

WRITTEN SUBMISSION FOR  
**Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage**

**Study of the arts, culture, heritage, and sport sector's recovery from the impact  
of COVID-19**

**By Special Olympics Canada**

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## Executive Summary

The impact and isolation caused by COVID-19 has been exceptionally difficult for our community. Program delivery has been suspended in most areas of the country, competitions put on pause, and as a result, participation rates of both athletes and volunteers have been significantly reduced.

**Vision:** Our vision is that sport will open hearts and minds towards people with intellectual disabilities and create inclusive communities all across Canada.

**Mission:** Special Olympics Canada is dedicated to enriching the lives of Canadians with an intellectual disability through sport.

The impact and benefits of sport are multi-dimensional. In a 2021 national survey Special Olympics Canada asked Canadians what they believed the key benefits of the Special Olympics movement were for individuals with intellectual disabilities and over 60% responded; gaining confidence, having a sense of belonging and becoming more independent through access to local sport programs. Special Olympics develops healthier athletes with life-long physical fitness habits and instills confidence, self-esteem and other life skills. These attributes extend far beyond the field of play and establish lasting positive impacts for the individual, their families and their communities. Special Olympics contributes to social change by transforming attitudes and creating a more inclusive society that combats negative stereotypes and misperceptions. Special Olympics builds communities by bringing people together and promoting volunteerism and civic engagement. As we aim to recover from the impact of COVID-19, we are committed to both the quality and the growth of sport programs and competitions that contribute to personal development and result in building stronger, more inclusive Canadian communities. **Our number one priority is to recover, rebuild and reignite our movement.**

## Special Olympics Canada

As a national multi-sport organization, Special Olympics Canada provides year-round community sport, training and competition opportunities to over **49,626 athletes (pre-COVID)** of all ages and abilities. The organization is supported by a network of more than **21,932 volunteers (pre-COVID)**, including more than **14,153 trained volunteer coaches (pre-COVID)**. With few to no programs offered through COVID, registration is significantly down – our priority is to rebuild.

Special Olympics Canada's programs reach athletes where they live. Each day of the week, from coast to coast to coast, in communities large and small, Special Olympics programs provide athletes with an intellectual disability the opportunity to experience the transformative power and joy of sport.

Incorporated in 1969, Special Olympics Canada enjoys a rich history within Canada and is viewed as a leader within the broader global movement. Working within a collaborative, federated governance model, we are currently in a two-year Pan-Canadian Strategic Plan that is short term, actionable and aspires for Special Olympics in Canada to come through the pandemic in a position of strength over the coming year and beyond. We have a diversified revenue strategy that includes corporate, individual, foundation and both federal and provincial/territorial government funding.

Prior to COVID-19, each of our twelve provincial / territorial chapters, were on a growth trajectory seeing more athletes experiencing the transformative power and joy of sport. Now, more than ever, the

potential and the need to get athletes back on the playing field and providing more opportunities for more people is critical. Special Olympics is the largest organization in Canada dedicated to providing quality sport programs and competitions for people with intellectual disabilities. Our community-based programs reach athletes ages 2 to as high as mid-80's. Considering the low economic status of the vast majority of people with intellectual disabilities, we are proud to offer programs at no to little cost – no person is denied access to our programs because they can't afford it. From early childhood physical literacy to sport participation at a recreational level to pursuit of a competitive pathway that can lead to representing Canada on the world stage, Special Olympics is the only organization that provides grassroots programming and multi-level competitive opportunities for athletes with an intellectual disability, and we do so in 18 official summer and winter sports. **Special Olympics Canada is the sole organization providing a comprehensive playground to podium sport experience for Canadians with an intellectual disability.**

## **Impacts of COVID-19**

Due to COVID-19, the important work of providing individuals with intellectual disabilities opportunities to change their lives through sport is heightened, and Special Olympics Canada strives to get back to pre-COVID participation rates, delivering programs and competitions, while continuing to grow and expand its reach. **We have identified the following eight significant impacts as a result of COVID-19:**

