



Athlete Leadership University

Handbook

2026

Table of Contents



About Special Olympics	3
Athlete Leadership Values	4
Glossary	5-6
2026-2027 Calendar	7
Code of Conduct	8
Athlete Leadership Overview	9
Basic Concepts	10-12
Athlete Leadership University	13
Athlete Leadership Course Guide	14
Athlete Leadership Roles	15-18
Role of a Mentor	19-20
Common Questions	21
Meet the Staff	22-23
Message from our Leaders	24-25

*"Let me win, but if I cannot win,
let me be brave in the attempt."*

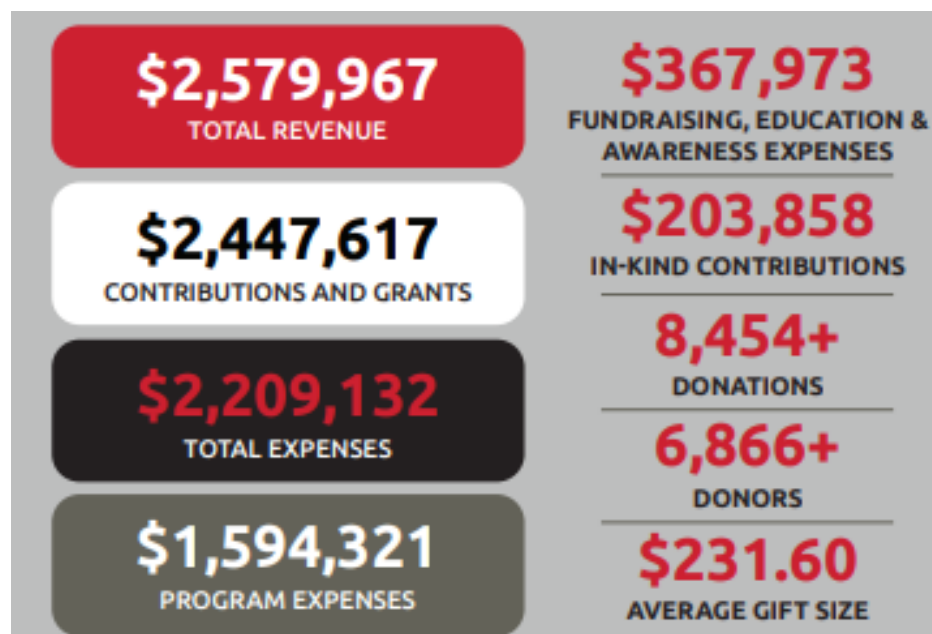
About Us



The mission of Special Olympics Rhode Island 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 Rhode Island is authorized and accredited by Special Olympics, Inc. for the benefit of persons with intellectual disabilities.

Our Rhode Island Impact



OFFICIAL SPORTS

ALPINE SKIING
ATHLETICS
BASKETBALL
3X3 BASKETBALL
CROSS COUNTRY SKIING
CYCLING
FLOORBALL
GOLF
MATH
PICKLEBALL
POWERLIFTING
SNOWBOARDING
SNOWSHOEING
SOCCER
SWIM
TEN PIN BOWLING
TENNIS
UNIFIED BASKETBALL
UNIFIED BOCCIE
UNIFIED CORNHOLE
UNIFIED CROQUET
UNIFIED CROSS COUNTRY
UNIFIED FLAG FOOTBALL
UNIFIED GOLF
UNIFIED SOCCER
UNIFIED SOFTBALL
UNIFIED TEN PIN BOWLING
UNIFIED TENNIS
UNIFIED TOPGOLF
UNIFIED VOLLEYBALL

Values



- Respect athletes as equal partners in your Special Olympics experience
- The Special Olympics Movement is led by athletes
- Dedication and excellence in everything we do
- Honesty and integrity in all interactions
- Value athlete opinions and preferences



Glossary of Terms

Acronyms (Abbreviations) & Definitions



ALC – Athlete Leadership Council
ALU – Athlete Leadership University
BOD – Board of Directors
HA – Healthy Athletes
LETR – Law Enforcement Torch Run
LP- Local Program
LPD – Local Program Director
SO – Special Olympics

SO College – Special Olympics College (
SOI – Special Olympics Incorporated
SONA – Special Olympics North
America
SORI – Special Olympics Rhode Island
UCS – Unified Champion Schools
UP – Unified Partner
YA – Young Athletes
UL – Unified Leadership

Athlete: A person who is at least 8 years old and identified by an agency, or professional, as having an Intellectual Disability (ID). They compete at least once in a Special Olympics game or competition at any level during the calendar year, either with their school or with a community team.

