both children and adults participate in Special Olympics. Always refer to Special Olympics participants as athletes rather than kids. Special Olympics does not, at the request of the United States Olympic Committee, use the term Olympians.
4. Using appropriate body language makes any conversation with athletes and coaches more positive. Maintain eye contact to let the person know you are interested. Keep an open body posture, arms by your side or in your pocket. Incline your head toward the person. Closed arms and leaning away from a person created a closed or unfriendly position or atmosphere.
5. Be yourself. Use your normal voice and give support but try not to over-praise. Don't exaggerate the accomplishments of athletes. Special Olympics athletes will gain the most from being judged fairly and without overstatement.
6. Most athletes you'll meet are very friendly and enjoy your attention. Along with fun, we encourage behavior that is appropriate to athletic events. If you have any questions, just remember that behavior that is not appropriate for persons without intellectual disabilities is not appropriate among persons with intellectual disabilities. Appropriate behavior and sportsmanship are two skills emphasized in Special Olympic training. Reinforce them whenever possible. Please do not interfere if a coach is disciplining an athlete. If you have a question, ask the coach when it is convenient and out of hearing distance from the athlete.

7. Athletes thrive on receiving encouragement, but let them take the lead as to what type of recognition they are comfortable with (pat on the back, high five, handshake, etc). You should also be comfortable setting your own limits and should caution an athlete if an action makes you feel uncomfortable, as well.
8. As a volunteer, you will want to do everything you can to respect the dignity and be sensitive to the cultural differences of the athletes that you will meet.
9. When approaching an athlete, always ask if they need assistance before giving any.
10. If working with an athlete who is visually impaired, always identify yourself by name to announce your presence. Allow them to take your elbow with their hand (do not grab theirs). In a calm, normal tone, describe the area to them being aware of people and things on either side. When sitting down, take the individual's hand and place it on the back of the chair, telling them which way the chair is facing; they will seat themselves.
11. If working with an athlete who is hearing impaired, understand that there is a wide range of hearing losses. Do not shout or exaggerate your speech, as this does not help with communication. To get a person's attention, call their name. If you do not get a response, lightly touch their arm or shoulder. Always make direct eye contact and keep your face and mouth visible at all times.
12. Whenever possible, always deal directly with the athlete. Direct all questions, comments or concerns directly to the individual and do not hesitate to ask an athlete for advice. We learn together.
13. As you perform your volunteer duties, don't be afraid to ask other coaches, volunteers or staff for help if you see a problem occurring.

Sport Seasons

Special Olympics sports are offered on a seasonal basis.

Fall Sports

- Bocce
- Flag Football
- Long Distance Run/Walk
- Powerlifting
- Soccer
- Volleyball

Spring Sports

- Athletics
- Basketball
- Equestrian
- Gymnastics
- Swimming (Aquatics)
- Tennis

Winter Sports

- Alpine Skiing
- Figure Skating
- Floor Hockey/Floorball
- Snowboarding
- Snowshoeing
- Speed Skating

Summer Sports

- Softball
- Golf

Locally Popular

- Cross Country Skiing
- Judo
- Kayaking
- Pickleball
- Roller Skating
- E-Sports

Getting involved with a sport

Volunteers who are looking to volunteer with a sport can take the following steps:

1. Complete registration in our [Online Portal](https://specialolympicspa.org/get-involved/sports-sign-ups). Assistant coaches/coaches are asked to complete a background check and trainings as part of the registration process.
2. Sign up to volunteer for the sport of your choice. Typically, signups happen on a seasonal basis. Check our website (<https://specialolympicspa.org/get-involved/sports-sign-ups>) for information on how to register.

Athletes who are looking to participate with a sport can take the following steps:

1. Determine eligibility: Special Olympics athletes are individuals 8 and older with an intellectual disability, cognitive delay or developmental disability.
2. Complete registration – registration information is available on our website; please visit <https://specialolympicspa.org/get-involved/become-an-athlete>.
3. Sign up to participate in the sport of your choice. Typically, signups happen on a seasonal basis. Check our website (<https://specialolympicspa.org/get-involved/sports-sign-ups>) for information on how to register.

