

# *Special Olympics Washington Adopts Organization-Wide Healthy Food and Beverage Policy to Reduce Health Disparities*

## THE PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGE

***Individuals with intellectual disabilities are more at risk for chronic disease and other poor health outcomes.***

Based on the Special Olympics Washington 2019 Health Promotion screenings:

*More than*  
**50%**

of athletes are  
***overweight or obese***

**30%**

of athletes have  
***insufficient aerobic activity***

**27%**

of athletes have  
***high blood pressure***

**22%**

of athletes have  
***untreated tooth decay***

**13%**

of athletes have  
***low bone density***

Research shows that individuals with these health conditions have a higher risk for heart disease, diabetes, cavities, poor bone health, and other preventable chronic diseases.



In addition to providing year-round sports training and athletic competition, Special Olympics is focused on reducing health disparities among those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

To encourage sound nutritional choices and improve access to healthy food, Special Olympics Washington – in collaboration with the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) – developed nutritional guidelines, created a toolkit and passed a comprehensive healthy food and beverage policy for events of all sizes.

# LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

*February 2018 – July 2018*

The idea of the Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines for Special Olympics started with Mary Pittaway, global clinical advisor for Health Promotion at Special Olympics International. In February 2018, Mary reached out to Chris Mornick, nutrition coordinator at the DOH for help with increasing access to healthy options at the 2018 Special Olympics USA Games in Seattle. Mary and Chris worked with the University of Washington's graduate nutrition program to develop nutrition information and signage for the dining halls to direct athletes to healthier options.



*“Because of the health promotion efforts of Special Olympics Washington over the years, advocating healthy nutrition guidelines with athletes and athlete leaders was a natural next step. Athlete support was easy and forth coming, as they recognized their sports performance and quality of life depend a great deal on healthy nutrition.”*

– MARY PITTAWAY  
Global Clinical Advisor, Special  
Olympics International

FEB-JUL 2018

Special Olympics and DOH develop nutrition program for Special Olympics USA Games held in Seattle

SEP 2018

Work begins on Special Olympics Washington's Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines

MAR 2019 - JAN 2020

Special Olympics Washington adopts nutrition guidelines statement and feedback gathered on proposed Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines

JUN 2020

DOH and Special Olympics Washington finalize toolkit to supplement Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines

SEP 2020

Special Olympics Washington board of directors votes unanimously to adopt the Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines as policy

The 2018 USA Games, which drew more than 4,000 athletes and coaches from across the nation, highlighted the need for a nutrition policy that would ensure healthy options were available at all Special Olympics events, further supporting the organization's mission to improve the health of athletes. With encouragement from Dave Lenox, then president and CEO of Special Olympics Washington, and the organization's Health Programs team, Mary suggested Chris work locally with Special Olympics Washington to develop and adopt nutrition guidelines that could serve as a model for the broader Special Olympics community.

# LISTENING TO OUR ATHLETES

*September 2018*

Work on what would become the Special Olympics Washington Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines began in September 2018. Nutrition guidelines for a state-wide sports organization like Special Olympics Washington had never been developed before, so Chris had to start from scratch – looking to the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) and the [Food Service Guidelines for Federal Facilities](#) for inspiration.

The first draft of the guidelines included tiered categories for “healthy,” “healthier,” and “healthiest” options that could be pilot tested with athletes, staff and volunteers to help determine the feasibility of implementing nutrition standards. At the same time, Special Olympics Washington sought feedback from its Athlete Input Councils and athletes trained as health advocates and role models (Health Messengers) to get a feel for whether a nutrition policy would be supported in the Special Olympics Washington community.

**TABLE 1** *Summary of responses from Athlete Input Councils to the question “Special Olympics Washington is developing a food policy for our organization to set a healthy standard for the food and beverages we provide. What kind of food should be encouraged at competitions and events? What kind of food should be discouraged?”*

## Food and Beverages to **Encourage**

- ✓ Fresh fruits and vegetables  
(carrots, broccoli, salads, fruit)
- ✓ Hummus and peanut butter
- ✓ Wraps or sandwiches on whole grain bread  
(with vegetables included and condiments on the side)
- ✓ Water bottles at all venues and starts and finish
- ✓ Sugar-free sports drinks and flavored water

## Food and Beverages to **Discourage**

- ✗ Soda and sugary-sweetened beverages
- ✗ Candy, ice cream and donuts
- ✗ White bread and pasta
- ✗ Food that is too cheesy
- ✗ Unhealthy foods
- ✗ Pizza
- ✗ Fast food



The response was overwhelmingly positive, with athletes requesting food and beverage options that were often healthier than the guidelines in even the “healthiest” category.