### **Number of Registered Athletes**

Prior to COVID-19 Special Olympics Canada was reaching 49,626 athletes. With in-person programs suspended or offered with limited capacity in varying degrees across the country, total athlete registration across all twelve provincial/territorial chapters has significantly decreased:

- 2019: 49,626
- 2020: 41,262
- 2021: 25,109

As we look to rebuild post-pandemic, our primary aim is to get athletes back to the playing field! While we need to get athletes back to programs when safe to do so, there is so much potential for growth and so many more individuals that could, and should, benefit from increased physical activity and the numerous benefits that come from involvement in sport.

### **Number of Registered Volunteers**

Volunteerism and civic engagement are part of the Canadian fabric and a source for Canadian pride. Prior to COVID-19 Special Olympics Canada was fortunate to have over 14,513 trained volunteer coaches and 21,932 total volunteers, who are the driving force behind each and every program and competition that takes place across Canada. As with athletes, the total number of registered volunteers across all chapters has significantly decreased:

- 2019: 21,932
- 2020: 17,736
- 2021: 13,481

As the organization strives to recover from COVID-19 and include more athletes, it is imperative that equal emphasis be placed on recruiting more volunteers. At present, Special Olympics Canada is proud

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to have a 3:1 athlete to coach ratio. An increase in the number of athletes would put an increased demand on the current volunteers who already contribute to their capacity. More volunteers will be required to maintain this standard, and they will have to be trained to fulfill their various roles in order to best serve our athletes.

### **Grassroots Program Delivery**

Before COVID-19 suspended sport programs and competitions, Special Olympics Canada was delivering over 6000 sport programs in over 340 communities to athletes who were often choosing to participate in more than one sport. A 2021 survey revealed that 77% of Canadians feel that those with intellectual disabilities have been more impacted by the pandemic. Now more than ever, the re-engagement of athletes and volunteers coupled with our on-going efforts to reach more people, especially in remote northern communities, requires sustained investment. As activities start to get back-up and running, one area of concern is hesitancy of athletes and their families and of volunteers to return to activity because they fear COVID and question safety measures. Building trust in safety protocols and practices will be essential. A second and significant impact to program delivery will be access to facilities. Many Special Olympics programs take place in schools and community or private recreation facilities. While this varies across the country, many schools are not allowing access to external users and protocols in community and private sport venues are allowing access with reduced participant numbers. This results in fewer athletes being able to access programs, limited rental times available, increased rental and equipment costs – all factors that will impede getting programs back up and running and starting new programs. These local sport training programs are the heart of Special Olympics, whether in small rural communities or large urban centres, whether on a playing field, in a pool, or at a local ice arena; it is here that athletes develop sport skills and find a place, no matter their ability level, where they can succeed.

### **Competition Opportunities**

Whether at a community, regional or provincial/territorial level, quality competition is a key component of the overall sport experience for athletes. During COVID-19 all competitions were put on pause. As athletes return to programs post-COVID and focus on training in one or more of Special Olympics Canada's 18 official sports, communities and chapters will have to 'build back' their competition opportunities ensuring sport venues are available and working through new COVID-19 related protocols that may become our 'new normal'. Chapters will need to devote more human and fiscal resources to creating and implementing competitive opportunities that reflect and complement the athletes' training.