Volunteer Roles and Requirements

Special Olympics Pennsylvania has two distinct volunteer classifications: one **cannot** supervise athletes (*previously known as class B volunteers*) and volunteers and the other one **can** (*previously known as class A volunteers*). Both volunteer classifications play an important role in our organization! Let's help you better understand the differences between the two:

These volunteer opportunities **CAN NOT** supervise athletes and volunteers:

Unified Partner

- Volunteer that is 8 years old or older who trains and competes alongside an athlete.
- Required to have completed a volunteer application, a background clearance (if over 18), Protective Behaviors Training, General Orientation Training (if over 16) and a Health History and Release form.

General Volunteer

- Volunteer who assists only occasionally at a local training site and has limited contact with athletes, only under the supervision of coaches.
- These volunteers may help as one-day volunteers at our events, supporting with duties such as scorekeeping, timing and awards.
- General volunteers do not supervise, chaperone or travel with a team to any competition. General volunteers may be individuals who are only able to attend a few practices, or who want to better understand Special Olympics before becoming more involved.
- Required to have completed a volunteer application. Must be 14 years or older.

Event Group Lead Volunteer

- Volunteer who registers a group/family to volunteer at a one-time event.
- Required to have completed a volunteer application and Group Lead approval form.

Healthy Athletes Volunteer

- A health care professional or student who helps at one of our health screening events.
- Required to have completed a volunteer application.

These volunteer opportunities **CAN** supervise athletes and volunteers:

Head Coach

- Volunteer who creates, organizes and leads a comprehensive sport training program for a team of athletes and volunteers.
- Required to have completed a volunteer application, a background clearance, Protective Behaviors Training, General Orientation Training, Concussion Training and a Sports Certification.

Assistant Coach

- Volunteer who helps to organize practice and assist athletes in acquiring sports skills.
- Required to have completed a volunteer application, a background clearance, Protective Behaviors Training, General Orientation Training and Concussion Training.
- Not required to have a Sports Certification, but it is always helpful as a resource!

Mentor

- Volunteer who supports Special Olympics athletes in their journey to become Athlete Leaders. Mentors are matched with an athlete and offer ongoing support, constructive feedback and encouragement.
- Required to have completed a volunteer application, a background clearance, Protective Behaviors Training, General Orientation Training and Concussion Training. There is also an optional Athlete Mentor training.

Team Volunteer

- Volunteer who supports a training site/team to cover the 1:4 ratio. This role can include providing general supervision and support to the sport team, as well as more direct, 1:1 support to individual athletes as needed. Team Volunteers are authorized to supervise athletes and travel with the team for competitions.
- Required to have completed a volunteer application, a background clearance, Protective Behaviors Training and General Orientation Training. Volunteers in this role must be 16 or 17 years old for one-day competitions and 18 or older for overnight competitions and at training sites.

HOD (Head of Delegation)

- Volunteer who is the lead coordinator of a Team during a competition event. They manage team housing, credentials, medicals/medication and more.
- Required to have completed a volunteer application, a background clearance, Protective Behaviors Training and General Orientation Training.

Team Leader – also known as Local Program Manager

- Volunteers who keep our Teams running smoothly through their leadership.
- Required to have completed a volunteer application, a background clearance, Protective Behaviors Training, Concussion Training and General Orientation.

The role of a Team Leader may vary, depending on the needs of the Region and Team. Some areas that Team Leaders focus on include:

- **Sports** – Support coaches and RSD's to help implement registration, training and competition. Communicate with coaches throughout the season. Assist teams with securing training sites, transportation and equipment/uniforms.