Athlete Application: Required for participation as a Special Olympics Rhode Island athlete. An online application where athletes provide required information and necessary forms and consent in order to participate in SORI programming. Forms are required every three (3) years.

Athlete Leadership Council (ALC): A committee of athletes who facilitate discussion and provide input and feedback about Special Olympics Rhode Island programming and operations. Athlete Leadership Council (ALC) feels it is important to get more voices heard, create more leadership opportunities for athletes in all regions, and continue to create more meaningful roles for athletes across Rhode Island.

Board of Directors (BOD): The Board of Directors is the governing body for Special Olympics Rhode Island. Board members set policy, and help SORI work towards the mission.

Class A Volunteer: Any person who volunteers for a Special Olympics Local Program as a coach, chaperone, driver, Unified Sports® partner, or otherwise in a manner that results in regular close contact with Special Olympics athletes. Class A Volunteers also include those who may assume administrative or financial duties such as Committee Members, Event Directors, or Board Members.

Coach: A volunteer charged with training athletes in a specific sport.

Glossary of Terms

Acronyms (Abbreviations) & Definitions



Healthy Athletes® (HA): The Healthy Athletes® program provides health services and education to Special Olympics athletes and changing the way health systems interact with people with intellectual disabilities.

Law Enforcement Torch Run (LETR): The Law Enforcement Torch Run engages law enforcement worldwide championing acceptance and inclusion for people with intellectual disabilities, starting first with their own communities. Rhode Island is the only state to recognize Police, Fire, Corrections and justice as part of the LETR.

Local Program (LP): A local program is a group of volunteers, coaches and families who coordinate training and competition for multiple age groups and/or sports throughout the calendar year for athletes and Unified Partners.

Local Program Director (LPD): A Local Program Director the leader of the team. They oversee Athletes, Coaches, Unified Partners and Volunteers. They are managing all aspects of the team.

Special Olympics College (SO College): Special Olympics College programs are made up of the three components: Special Olympics Unified Sports®, Inclusive Leadership, and Whole Campus Engagement.

Special Olympics Rhode Island (SORI): Provides year-round sports training and competition for more than 20,000 athletes with intellectual disabilities and Unified partners in the state of Rhode Island.

Unified Champion Schools (UCS): Unified Champion Schools create social inclusion in schools by building on Special Olympics' values, principles, practices, and experiences.

Unified Partner (UP): A person without an intellectual disability who trains in a Special Olympics sport and who competes at least once in a Special Olympics Game or competition at any level during the calendar year.

Unified Sports®: An inclusive sports program that combines approximately equal numbers of teammates with and without intellectual disabilities on sports teams for training and competition. Age and ability-matching of athletes and Unified Sports® partners are specifically defined on a sport-by-sport basis.

Young Athletes Program (YA): A sport and play program for children with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities ages 2-7.

2026 - 2027 Calendar

Semester 1 - General Education



CORE MODULES: The Basics (Sept)

Leadership 101: 8/25 & 8/29

Athletes as Facilitators: Part 1- 8/25, Part 2- 8/29

Unified Leadership 102: 9/12 & 9/15

ADVANCED MODULES: Building Communications (Oct)

Understanding Emotions 201: 9/29 & 10/3

Engaging With Others 202: 10/27 & 11/7 *HEADSHOTS

ADVANCED MODULES: Growing Leadership Skills (Nov-Dec)

