



***Special  
Olympics***  
*Florida*

FAMILY GUIDE



## Family Guide

Dear Family Members,

Special Olympics Florida is excited to have you join the Special Olympics movement. We hope you will feel welcome and become involved as supporters, volunteers, committee members, coaches, and in all other aspects of Special Olympics.

We know that family members are often the greatest supporters of our athletes. We welcome and encourage you to make a difference in your family member's life and the countless others who will benefit from your involvement.

If you have any questions or want additional information, please contact your local Special Olympics Florida area office. For more information, visit [www.specialolympicsflorida.org](http://www.specialolympicsflorida.org)

Best Regards,  
Special Olympics Florida



### DID YOU KNOW?

Special Olympics Florida now serves over 80,000 athletes.

## Special Olympics Florida Mission:

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

## Who We Are

Special Olympics is a worldwide movement that provides year-round sports training and competition opportunities for children and adults with intellectual disabilities.

Special Olympics began in 1968 when Eunice Kennedy Shriver organized the first International Special Olympics Games at Soldier Field in Chicago. The idea began in the early 1960s when Mrs. Shriver started a day camp for people with intellectual disabilities. She saw that people with intellectual disabilities were far more capable in sports and physical activities than experts thought. Since 1968, millions of children and adults have participated in our programs and services.

Special Olympics is based on the belief that people with intellectual disabilities can enjoy a better quality of life through individual and team sports participation.

Regular training, including physical conditioning, nutrition, and wellness activities, is vital for developing sports skills. Competing against athletes of similar ability levels is an excellent way to assess these skills, track progress, and encourage personal growth.

Through sports training and competition, people with intellectual disabilities benefit physically, mentally, and socially. Their participation and involvement strengthen families and communities. Special Olympics Florida offers opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to practice and compete in an environment of equality, respect, and acceptance.



# How is Our Organization Structured?

There are accredited Special Olympics programs in more than 193 countries. Special Olympics programs are continually being developed around the world.

In the United States, Special Olympics chapters exist in all 50 states, including the District of Columbia, Guam, the Virgin Islands, and American Samoa. About 25,000 communities in the United States have Special Olympics programs.

Special Olympics Florida is an accredited program in the North American region. Its board of Directors governs Special Olympics Florida and sets its policy. We are present in nearly every county, with local staff and volunteers overseeing operations and competition.

## How Do I Contact My Local Program?

Special Olympics Florida is divided into 8 Regions containing 67 counties.

To contact your area office, visit **[specialolympicsflorida.org](https://specialolympicsflorida.org)** and click **Contact Us**. You can also contact your local region office by using our [interactive state map](#).

If you need assistance in identifying or contacting your area, please call our state headquarters for assistance at 352-243-9536.



### DID YOU KNOW?

Special Olympics serves 4.6 million athletes and Unified partners in 208 countries and jurisdictions.

# Why Be Involved?

Special Olympics Florida athletes and their family members enjoy the opportunity for athletes to participate in a sports environment that encourages individuals to reach their personal best.

## Athlete Benefits:

- Promotes positive self-esteem and self-confidence.
- Encourages a healthy, active lifestyle.
- Provides opportunities for community involvement and social skills development. Teaches responsibility and self-discipline.
- Provides inclusive activities for athletes to interact with friends and family through Special Olympics Unified Sports®.
- Develops employment skills through involvement and teamwork.

## Family Member Benefits:

- Social interaction and support networks with other families.
- Opportunities to see your athlete excel in a sport and as a person.
- Unified Sports™ provides opportunities for family members to participate with their Special Olympics athlete.
- Opportunities to get more involved and impact the lives of other athletes and family members.
- Participating in sports provides your family with endless fun and recreation opportunities.



# Eligibility

Individuals of all ages and ability levels are welcome to participate in Special Olympics, which offers a variety of programs for children and adults. To be eligible to participate as a Special Olympics athlete, the individual must be identified as having an intellectual or developmental disability.

They must be at least six years old to practice and eight years old to compete. Children aged 2 to 7 are eligible to participate in Special Olympics Young Athletes.



## Getting Started

Getting involved with Special Olympics Florida is easy. First, contact your regional contact to learn about the programs available in your area.

Every athlete participating in sports must complete a registration packet to ensure their safety. Once the forms are submitted to your regional contact, the athlete will be placed with an existing and sanctioned Register Training Program.