- **Database Coordination** – assist volunteers, athletes and staff with completing necessary paperwork, such as medical history forms and training rosters.
- **Fundraising** – Provide support to the Regional Development Director for fundraising events and opportunities.
- **Community** – Assist with spreading the word throughout the community! Help recruit volunteers, maintain social media pages, attend community fairs and more.
- **Overall leadership** – work closely with regional staff to ensure teams are running smoothly. Communicate all important info with team volunteers, athletes and families.

Coaching

The athlete/coach relationship is a crucial cornerstone of the Special Olympics experience. It goes beyond just teaching sports skills and has a profound impact on the athletes' lives. Here's why this bond is so important:

Understanding and Individualized Training:

- Coaches play a vital role in understanding each athlete's uniqueness.
- This allows them to tailor training programs that are effective and engaging for the individual, fostering a sense of accomplishment and progress.



Motivation and Confidence Building:

- A strong coach-athlete relationship provides a supportive environment.
- Coaches can motivate athletes to push their boundaries, celebrate their victories (big or small), and help them bounce back from setbacks.
- This builds confidence and self-esteem, which spills over into all aspects of the athlete's life.

Life Skills Development:

- Special Olympics coaches go beyond just sports.
- They can help athletes develop important life skills like communication, teamwork, and following instructions.
- This empowers them to be more independent and successful in their daily lives.

Social Inclusion and Belonging:

- Coaches create a welcoming and inclusive environment.
- This fosters a sense of belonging and social connection, which can be especially important for individuals who may face social isolation.

Overall Well-being:

- The positive aspects of the coach-athlete relationship contribute to the overall well-being of Special Olympics athletes.
- This can lead to improved physical health, mental well-being, and a more positive outlook on life.

Assistant Coach vs. Head Coach – what’s the difference?

Head coaches lead and organize their team of athletes and volunteers to create a comprehensive sport training program. They make sure the paperwork for their training site is completed, and that they have enough volunteers to run their sport. They manage the rosters of both athletes and volunteers, and communicate important info such as practice dates, schedule changes and what to expect during the season. They handle the paperwork for competitions.

Assistant coaches help to organize practice and assist athletes in acquiring sports skills, under the leadership of a head coach. Assistant coaches are needed to maintain our 4:1 ratio. They help support at competitions and events.

Head Coach Responsibilities

- With assistance from your Regional Sport Director/Leadership Team, secure the necessary training facilities for the season.
- Schedule and organize all practices and events.
 - Establish a sports training and competition schedule for a minimum of 8 - 10 weeks.
 - Communicate the schedule and any important info throughout the season to athletes, parents/guardians, assistant coaches, local program management team, and regional office. You’ll find the most up-to-date contact information on your training roster.
- Oversee all training at practices and ensure all practice locations and equipment are sufficient and safe for use.
- Ensure the required 4:1 ratio of athletes to volunteers (eligible to provide supervision) is met, and the required 25:1 ratio of athletes to certified coaches is met.
- Keep copies of current health history certifications for each athlete. Do not allow ineligible athletes to train.
- Ensure volunteers (including you!) are eligible and up-to-date with trainings and clearances. Do not allow ineligible volunteers to provide supervision at practices or events.
- Document attendance on the trackers for each practice. Reach out to regional staff if you need assistance!
- Document scores for all athletes as required (e.g., for divisioning at events).
- If invited to an invitational, Regional, Sectional or State Event, fill out any necessary paperwork and provide information to athletes and their families.
- **Other volunteers can support in completing these responsibilities! You are encouraged to delegate responsibilities to assistant coaches and other volunteers.**
- Keep an inventory of uniforms and request replacements/additional sizes as needed.

Coach Certification

Special Olympics offers, and sometimes requires, coach certifications in our sports. Head coaches, as the expert on the team, are required to be certified in their sport.

Assistant coaches are not required to become certified, but all are encouraged to become certified in order to better serve our athletes!

Why get certified?

Our coach certification trainings provide volunteers with important information related to your sport, such as rules updates, suggested training plans and best practices in coaching Special Olympics athletes. We also provide Sport Skills Program materials to each participant. We hope that these trainings will help you feel more confident in guiding and supporting your athletes.