Leading Discussions 301: 11/10 & 11/14

Managing Time 302: 12/8 & 12/12

Semester 2 - Leadership Tracks

THE MAJORS: (Jan- Mar) * *ONLY HELD ONE TIME*

Health Messenger 401: 1/5 or 1/9

Health Messenger 402: 1/26 or 1/30

Health Messenger 403: 3/2 or 3/6

Athlete Representative 501: 1/5 or 1/9

Athlete Representative 502: 1/26 or 1/30

Athlete Spokesperson 601: 1/12 or 1/16

Athlete Spokesperson 602: 2/2 or 2/6

Other Important Dates:

Capstone Project Basics Class: March 23, 2027, & March 27, 2026

Capstone Project Presentations: May 11, 2027

Graduation: June 12, 2027 (Tentative)

Athlete Code of Conduct



Special Olympics Rhode Island is committed to providing a safe, respectful, and Inclusive environment for everyone involved in our programs. Participation is a privilege, and all athletes and Unified partners are expected to uphold the values of sportsmanship, respect, integrity, and inclusion by following this Code of Conduct.

Sportsmanship

- Show respect to all volunteers, coaches, officials, event coordinators, and others whose hard work and dedication make Special Olympics opportunities possible.
- Conduct myself in a manner that brings honor to myself, my coaches, my team, and Special Olympics Rhode Island.
- Treat all competitors with respect and demonstrate good sportsmanship at all times.
- Respect all facilities, equipment, and property used during Special Olympics activities.
- Use appropriate language and refrain from swearing, insulting, or verbally abusing anyone associated with a Special Olympics event.
- Resolve conflicts peacefully and never engage in physical fighting or aggressive behavior with athletes, Unified partners, coaches, volunteers, officials, spectators, family members, or others participating in or attending a Special Olympics event.

Training & Competition

- Attend practices regularly and commit to training throughout my sport season(s).
- Learn, understand, and follow the rules of my sport, as well as all Special Olympics policies and procedures.
- Listen to my coaches and officials and ask questions when I need clarification.
- Always give my best effort during training, divisioning, and competition.
- Compete honestly and never intentionally underperform during preliminary competitions or qualifying events to gain an unfair competitive advantage.

Responsibility for My Actions

- Follow all applicable laws and all Special Olympics Rhode Island rules and policies.
- Not possess, use, or be under the influence of alcohol, illegal drugs, or unauthorized controlled substances during any Special Olympics activity, including practices, competitions, meetings, travel, or social events.
- Treat others with dignity and respect and never engage in unwanted, inappropriate, or abusive physical, verbal, or sexual behavior.
- Not use performance-enhancing drugs or substances intended to gain an unfair competitive advantage.
- Maintain appropriate boundaries with Special Olympics Rhode Island staff and volunteers and refrain from engaging in romantic or dating relationships with them.
- Avoid violent, threatening, intimidating, or disruptive behavior that could jeopardize the safety or well-being of others or the integrity of the Special Olympics program.
- Use social media responsibly and respectfully.
- Represent myself, my teammates, coaches, volunteers, officials, and Special Olympics Rhode Island in a positive and respectful manner.
- Not post or share content that is bullying, threatening, discriminatory, harassing, or inappropriate.
- Respect the privacy of others by obtaining permission before posting photos or videos of fellow athletes, Unified partners, coaches, volunteers, or staff when appropriate.

I understand that participation in Special Olympics Rhode Island is a privilege. If I do not follow this Code of Conduct, I may face disciplinary action, up to and including suspension or removal from Special Olympics Rhode Island programs. If I serve as an Athlete Leader, I understand that my Athlete Leadership role may be discontinued if I do not uphold this Code of Conduct.

Athlete Leadership Overview



What is Athlete Leadership?

Athlete Leadership allows Special Olympics Rhode Island (SORI) athletes to help shape the future of the Special Olympics movement and ensure all people with intellectual disabilities have the opportunity to participate in sports training and competition that is fun and fair. Athlete Leadership programs train athletes to serve in meaningful leadership roles in addition to sports. SORI currently provides multiple opportunities for athletes to serve as leaders, and we are constantly searching for ways to make our programs more athlete-led.



EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

Utilizing the Unified Leadership approach to develop leaders. Building from sport, Unified Leadership teaches leaders (both those with AND without ID) that we all have a responsibility to develop diverse leaders.

