

Thursday August 27, 2020

COVID-19 AND THE IMPACT ON SPECIAL OLYMPICS IN CANADA

FAQ

What do you mean when you refer to grassroots?

Grassroots programs are the full range of programs delivered in a community and/or school setting by Special Olympics: sport clubs/programs, Active Start, FUNdamentals, Unified Sports, Healthy Athletes, Athlete Leadership, volunteer/coach education.

Special Olympics' 6,000+ programs in communities across the country are the heart and soul of the overall movement. During the COVID-19 program suspension, we witnessed firsthand just how important these weekly programs are to all 49,600 athletes. Not only do they provide access to a healthy active lifestyle, but they also provide a community and important social network, which improves mental and emotional wellbeing.

What does investing in grassroots programs mean/look like?

As we adjust to the post-COVID-19 “new normal,” Special Olympics Canada (SOC) will invest in program innovation and expansion across the country, so we can ensure every Canadian with an intellectual disability has the opportunity to transform their life through sport. This investment and focus will allow SOC to better understand the needs of volunteers – who are essential in delivering these programs – and provide more training and resources. SOC, working alongside its 12 Provincial/Territorial Chapters, will also be using this opportunity to research and develop a plan of action to better reach diverse, or under serviced communities and cultures.

We will also continue to advance current virtual programs and opportunities that have proven successful this year, as well as develop strategies on how to better reach athletes who do not have access to technology to ensure they remain connected and active.

What does that mean for the local community?

For the foreseeable future SOC, and its 12 Provincial/Territorial Chapters, will be working with all of our communities to support them to safely restart grassroots programs that service athletes with intellectual disabilities while ensuring a sustainable plan for the future.

Who decided to cancel the Special Olympics Canada Summer Games Medicine Hat 2022?

The decision was a collective decision by SOC and its 12 Provincial/Territorial Chapters based on the current realities and uncertainties surrounding sport participation, mass gathering protocols and financial implications of COVID-19 now and for the near future.

Will SOC ever host a National Games again?

Absolutely. SOC recognizes the important role of competition in sport. In fact, SOC's focus on sport, quality training and competition has become its trademark within the global movement – and we are proud of this reputation. While the future of large multi-sport Games, and the financial impact are uncertain, Provincial/Territorial and National Games are still important to SOC and its Chapters. Our intent is to return to hosting Games when finances, and health and safety circumstances allow.

Is SOC getting rid of National Games altogether?

No. SOC recognizes the important role of competition in sport, which is why it is our intent to return to hosting Games when finances, health and safety allow.

What will “alternative competitions” look like?

SOC and its 12 Provincial/Territorial Chapters are committed to exploring alternative, cost-effective competition opportunities that comply with health and safety guidelines. We are investigating virtual and/or small group competition formats and models. In consultation with Special Olympics International and North America, along with National Sport Organizations, SOC will be reviewing and discussing best practices in program delivery and alternative competition models given the new realities and guidelines for a safe return to play.

Please stay tuned for more information in 2021.

Will the “alternative competitions” be a qualifier for the Special Olympics World Games Berlin 2023?

Maintaining a pathway to the Special Olympics World Games Berlin 2023 remains a goal – as long as it is safe to do so and financial resources are available. SOC is committed to exploring alternative competition formats that will ensure a quality selection process for Special Olympics Team Canada 2023.

How will athletes train for these alternative competitions?

Special Olympics Canada and its 12 Provincial/Territorial Chapters are working hard – in consultation with federal, provincial, territorial and local public health authorities as well as National and Provincial/Territorial Sport Organizations – to develop a safe return to sport, with the health of athletes, volunteers, staff and communities the top priority.

With the COVID-19 situation and response different across the country, all 12 Provincial/Territorial Chapters' return to sport will look different, as each plan is based on the best information available within that province or territory at any specific time.

How will you keep athletes, volunteers and staff safe at these alternative competitions?

As SOC and its Provincial/Territorial Chapters explore and develop alternative competition plans, we will respect and adhere to all local public health authorities' guidelines and recommendations.

Where will these alternative competitions take place?

SOC is currently investigating alternative competition models. Locations are yet to be determined.

When will these alternative competitions take place?

SOC is currently investigating alternative competition models, aiming for them to take place in Spring/Summer 2022, if possible.

When will you know more about the alternative competitions?

Please check back in Spring 2021.

If hosting National Games is not safe, how can you host alternative competitions?

High profile sporting events such as the Olympics, Paralympics, or World Cups are considered "mass gatherings." In general, an event counts as a "mass gathering" if the number of people it brings together is large and could strain the resources of the health system where it takes place.

Dependent on location and size, sporting events like Special Olympics Regional, Provincial/Territorial and National Games can also meet public health authority definitions of a "mass gathering."

Our aim is to explore alternative competition formats that would be smaller and focus on the sport competition only, avoiding any "extra" events that bring large groups together. For example, Opening or Closing Ceremonies.

If the cost of a National Games is too much, how much will alternative competitions cost?

As alternative competitions are still being explored, the cost is unknown. However, a key criteria in the evaluation of alternative competitions is the financial, staff and volunteer impact to Chapters and SOC. Ensuring fiscal and human resources are used responsibly is at the forefront in the decision making process. We are very hopeful that we will be able to create an efficient and effective competition model.

How can SOC send a team to the World Winter Games 2022, but cancel National Games the same year?

The Special Olympics Team Canada selection process was completed following the Special Olympics Canada Winter Games Thunder Bay 2020 – before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. These athletes have already put in the work and qualified for SO Team Canada. 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 SOC's National Team Program (NTP) and the participation of SO 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.

When will the SO Special Olympics Team Canada 2022 team roster be announced?

November 2020.

How will SO Team Canada 2022 train for the World Games in Russia?

SOC and its 12 Provincial/Territorial Chapters are in discussions as to how this training can move forward safely, within current health and safety guidelines across the country. We are investigating virtual and small group opportunities to ensure that Special Olympics Team Canada is well prepared to compete on the world stage. These plans, of course, will depend on the National and Provincial/Territorial health guidelines and return to play protocols in each Province/Territory.

Will Canada participate at the Special Olympics World Games Berlin 2023?

SOC intends to continue supporting its National Team Program, with adaptations for new COVID-19 realities. Maintaining a pathway to Special Olympics World Games remains a goal – as long as public health guidelines and financial resources across the country permit SOC and the chapters to implement a revised quality competition format that provides a pathway for athletes to qualify and advance through the various levels of competition.

SOC is currently investigating alternative competition options that would provide athletes the opportunity to qualify from Regionals to Provincials/Territorials to Nationals and to SO Team Canada and the Special Olympics World Games Berlin 2023.

How will Special Olympics athletes qualify for the 2023 World Games without Medicine Hat 2022?

SOC is currently working with its 12 Provincial/Territorial Chapters to determine the best plan to move forward with alternative competitions ensuring SOC and each chapter can follow public health guidelines and have the financial resources to implement some form of competition.

What if there is a second wave of COVID-19?

We will continue to monitor COVID-19 health and safety protocols related to grassroots program delivery, large gatherings and travel. If, for any reason, SOC or any of the chapters determine that the safety of our athletes, volunteers and staff is at risk by attending programs or any form of competition, those programs and competitions will be further suspended until safe to resume. Safety comes first!