

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting us to speak about accessibility and sports. Special Olympics is a worldwide organization that provides almost 5 million children and adults with intellectual disabilities in 170 countries with year-round opportunities to train and compete in sports. Our work is supported by more than 400,000 coaches and over 1 million volunteers. Last year, over 108,000 competitions were organized –at local, regional, national and world levels.

Before we continue, we'd like to show you a video about the Special Olympics World Summer Games that were held in Los Angeles in 2015 and involved 7,000 of our athletes.

Video 4 min

I am quite sure that most - if not all - of the athletes in the video were confronted with inaccessibility as their pursued their passion for sports.

So the question is how does Special Olympics encourage accessibility?

We encourage accessibility in several ways. First, we increase sports opportunities for the individual athlete by recruiting volunteer coaches who can provide consistent and quality training. These coaches do not believe that disability should be a barrier to participating in sports. They serve as coach and as a catalyst for social change. Special Olympics works to provide our coaches with access to good coach education

programs that include workshops, adapted physical education courses, university curricula and sports federation certification. With a good coach, an athlete can be fit and healthy, master sports and life skills, build confidence and perform to his or her best ability on and off the field.

This leads us to the second way in which Special Olympics creates accessibility. While the training of an individual athlete often takes place in a segregated environment such as an institution or special school, we believe the sports experience should be expanded into the community. There, as we create awareness about the potential of our athletes and their needs, we can find solutions to the challenges they face (and we'll hear about those challenges and solutions from my colleagues Micheline and Lieve). We have more than 30 sports that a person can choose from and there is something for everyone regardless of ability. As part of fostering an accepting community we offer Unified Sports, an inclusive team concept that has been particularly successful in bringing young people with and without intellectual disabilities together as equals in a school or club setting. We also have a program called Young Athletes that gives children between the ages of 2 and 7 with and without intellectual disabilities access to a fun and inclusive play activity that leads to access to regular Special Olympics

programming when they become older. And, at many of our sports events our athletes have access to health care screenings which enables them to compete at their very best while improving their overall well-being.

In short, Special Olympics is a concept that facilitates accessibility - offering a person a lifetime of opportunities and support to participate in sports while breaking down those tangible and intangible barriers that cause inaccessibility.

However, accessibility and all that it entails cannot be achieved in a vacuum. Accessibility is indeed an inclusive endeavor which calls upon all of us - families, coaches, federations, clubs, schools, universities, health care professionals, authorities, sports celebrities, and the media to work together to ensure that the gates of a club, sports hall or sports field are not closed to persons with intellectual disabilities. We know that as these doors open, an individual with an intellectual disability has access not only to sports but to other aspects of life as well.