TRAINING

It is important that all non-Special Olympics athletes acknowledge that athletes have a choice in how and where they lead in Special Olympics. This is their program, and staff and volunteers are here to support them. But for them to succeed, they need to be trained in the areas that they choose to pursue.

LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Special Olympics athletes hold the power to change the world through sport; that is the organization's founding principle. Athlete Leadership teaches our athletes to gain the knowledge and confidence to lead programmatic work. This is their organization—we are here to support them.

Guiding Principles



Basic Concepts



- Athlete Leadership starts with an athlete who wants to take on a leadership role
- Athletes have a choice in how and where they lead in Special Olympics
- Athletes have opportunities to practice and improve their leadership skills
- Athletes benefit from the support of a committed mentor
- Athlete Leadership teaches our athletes to gain the knowledge and confidence to lead programmatic work. This is their organization - we are here to support them
- Athletes are in positions of influence and leadership throughout the organization to help determine policy and set direction
- Athletes have the ability to contribute in these roles in a meaningful way
- Athletes are held accountable to all Special Olympics policies and rules



Behaviors of Great Leaders



Model the Way

They set good examples for other people to look up to. They show people how they should treat others and how to work hard.



Inspire the Shared Vision

Leaders believe they can make a difference. They share enthusiasm for the future. Great leaders find a way to inspire others to act.



Enable Others to Act

Great leaders encourage and empower others. They want everyone on the team to contribute. They create an atmosphere of trust and respect for everyone involved.



Encourage the Heart

Great leaders see when others are doing good things and give them credit for their work. They cheer people on, especially when things are difficult.



Challenge the Process

Great leaders are always learning new things and improve the way things are done. They are not afraid to ask questions.

Basic Leadership Skills



COMMUNICATION

It is a leader's responsibility to inspire and motivate the team

DECISION MAKING

Leaders listen to ideas from other people, get input, and make decisions.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Strong and confident leaders realize that change can be a good thing and make things better.



ADAPTABILITY

An important skill for a leader is to adapt and help people to use their skills and talents to help the team.

GOAL ORIENTED

Stay focused on the goal to help guide your team. Create an environment that helps you and your team focus.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Build healthy relationships to have a strong team that works together and trusts one another.

Athlete Leadership University (ALU)



Athlete Leadership University (ALU) is a program of classroom sessions and hands-on activities designed for Special Olympics Rhode Island athletes. Through ALU, athletes build confidence, develop leadership skills, and learn how to create meaningful change in their communities. With guidance from volunteer mentors, athletes complete core leadership courses and then choose a specific major to focus on.



ALU Course Guide



Core Modules

Leadership 101

Unified Leadership

Advanced Leadership Modules

**Understanding
Emotions**

**Engaging
with Others**

**Managing
Time & Tasks**

**Leading
Discussions**

Special Olympics Leadership Tracks

**Athlete
Representative**

**Athlete
Spokesperson**

**Health
Messenger**



Athlete Leadership Roles



After completing core and advanced modules, athletes choose a Leadership Track that matches their interests and goals. Each track prepares them for a specific role within Special Olympics.



ATHLETE REPRESENTATIVE

Set policy, recommend improvements, and introduce new ideas that strengthen local programming



ATHLETE SPOKESPERSON

Promote, educate, and inform others about the mission of Special Olympics



HEALTH MESSENGER

Educators, advocates and role models within their Special Olympics communities

Once you graduate, you can take the next step in your leadership journey by becoming a Facilitator — guiding and inspiring the next generation of Athlete Leaders.



FACILITATOR

Guide groups through new content and challenges, helping future Athlete Leaders build confidence and skills.