### DID YOU KNOW?

**Special Olympics Florida held more than 160 competitions in 2024 and conducted nearly 10,000 health screenings**

## Sports Offered

Alpine Skiing	Equestrian	Soccer
Aquatics	Figure Skating	Softball
Athletics	Flag Football	Stand Up Paddle
Basketball	Golf	Surfing
Bocce	Gymnastics	Tennis
Bowling	Open Water Swim	Triathlon
Cheerleading	Powerlifting	Volleyball
Cycling	Sailing	

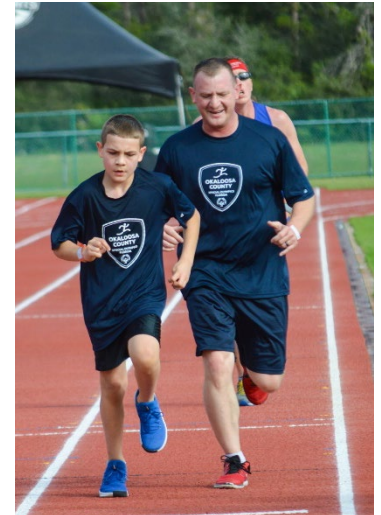
## Evolving Levels in Competition

Through Special Olympics, athletes of all ability levels are encouraged to participate, and every athlete is recognized for his/her performance.

Competitions are structured so that athletes compete with other athletes of similar ability in equitable divisions.

Athletes need to compete in a sport at the area/regional level to be eligible to compete at the state level in that sport. Special Olympics Florida holds eight state competitions each year.

Special Olympics Inc. holds the USA Games every four years and the World Games every two years, alternating between the Summer and Winter Games. Athletes train and compete worldwide, but only a few are selected to represent their country and state.



**More than 100,000 Special Olympics competitions are held worldwide every year.**

# What We Do

Special Olympics Florida offers a broad spectrum of sports opportunities for athletes of all ability levels. Each opportunity enables athletes to develop skills and encourages participation and competition in an appropriate and meaningful manner. This continuum of opportunities includes:

## Young Athletes

Young Athletes is a program for children aged 2 to 7 and focuses on developing fundamental motor tracking and hand-eye coordination through physical play. This participation-based program also introduces the child to the world of sports and begins to prepare them for competition, which can start at age 8.

## Little ELITES

Little ELITES is an entry-level school-based sports program that bridges the gap between Young Athletes and Special Olympics competitive sports. This program is ideal for children in second through fifth grade who have an intellectual disability or developmental disability diagnosis. Schools can sign up for soccer, athletics, flag football, softball, and basketball.

## Unified Sports

Unified Sports integrates athletes with and without intellectual disabilities in training and competition programs, as well as social activities. This gives all participants the opportunity to practice and play together while having fun, promoting physical health and bringing people together. Unified Sports can be implemented in the schools, intramural leagues or other community events.

## Individual and Team Sports

Individual and team sports include those sports officially approved by Special Olympics, Inc., the sanctioning body for all Special Olympics programs worldwide. Florida offers 23 official Special Olympics sports. Athletes train and compete in these individual or team sports with other athletes of similar age and performance capabilities.

## Healthy Athletes

Healthy Athletes is designed to help Special Olympics athletes improve their health and fitness, leading to an enhanced sports experience and improved well-being. Healthy Athletes offers the following screenings in eight disciplines at area and state competitions: Fit Feet, FUNfitness, Healthy Hearing, Health Promotion, Opening Eyes®, Special Smiles®, MedFest® and Strong Minds.

## Healthy Communities

Healthy Communities offers health exams, identical to the Healthy Athletes disciplines, throughout the calendar year. Through partnerships with local medical practices, a statewide referral database is maintained to provide athletes with contact information for local practitioners who accept referrals of Special Olympics Florida athletes and may provide the necessary services at a reduced rate or free of charge. In addition, multi-week fitness, wellness, and nutrition programming is offered throughout the community.

## Individual Skills

Individual Skills is for athletes who are not yet proficient in the fundamental skills needed to participate safely and meaningfully in a sport. The goal is for the athlete to prepare for team participation and higher levels of involvement in individual sports.

## Motor Activities Training

Motor Activities Training is for people with severe disabilities whose physical and/or behavioral limitations preclude participation in team or individual sports in traditional Special Olympics competitions. The program emphasizes training and participation rather than competition. It is set up so people with severe disabilities can participate in appropriate recreational activities geared to their ability level.

## Athlete Leadership

Athlete Leadership helps athletes meaningfully participate in the leadership of the organization by becoming public speakers, coaches, officials, committee members, board members, and volunteers. Athletes receive training and opportunities to prepare and support them in becoming effective leaders and to create an environment that welcomes and values their contributions to the organization.

# Getting More Involved

As a family member, we encourage you to support your athlete by attending practices, competitions, and events to cheer them on. Additionally, other volunteer opportunities are available to help support Special Olympics Florida.

Volunteering for Special Olympics Florida has an immediate impact. Your contribution, whether it is time, expertise, goods and services, or money, directly helps our athletes, coaches, and families.