### **National Games**

As a result of COVID-19 all twelve chapters had to cancel Provincial/Territorial Games, and Special Olympics Canada cancelled its 2022 National Summer Games. With no or limited training programs and the pathway from local, provincial/territorial to national qualifying competitions not possible, we made the decision to prioritize financial and human resources on getting grassroots programs up and running versus hosting games. As a country we take great pride in our ability to provide athletes with valuable competitive opportunities, so starting in 2024, we aim to continue to host National Games every two years, alternating between summer (10 sports) and winter (8 sports), and including athletes from all twelve provincial/territorial chapters and all ability levels in pursuit of qualifying for advancement to

World Games. It is important to note, that in addition to providing competitive opportunities for our athletes, our games also serve to benefit and build capacity in the host community. With an overall budget of \$2 million, a STEAM assessment conducted by Sport Tourism Canada determined that the 2018 National Games had an economic impact of \$8.7 million to the host City of Antigonish, \$10.7M to the Province of Nova Scotia and \$12.6M for Canada as a whole. Not only are the games impacting our athletes, but they make a big financial impact and build capacity in the communities in which they are held.

### **Technology Systems**

Through COVID-19 we have all become more aware of how technology can bring us together. The pandemic has highlighted where we have gaps in technology and now more than ever, the need to create and deliver platforms that are national in scope and can digitize our movement is very important. Digital technology that will connect and streamline on-line registration, communications, grassroots fundraising, financial tracking, and data collection and analysis across the chapters and with people who engage with us and support us is essential. Most funding agreements prioritize program delivery versus infrastructure, yet opportunities to invest in core capabilities, systems and processes will help us maximize economies of scale and work more efficiently and effectively.

### **Mental Health**

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are more vulnerable to the negative mental health consequences of the pandemic, and this is on top of already very high rates of mental health issues and inadequate mental health services in this population in both childhood and adulthood (Lunsky et al., 2018)\*. While chapters have done a good job of offering virtual programs and activities to keep athletes connected and active during the pandemic, the abrupt stop and continuing absence to daily routines, programs and in-person contact with friends has severely impacted mental health. Concern for mental health has put a great strain on athletes and their families. In an athlete survey conducted by Special Olympics Canada in April 2021, when asked what life has been like without in-person programs, one athlete responded, “Very boring, lonely, and I miss the interactions with friends. Also I miss playing my sports.” When asked about what you look forward to the most about returning to programs, another athlete shared, “Back to seeing my friends and coaches and getting back into the sports I love and competing.”

\* <https://rsc-src.ca/en/covid-19-policy-briefing/time-to-be-counted-covid-19-and-intellectual-and-developmental-disabilities>

### **Financial Impact**

The financial impact of COVID-19 has been significant and will be a long-term recovery. While corporate partners, individual donors and government funding has thankfully remained stable, fundraising events and activities, in particular at the local community level, have been negatively impacted. Pre-COVID, in our 2019-2020 fiscal, Pan-Canadian revenue was \$40M, in 2020-2021 we had a 30% decrease in revenue and are forecasting the same for our 2021-2022 fiscal year. Special Olympics Canada was fortunate to receive funding through the Sport Canada Recovery Fund in 2021 and many chapters have benefited from federal supports specific to employee salaries. That said, Special Olympics Canada has submitted a federal funding request to the Standing Committee on Finance to maintain current incremental funding that sunsets as of March 31, 2022. We are also looking into submitting an

application for funding through the recently launched 2022-2023 Community Sport for All initiative via Sport Canada. It should be noted, that while there have been financial savings due to lack of program costs, initial return to sport in some areas of the country, reveals that costs going forward will be higher and pre-COVID program budgets will not go as far in a post-COVID economy.

#### Looking to the Future

The past two years have been a challenge for Special Olympics Canada, its provincial/territorial chapters, athletes and families, volunteers and communities. Despite these challenges, we have been strategic and remained focused on Pan-Canadian priorities. **We are proud of what we have accomplished, and our aim for the future is to recover, rebuild and re-ignite our movement. We are committed to the growth and on-going delivery of high impact, cost effective, community-based programs for our athletes.**

We want to ensure that Canada remains an innovator in both its vision and actions toward a 'sport for all' Canadian sport system. **We are extremely grateful for the Government's ongoing support in helping Special Olympics Canada be a leader in delivering sport opportunities that enrich the lives of Canadians with intellectual disabilities and in so doing, creating more inclusive Canadian communities.**