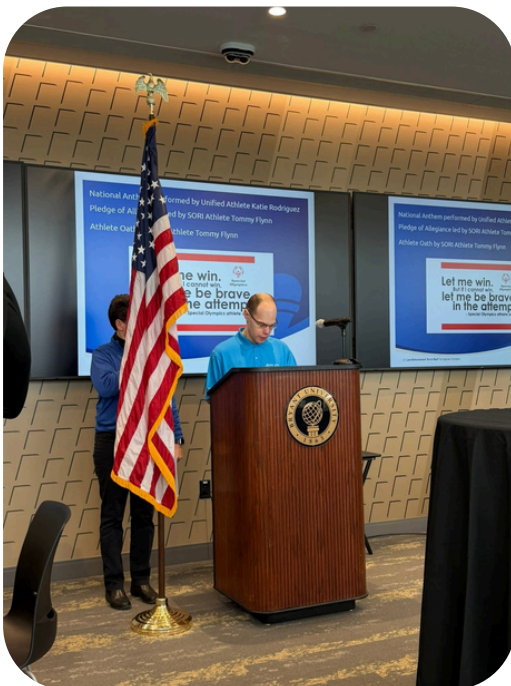
Athlete Representative



Athletes help set policy, make recommendations for continuous improvement, introduce new ideas, and put those ideas into action to improve local Special Olympics programming.

Take the **Advocacy** track if you want to be a...

- Athlete Leadership Council Member
- SORI Committee Member
- Board of Directors member
- Committee Member within your Local Program





Athlete Spokesperson

(Formerly Global Messenger)

Athletes promote, educate, and inform others about the mission, benefits, and direction of Special Olympics. It goes beyond giving speeches and interviews - it is about spreading the word about the Special Olympics movement through different outlets.

Take the **Communications** track if you want to be a...

- Spokesperson
- Event Presenter
- Beyond the Medal Podcast
- Social Influencer



Health Messenger



Athletes are trained as health leaders, advocates, educators, and role models within the Special Olympics community and the community at-large.

Take the **Health & Fitness** track if you want to be a...

- Team Leader for stretches
- Inclusive Health Supporter for fitness professionals
- Healthy Athlete Initiatives



Role of a Mentor



Mentors are the heart of the Athlete Leadership journey. They walk alongside athletes every step of the way — helping them discover their strengths, set meaningful goals, and grow into confident leaders who inspire others.

The role and responsibility of a mentor includes:

A trusted role model

- Establish and maintain a relationship with your athlete that is a partnership.
- Set a good example.
- Create a welcoming environment that is open and honest.
- Value the athlete's opinions and preferences.
- Listen to the athlete.
- Mentor feedback is always welcome, however, as a mentor, their main focus is to encourage the athlete to speak up and express their opinions.

Supports growth

- Know the athlete, understand the athlete's interests.
- Present opportunities to gain skills and knowledge.
- Provide ongoing encouragement.
- Enable the athlete to express themselves.
- Assist with coping strategies.