One Athlete Input Council responded, “Make it a point of pride to offer healthy food to [Special Olympics Washington] athletes,” and “attract healthy food providers to showcase their products and partnerships.”

## CREATING A POLICY

### *March 2019*

In March 2019, Special Olympics Washington adopted a nutrition guidelines statement, but stopped short of an official policy. At the time, the organization thought a statement would be more appropriate given the tiered nature of the guidelines, and that it would make following the guidelines more approachable and realistic.

"It seems most people were more comfortable starting conversations with venues and donors when this was framed as a guideline instead of a policy," said Della Norton, Director of Health Programs for Special Olympics Washington.

### *January 2020*

In January 2020, feedback on the proposed guidelines was gathered from the Special Olympics Washington staff and it quickly became clear that additional tools and resources would be needed. Chris and Della reached out across all levels of Special Olympics Washington to understand the impact on the organization of implementing these guidelines. They worked closely with the organization's procurement manager to understand how Special Olympics Washington works with vendors and solicits donations. They also conducted additional outreach to athletes, Health Messengers, coaches and families.



### *June 2020*

Ongoing collaboration through frequent, bi-weekly meetings between Special Olympics Washington and the DOH contributed greatly to the success of this project. As a result, by June 2020 Chris and Della had developed a 28-page toolkit to support the implementation of the guidelines, complete with tip sheets, templates, checklists and general guidance for vendors, coaches, staff, caterers and volunteers. They also updated the guidelines to a single set of standards instead of tiered standards, making the guidelines easier to follow.

"Working closely with my colleagues and our volunteers helped ensure that the toolkit directly addressed the challenges that kept people from following the guidelines," added Della.

For the nutrition guidelines to have a lasting and sustained effect, making them a formal policy and integrating the guidelines into the organization's quality standards for events and competitions would be critical.

## CREATING A POLICY (CONT'D.)

### September 2020

In September 2020, the Special Olympics Washington board of directors voted unanimously to adopt the Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines as policy. While the process from the conception of the guidelines to their adoption by the organization was long, the time without events during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed for more resource development and a window to implement a policy.

*"I'm excited to see how our athletes, coaches and families react to the positive changes in the food we serve at events. Working with Chris and the DOH has allowed Special Olympics Washington to develop a tailored and achievable set of guidelines and resources that will set us up for success and health for years to come."*

– DELLA NORTON  
Special Olympics Washington

Through Special Olympics Washington's many events, the Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines have the potential to impact more than 28,000 people in Washington each year. They have also led to new opportunities for funding. In 2019, one of the organization's long-time partners provided financial support for two of Special Olympics Washington's largest state games, enabling the organization to offer healthier food to athletes and attendees.



*"The hope is that people will adopt the principles, not just during Special Olympics Washington activities and events, but at home and in their communities too. We're also actively working with Special Olympics International, the CDC, and other state Special Olympics programs to help them understand the importance of the Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines and adopt a similar policy for their organizations."*

– CHRIS MORNICK  
Nutrition Coordinator, Washington  
State Department of Health

## CREATING A POLICY (CONT'D.)

For now, the COVID-19 pandemic has put a pause on in-person training and competitions. Once they resume, Special Olympics Washington is looking forward to using the Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines to ensure healthy options are available at events. In the meantime, Special Olympics Washington will continue to train coaches, key volunteers, staff and vendors on how to best use the toolkit, and the entire organization will work together to ensure sufficient funding to support healthier food options.

As Special Olympics continues to put athlete health at the forefront, the collaboration between Special Olympics Washington and the Washington State Department of Health will be **transformational** for years to come and has the potential to **positively impact athletes across the nation**.



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To learn more about Special Olympics Washington's Healthy Food and Beverage Guidelines and how you can apply them to your organization or Special Olympics program, contact:

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