



**Guidance:** Recreational Swimming

**Date:** December 3, 2018

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The Special Olympics U.S. Risk Management & Insurance Task Force (RMITF), with input from US Programs, has created the following recreational swimming guidance for use by U.S. Programs.

While the following guidance contains the minimum requirements all U.S. Programs may consider incorporating into any local guidance or policy, it is recommended that Programs contact local legal counsel to ensure compliance with any applicable State laws relative to the supervision and care of individuals with intellectual disability and/or minors prior to developing/implementing guidance or a policy.

Some U.S. Programs may already have a recreational swimming policy in place. Programs are encouraged to review this guidance and incorporate any elements herein that may further enhance their existing policy or guidance.

### **Objective**

It is always Special Olympics' intent to take steps to ensure the health and safety of all Special Olympics participants. Special Olympics participants should always remember that safety comes first and should take reasonable steps to help minimize the risks for injury or accidental drowning related to recreational swimming.

By way of history, recreational swimming has been a leading cause of death or serious injury in Special Olympics, amongst athletes, dating back to the mid-1970's. Recommendations were made in the early 1980's to Programs (by SOI) to examine this issue and take steps to address recreational swimming. Many U.S. Programs have since created their own recreational swimming guidance or policies over the years.

To ensure a level of consistency, and in the ongoing interest of ensuring the safety of our participants, the RMITF and Special Olympics is providing this guidance.

### **What is Considered Recreational Swimming?**

Recreational swimming is any swimming or swimming-like activities that occurs outside of sanctioned Special Olympics swimming or water-based sports (sailing, kayaking, canoeing, stand up paddle boarding) training or competition.

Examples would include participating in swimming or swimming-like activities (Jacuzzis, hot tubs) at pools, lakes, oceans, rivers, water parks, or other bodies of water during an athlete, team or delegations' "down time" during a Special Olympics training, competition, or activity. This includes but

is not limited to housing and activity locations such as hotels, dormitories, military base housing, private residences, parks, and host town accommodations.

An allowable exception to be entertained by a Program would be for additional warm-up/practice for athletes/Unified partners during a swimming competition. If so, said exceptions must comply with the “Safety Considerations” found in section 5 of the Special Olympics Swimming rules ([http://media.specialolympics.org/resources/sports-essentials/sport-rules/Swimming-Sports-Rules.pdf?\\_ga=2.161567292.1433429583.1510349030-154523132.1509308827](http://media.specialolympics.org/resources/sports-essentials/sport-rules/Swimming-Sports-Rules.pdf?_ga=2.161567292.1433429583.1510349030-154523132.1509308827)).

## Key Elements

All Program guidance or policies should include, at minimum, these three elements.

1. Clearly state the position on the matter the Program maintains on recreational swimming. A couple scenarios include:
  - A. “Special Olympics PROGRAM NAME has determined, for the health and welfare of its participants, to prohibit recreational swimming at any time while under the auspices of Special Olympics. This applies not only to the time at Special Olympics competitions or activities, but also while in transit to/from Special Olympics competitions or activities”
  - B. “Special Olympics PROGRAM NAME has determined, for the health and welfare of its participants, to prohibit recreational swimming at any time during Special Olympics competitions or activities unless specifically authorized and stated otherwise by Special Olympics PROGRAM NAME with respect to a specific event.

Any such exceptions must comply with the “Safety Considerations” found in Section 5 of Special Olympics’ [Swimming Rules](#), with particular regard to the following sub-sections.

### Section 5 – Safety Considerations

All Special Olympics swimming training, recreational sessions and competition events shall be conducted in accordance with the following practices, rules and procedures in order to ensure the safety and well-being of all Special Olympics athletes, coaches and volunteers:

#### **5.1 Basic Rules**

- 5.1.1 There shall be at least one certified lifeguard on duty for every 25 swimmers in the water.
- 5.1.2 The sole function of the lifeguard shall be to guard. If no relief lifeguard is available, the pool must be cleared, even for a short duration, when a lifeguard must leave the pool side.
- 5.1.3 The Event Director will review the Emergency Action Plan prior to each occasion.
- 5.1.5 Athlete medical history forms shall be on site and relevant information shall be discussed with the lifeguard or medical personnel on duty in advance of the aquatic activity.
- 5.1.6 Pool depths must be marked and easily visible.

#### **5.2 Emergency Action Plan**

- 5.2.1 An Emergency Action Plan shall be in place prior to any Special Olympics participants entering the water for any reason, be it training, competition or recreation. The Emergency Action Plan original plan should be written and

reviewed by the staff on hand. The plan shall include the following: The procedure for obtaining emergency medical support if a medical doctor, para-professional or medical support is not present.

- 5.2.2 The posts and areas of responsibilities for each lifeguard.
- 5.2.3 The procedure for obtaining weather information or weather watch information, particularly if the event is outside.
- 5.2.4 The procedure for reporting accidents.
- 5.2.5 The chain of command in case of a serious accident, including who is assigned to talk to the press.
- 5.2.6 The procedure for obtaining weather information particularly for Open Water swimming.
- 5.2.7 Other items as may be required by local Programs.

### **5.3 Supervisory Personnel Requirements**

- 5.3.1 An adequate number of supervisory personnel shall be present at all swimming sessions, events or recreational activities. The type of personnel will vary in accordance with the following requirements:
  - 5.3.1.1 Recreational Programs
    - 5.3.1.1.1 Enough certified lifeguards to provide a minimum ratio of guards to swimmers of 1 per 25.

*Note: Programs should include their chaperoning ratio minimums and ensure these are abided by in recreational swimming situations.*

*Note: Wording adjustments may be made to the above statements (excluding the direct quotes from the Special Olympics Swimming rules), but the intent and spirit of the statements above must be preserved.*

2. Clearly state the timeframe that the guidance or policy is in effect, for example, from the time the participant comes under the supervision or purview of Special Olympics for a practice, competition or activity to the time they are no longer under the care or purview of Special Olympics for said practice, competition or activity.
3. Articulate potential ramifications for violating the guidance or policy. Potential repercussions could include but are not limited to: disqualification from competition; being sent home from training, competition, or activity at their or their legal guardian's expense; temporary suspension; permanent suspension.

### **Additional Guidance**

Programs with guidance or policies addressing a process for, and assumed liabilities of, families/legal guardians "signing out" athletes from events (typically occurs at multi-day/overnight events) should incorporate any/all applicable language into their recreational swimming guidance or policy to clarify if recreational swimming will or will not be allowed during a parent or legal guardian's temporary supervision of an athlete during a Special Olympics event or activity.

### **Communication with Athletes, Unified Partners, Coaches, Volunteers, Parents and Guardians**

U.S. Programs should communicate/make available in writing, to all participants and/or parents/guardians, its guidance or policy on recreational swimming.

**Questions?**

This guidance provides a framework for each U.S. Program to use if developing its own guidance or policy. Please contact SOI Legal with questions: [legal@specialolympics.org](mailto:legal@specialolympics.org)