The dedication of Special Olympics families and volunteers provides a richer experience for athletes with intellectual disabilities.

## Volunteer Opportunities

### Coaching Opportunities

- Become a certified coach or assistant coach.
- Organize, coach, or play on a Unified Sports™ team.
- Use specific sports expertise to help set up sports clinics or Special Olympics training schools.
- Train individuals with more severe disabilities through Motor Activities Training.
- Become a trainer and hold training schools to instruct coaches and individuals interested in Special Olympics Florida.
- Help a certified coach with transportation, chaperoning, or other needs they have.

### Competitions

- Serve as competition director, venue supervisor, or certified official at Special Olympics competition.
- Organize special events, such as the Olympic Village, family reception tent, and Opening Ceremonies.
- Act as a day-of-event volunteer in multiple capacities, such as greeter, timer, stager, measurer, line judge, ball shagger, spotter, escort and much more.
- Set up and support the event area for competition (making lines, putting up tents and tables, filling water coolers, etc.)

### Programs

- Mentor an athlete through Athlete Leadership
- Coach a community-based Young Athletes program.
- Start a community-based sports program.

### Schools

- Become a trainer and train schools to be involved in Young Athletes, Little ELITES, or Motor Activities Training
- Create a booster club to support your Special Olympics team.

### Professional

- Establish a program in workplaces employing individuals with intellectual disabilities.
- Provide medical support, including free physicals or pro-bono legal services for athletes and families in need.
- Become a sponsor of a Special Olympics Florida team or fundraising event.
- Make donations of goods, services, or vital office supplies to local Special Olympics Florida programs.
- Help plan and organize a fundraising event.
- Volunteer photography and graphic design skills.

### Administrative

- Contribute typing, filing, and computer skills in Special Olympics Florida offices.
- Distribute materials for Special Olympics events.
- Help with mass-mailing projects.

### Additional Family Involvement Opportunities

- Participate in local and state family activities to meet other families and give input on local and state programs.
- Create support and service resources for families to access in their area.
- Provide networking directories to enhance communication opportunities within SOFL areas.
- Become a Family Messenger.



### DID YOU KNOW?

Special Olympics Florida has over 51,000 dedicated volunteers.

# Special Olympics Oaths

The Special Olympics oaths are repeated before competitions as a pledge to strive for the highest level of competition and good sportsmanship.

## Special Olympics Athlete Oath:

Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.

## Special Olympics Volunteer Oath:

I promise to give of the time in my life so that Special Olympics athletes can have the time of their lives.

I promise to support Special Olympics, not just as an expression of charity, but as a form of respect for my fellow human beings.

I promise to spread the word of volunteerism because, in giving, I receive so much more in return.

## Special Olympics Official Oath:

In the name of all judges and officials, I promise that we shall officiate in these Special Olympics Games with complete impartiality, respecting and abiding by the rules which govern them, in the spirit of sportsmanship.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Special Olympics Florida provides quality sports training and competition at no cost to the athlete or their family. All program expenses are paid for by our generous donors.

# Resources For Families

- Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD) - [apd.myflorida.com](http://apd.myflorida.com)
- ChildCare.gov - [childcare.gov](http://childcare.gov)
- The ARC - [arcflorida.org](http://arcflorida.org)
- Family Resource Center on Disabilities - [frcd.org](http://frcd.org)
- Florida Association of Centers for Independent Living - [floridacils.org](http://floridacils.org)
- Council for Exceptional Children - [exceptionalchildren.org](http://exceptionalchildren.org)
- Vocational Rehabilitation: [rehabworks.org](http://rehabworks.org)
- Family Network on Disabilities of Florida, Inc. - [fndusa.org](http://fndusa.org)
- Autism Society of Florida – [autismfl.org](http://autismfl.org)
- National Down Syndrome Foundation of Florida - [dsfflorida.org](http://dsfflorida.org)

# Family Action Network

Because family members are an essential component of our movement and are valued contributors, we have created the Family Action Network.

Family Action Network advocates for all Special Olympics Florida families, providing support and information about services, creating valuable tools, and using families' experiences to educate others throughout our state.

- Hospitality areas are present at all state competitions.
- Family giveaways.
- Family Recognition Program.
- Creation and distribution of resource materials.
- Competition information and correspondence.
- Hotel rooms are held in a block before all state competitions so families can stay nearby at a reduced rate.
- Family Messenger Program – a trained Special Olympics Florida family member who serves as a support person and provider of information to family members of new and potential Special Olympics athletes.

**Join Family Action Network today:**  
**[www.specialolympicsflorida.org/fan](http://www.specialolympicsflorida.org/fan)**



## *Revealing the Champion in All of Us!*



**Special  
Olympics**  
Florida



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