Defines success

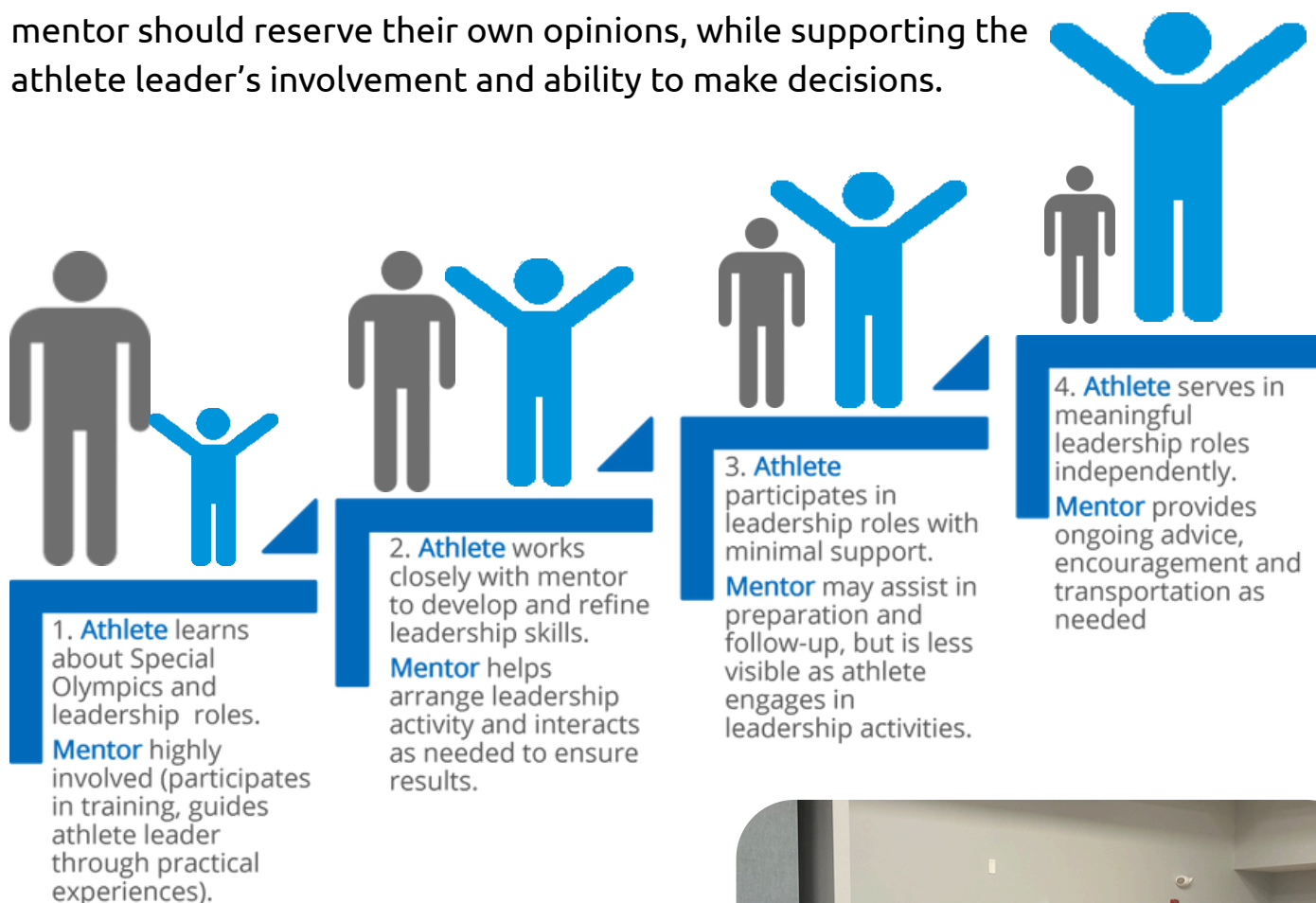
- Understand Special Olympics and the basic principles of Athlete Leadership.
- Support athlete to develop their own goals and vision for success.
- Create a realistic and achievable plan.
- Provide professional constructive feedback.
- Has high, yet reasonable expectations.

Accountability

- Teach athletes how to create a personal action plan.
- Work with your athlete to make their leadership experience as meaningful and educational as possible.
- Make sure you know about training opportunities.
- Represent Special Olympics professionally.

Stages of Mentorship

Athlete leaders benefit from the support of a volunteer **mentor**. Some athletes may need regular or occasional support throughout their journey as a leader. Others may quickly be able to serve in leadership roles independently. At all times, the mentor should reserve their own opinions, while supporting the athlete leader's involvement and ability to make decisions.



COMMON QUESTIONS



WHY SHOULD I BE AN ATHLETE LEADER?

Athletes should use their skills beyond competition through leadership roles. Athlete input is critical to Special Olympics Rhode Island— we are an organization for and LED by athletes. It's important to advocate for ALL athletes.

I DID ATHLETE LEADERSHIP TRAINING BEFORE. WHY AGAIN?

Earlier material is outdated. To stay active, you'll need to complete updated courses, virtual workshops, and an activation project through Athlete Leadership University.

HOW IS ALU DIFFERENT FROM PREVIOUS TRAININGS?

Previously, training was one weekend every other year. Now, ALU offers more frequent training to build skills, discover interests, and take on meaningful roles — including a capstone project.

WHERE WILL TRAINING TAKE PLACE?

All trainings take place at the Special Olympics Rhode Island Headquarters, 370 George Washington Highway, Smithfield RI 02917.

WHY DO I STILL NEED A MENTOR?

Your mentor supports your entire ALU journey — attending classes with you and guiding you through experiences.

