

September 8, 2020

Statement from Special Olympics Canada
Challenge Accepted: A way forward for Special Olympics in Canada

Special Olympics Canada (SOC), inclusive of the 12 Provincial/Territorial Chapters, has been significantly impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Over the course of these past months, we have worked collectively to adapt and innovate – looking for opportunities and being open to new ways of doing things. It is clear that the implications for how we deliver programs, competitions and how we manage the financial downturn requires long term planning and vision. In the midst of much uncertainty, we must remain steadfast in our vision, mission and values while adapting and pivoting to a new way forward. We've 'accepted the challenge' and have made some bold decisions focused on resiliency and rebuilding.

Renewed Commitment to Grassroots Programs*

**Note: Grassroots programs encompasses the full range of programs delivered in a community and/or school setting: sport clubs/programs, Active Start, FUNdamentals, Unified Sport, Healthy Athletes, Athlete Leadership, volunteer/coach education.*

Everyone across the movement recognizes that our grassroots, community and school based programs are the foundation of what we do. Our grassroots programs reach all 49,600 athletes and all 22,000 volunteers across the country. What happens in our communities every day is the heart and soul of Special Olympics – the very reason we exist and the vehicle by which we deliver on our mission.

To ensure programs remain strong through the pandemic and beyond, SOC, along with each of the Chapters, is renewing its commitment to and focus on local programs – ensuring every athlete, volunteer and community is supported and stays engaged.

A safe return to in-person programs will take time and will happen slowly. While some re-opening has begun in varying degrees across the country, we are working on ideas and solutions to expand virtual programs and to getting athletes back on the playing field as soon as it is safe to do so. We look forward to working with our communities on new and innovative program delivery models, on continuing to grow athlete and volunteer registration, reaching a more diverse audience, and strengthening quality standards in all aspects of program delivery.

The importance of grassroots programs to our athletes' physical and emotional well-being is critical. Programs are so important to staying active, learning, and being socially connected with peers and community. Whether in-person or virtual, quality grassroots programs that reach and impact all 49,600 athletes across the country must remain our priority.

Cancellation of Special Olympics Canada Summer Games Medicine Hat 2022

Special Olympics Canada's focus on sport, quality training and competition have become our trademark within the global movement. We have a performance pathway from local, regional, Provincial/Territorial (P/T), National to Worlds that requires athletes to be well trained and results in meaningful competition. That said, as athletes advance along the performance pathway, we know fewer athletes qualify and compete at each stage. In a time of limited fiscal

resources, and given the uncertainty of when mass gatherings will be allowed, we must prioritize those activities that reach and have an impact on the vast majority of our athletes and volunteers.

While competition is an integral part of sport, Special Olympics Canada, together with the Chapters, has made the decision to cancel the Special Olympics Canada Summer Games 2022. Due to COVID-19, there will be no regional competitions in 2020 and the majority of Chapters are not planning to host Provincial/Territorial Games in 2021. As a result, our “typical” pathway for athletes to qualify for National Games is not possible. Major multi-sport games are a large investment whether at the Provincial/Territorial or National level, and with financial shortfalls expected to have multi-year implications, we need to protect the long-term viability of Special Olympics Canada and each Chapter.

National Games are important to Special Olympics Canada and the Chapters. While we have to put a pause on hosting multi-sport games for this cycle, we intend to host National Games in the future – when fiscal circumstances and safety protocols permit. In the meantime, we will explore and look for new competition models. We are committed to investigating alternate, cost-effective virtual and/or small group competition formats that continue to inspire athletes to further develop their skills and set goals that lead to opportunities to compete at their very best.

Special Olympics Team Canada at the World Winter Games Kazan 2022

The pathway to the Special Olympics World Winter Games 2022 began in Chapters in 2019 and lead to athletes qualifying for Special Olympics Team Canada based on their performances at the Special Olympics Canada Winter Games 2020 in Thunder Bay. Much has already been invested in this journey both in athlete training and the hosting of Provincial/Territorial and National Games. Additionally, we are grateful that Special Olympics Canada’s National Team Program (NTP) and the participation of Special Olympics Team Canada at the World Games is primarily funded by Sport Canada. The athletes have trained, competed and earned the opportunity to see the final step of their journey fulfilled.

Taking this into consideration, Special Olympics Canada, together with the Chapters, has made the decision to proceed with the NTP and participation at the Special Olympics World Winter Games Kazan 2022. With COVID-19 restrictions, training will have to be modified, but we will adapt and do everything possible to ensure that athletes are able to properly train and prepare. We are planning to announce the names of Special Olympics Team Canada in November 2020.

We will continue to monitor COVID-19 health and safety protocols related to training, travel and large gatherings. If, for any reason, Special Olympics Canada deems that the safety of our athletes, volunteers and staff is at risk either in the lead-up to or while at the Games, we will withdraw Special Olympics Team Canada from the World Games 2022.

The Way Forward

Taking into account COVID-19 health and safety restrictions and the negative financial impact on Special Olympics across Canada, we believe these decisions forge a new path that not only sees the movement survive, but thrive during COVID-19 and beyond. In our history, we have not had to face these types of challenges, but we are responding with ‘challenge accepted’ and a renewed commitment to ensure Special Olympics in Canada, our athletes and volunteers, come through this together, stronger and better.