Additionally, some of our competitions require a certain number of certified coaches per team.

For information on how to become a Certified Coach, please visit our website for the most up-to-date information: <https://specialolympicspa.org/get-involved/become-a-coach>

Competitions

Throughout the sport season, we offer opportunities for athletes to challenge themselves through competition. Competition events provide continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage and experience joy.

Types of competition:

Local/invitational: Competitions held at the local level and organized by Team Leaders/local Games Organizing Committee (GOC), in which local teams come together for a day of competition and fun. These opportunities can also include League Play where a seasonal competition calendar is developed, and athletes compete with other local training sites throughout the season.

Regional: Events organized by Regional staff with support of a local GOC, these can be single or multi-sport events and may be qualifiers for higher levels of competition.

Sectional: Sectional competitions are held for each training season in each of the three sections of the state (West, Central, East). These events are organized by staff with support from local GOCs. At sectional events, athletes compete for the opportunity to qualify for the state competition.

State Games: Statewide competitions that are the culminating event of the sport season. Athletes must qualify in order to attend state games. Events are led by Headquarters Competition staff and local GOCs.

USA Games: Held every 4 years, USA games invites over 4,000 athletes from all 50 states to compete. For most sports, athletes must win a gold medal in their division at State Games in order to qualify for USA games. There is an application and selection process for USA games. These slots are limited with SOPA taking about 100 athletes to each USA Games.

World Games: Once every 4 years, Special Olympics athletes in the United States are given the opportunity to represent our country at the highest level of competition - World Games (respectively for Summer & Winter Games)! World Games are one of the highest levels of privilege and opportunity for any Special Olympics athletes. There is an application and selection process for World Games. These slots are extremely limited with SOPA taking 8-10 athletes to each World Games.

Attending Competitions

Local, Regional and Sectional competitions are typically one day events. State games are overnight events that are usually 2-3 days. USA Games and World Games typically require over a week of travel.

Volunteers who attend competitions are required to complete a background check (if over 18) and volunteer trainings. For overnight events, volunteers must be 18 or older.

Resources for Volunteers

To connect with your local region: <https://specialolympicspa.org/find-a-program>

To learn more about Special Olympics sports and their rules:

<https://specialolympicspa.org/sports/sports-offered>

<https://resources.specialolympics.org/sports-essentials/sports-and-coaching>

Learning more about intellectual disabilities:

- Special Olympics International Resources:
<https://www.specialolympics.org/about/intellectual-disabilities?locale=en>
- How to speak with people with intellectual disabilities:
<https://www.specialolympics.org/about/intellectual-disabilities/how-to-speak-with-people-with-intellectual-disabilities>
- Autism: <https://www.specialolympics.org/about/intellectual-disabilities/autism>

Continuing Education for Coaches: <https://nfhslearn.com/courses?role=coach>

Seasonal Calendar

SEASONS AT A GLANCE



	FALL	WINTER	SPRING	SUMMER
Training Site Registration (see link below)	April 1 - May 1	August 1 - Sept. 1	Nov. 1 - Dec. 1	March 1 - April 1
Athlete, Unified Partner, Volunteer Signup	May 15 - July 15	Sept. 15 - October 15	Dec. 15 - March 1	April 15 - May 15
Season Length	August 9 - Nov. 3	Nov. 1 - March 8	March 14 - June 7	June 1 - Sept. 15
Eligibility Deadline	August 23	December 20	March 28	June 20
Sports Offered	Bocce, Flag Football, Long Distance Running/Walking, Powerlifting, Soccer, Volleyball, Walking Clubs	Alpine Skiing, Bowling, Figure Skating, Floor Hockey, Snowboard, Snowshoe, Speed Skating, Walking Clubs	Athletics (Track & Field), Basketball, Equestrian, Gymnastics, Swimming, Tennis, Walking Clubs	Golf Softball, Walking Clubs