HOW DOES ALU WORK?

Complete Intro to Leadership → attend advanced leadership modules → select a major (Spokesperson, Representative, or Health Messenger) → complete a capstone project → graduate.

WHAT DOES IT COST?

ALU is free. Course materials are provided. Athletes cover their own transportation.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER GRADUATION?

Serve in a role matching your major within Special Olympics Rhode Island or your community.

Meet the Staff



Mary-Ellen Powers has been a Special Olympics Rhode Island athlete for more than 27 years and has worked full-time with the organization for 15 years. After a two-year hiatus following a knee injury and surgery, she returned to competition earlier this year beginning with Unified Bowling, and she cannot wait to get back to the sport she loves most-- Swimming!

As the Athlete Leadership Specialist, Mary-Ellen provides education, training, and leadership opportunities for athletes across Rhode Island. She is also involved with Special Olympics at the National level, serving as the New England representative on the U.S. Athlete Leadership Council & an athlete representative on the U.S. Unified Leadership Committee.

One of Mary-Ellen's greatest accomplishments is creating the Athlete Leadership University for Special Olympics Rhode Island, a program that continues to empower athletes to develop leadership skills and make a difference in their communities. In 2023, she presented this program at the Global Athlete Congress in Berlin, Germany.

In 2026, Mary-Ellen was named one of the Top 5 Rhode Island finalists in the Remarkable Women Contest, recognizing her outstanding leadership and contributions to the Special Olympics community.



Mary-Ellen Powers
Athlete Leadership
Specialist

Ed Pacheco is a native Rhode Islander and graduate of the University of Rhode Island. He serves as President and CEO of Special Olympics Rhode Island, where he leads one of the state's most dynamic nonprofit organizations. Under his leadership, the organization provides more than 1,400 year-round sports training and athletic competition opportunities to nearly 4,000 children and adults with intellectual disabilities.

As the organization's fifth President and CEO, Ed has overseen record fundraising, expanded program capacity, and elevated mission awareness through compelling storytelling and community engagement. His passion for creating opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to experience inclusion, achievement, and the joy of sport is nothing short of contagious.

Ed lives in Warwick, Rhode Island, with his wife, Claudia, and their two children, Savannah and Ethan.



Ed Pacheco
President & CEO

Meet the Staff



Special Olympics Rhode Island takes great pride in the power of teamwork. Athlete Leadership University would not be possible without the dedication, collaboration, and support of our entire staff. From planning and preparation to creating meaningful opportunities for our athletes, every team member plays an important role in making this program a success.

It truly takes a team to create an experience where athletes can learn, grow, build confidence, and discover their leadership potential. We are grateful for the many staff members who contribute their time, talents, ideas, and encouragement throughout the process. Their commitment helps ensure that

Athlete Leadership University continues to provide athletes with the tools and opportunities they need to become strong leaders both within Special Olympics and in their communities. Together, we are creating more than a program—we are building a culture of inclusion, leadership, and empowerment. We are proud of what we accomplish when we work together and are thankful to have such a dedicated team supporting our athletes every step of the way.



Stephanie Palladini
Chief Mission
Officer



Rick LaBreche
Director of State
Sponsored
Programs



Kim Whittaker
Volunteer
Services Director

Message from our Leaders



“Since the founding of our movement in 1968, it has been the stories of grit, determination, and perseverance of our athletes, as told most compellingly by our athlete leaders, that have been so crucial to changing attitudes , eliminating stigmas, and breaking down barrieris throughout the world.

I’m confident that with the continued work of our athlete leaders, along with the transformative power of sport, we will achieve a world where the gifts of all persons with intellectual disabilities will be celebrated and included across all societies.

Our work is far from done, but our athlete leaders can be enormously proud of the progress they have made to this point, and I cant’s wait to see all that will be accomplished in the years to come.” *



Tim Shriver

Chairman of the Board
Special Olympics International

Message from our Leaders



"You are the stars and the world is watching you.
By your presence, you send a message to every village,
every city, every nation. A message of hope. A message of
victory."



Eunice Kennedy Shriver
Founder, Special Olympics

