

Including Swimmers With a Disability: A Guide for Local Swimming Committees

Swimmers with a disability participate in USA Swimming programs for the same reasons as “able-bodied” swimmers – they want to have fun, they enjoy swimming, they want to be with friends and make new friends, they want to “get in shape” and stay healthy, they want to improve their skills and performances, and they enjoy competition. Swimmers with a disability are attracted to USA Swimming programs because of the quality of coaching and competition, and they are participating in greater numbers every year.

This brochure was written to help LSC’s respond to the challenge of including swimmers with a disability. Although each LSC has the flexibility to tailor policies, procedures, and programs to meet the unique needs of its own athletes, coaches, and volunteers, there are some areas of commonality which each LSC should strive to address when formulating inclusion policies and programs.

Inclusion in Meets

According to Article 202.2.13 in the USA Swimming rule book, LSCs may develop special administrative standards and conditions that encourage athletes with disabilities to participate in their meets. The following concerns are commonly addressed in LSC policies.

- **Meet information.** Many LSCs require meet hosts to include a sentence or paragraph in the meet information that athletes with a disability are welcomed and asked to provide advance notice of necessary accommodations.
- .□ **Eligibility.** USA Swimming rules permit disability accommodations and exceptions for swimmers who have “a permanent physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities.” This definition encompasses swimmers who are deaf; swimmers who are blind; swimmers with cognitive disabilities such as mental retardation, severe learning disabilities, or autism; and swimmers with physical disabilities such as amputations, cerebral palsy, dwarfism, spinal injury, or other mobility impairments.
- **Qualifying Time Standards.** Qualifying time standards are a major obstacle to the inclusion of swimmers with a disability in swim meets. Imagine the performance of some elite able-bodied athletes if asked to swim without using their legs or using only one arm. Extremely talented and well-trained individuals are unable to achieve qualifying time standards when faced with such limitations. Recognizing this dilemma, many LSCs have developed policies that waive the qualifying time standards at regular season meets for swimmers with a disability.

Other LSCs have so many open meets that they see no need to develop special policies for anything other than their championship meets. For championship meets, it is common practice for an LSC to grant the meet director and/or meet referee the authority to include a swimmer with a disability who has not achieved the qualifying time.

□ **Classification.** LSC policies usually do *not* have provisions that recognize disability classifications. Classification is a method of grouping swimmers for competition according to ability/disability characteristics. Classification is used at major disability-specific meets, but is impractical at LSC meets because there are usually too few swimmers with a disability, because LSC officials are typically not prepared to make classification-specific rule exceptions, and because authorized classifiers are usually not available at local meets.

□.□ **Seeding.** An LSC may develop standards for seeding athletes with disabilities into events or it may assign this responsibility to the meet referee at each competition. The goal is to determine a method of seeding that does not have an adverse effect on the meet timeline and that does not place undue focus on the swimmer during the meet. One possibility is to allow the swimmer with a disability to compete at a shorter distance than others in the event, e.g., a 100m distance within a 200m event. Another option would be to have the swimmer with a disability seeded within an event for a younger age group. Keep in mind, however, that most athletes prefer to train and compete with their same-aged peers.

□ **Awards.** An LSC may determine whether special awards should be presented to swimmers with a disability, either as an LSC or meet host option. Remember that recognition is more valued when it is earned and that awards such as ribbons and medals are usually valued more by younger and novice swimmers.

□ **Disability accommodations.** The LSC should encourage meet hosts to make common-sense adjustments to their venues to accommodate the needs of athletes with a disability, such as a visual starting cue for swimmers who are deaf, step stools to help dwarf swimmers reach shower controls and other appliances, and mats at the starting end to facilitate transfers for wheelchair users. In addition, LSC policies should permit swimmers with a disability to have personal assistants on deck as needed. Personal assistants (usually provided by the swimmer) provide disability-specific help to the swimmer such as interpreting for swimmers who are deaf, “tapping” for swimmers who are blind, and helping with transfers for wheelchair users. Personal assistants are not required to be members of USA Swimming; however, they may not coach (unless registered as coach members) and must not interfere with meet operations.

Each LSC should develop a meet inclusion policy that accommodates swimmers with a disability and which is appropriate given the nature of meets conducted within the LSC. Once that policy is in place, it is important that meet directors and referees be educated in the intent and implementation of the policy. In

addition, the policy should be communicated regularly to coaches, swimmers, and parents via meet information packets, newsletters, and swim guides.

Here is a sample LSC policy on the inclusion of swimmers with a disability.

Inclusion of Swimmers with a Disability in Pacific Swimming Meets

□.1. In regular season meets swimmers with a disability need not have achieved the qualifying time standards. The Meet Referee shall have the authority to accommodate the swimmer without substantial negative impact on the meet timeline. Examples of such accommodation are:

. □ Allow the disabled swimmer to compete at a shorter distance than others in the event, e.g., a 50 meter distance within a 100 meter event.

. □ Seed the disabled swimmer by time rather than age, e.g., an 18-year old disabled swimmer could be seeded in the 11-12 age group of the same event.

2. 2. In Championship level meets, disabled swimmers may enter with the permission of the Meet Director and Meet Referee. Accommodations may be made as described in 1 above.

3. 3. Places and awards for disabled swimmers can only be earned in the swimmer's actual event and/or age group. At the discretion of the meet host, special awards may be given to disabled swimmers.

This policy shall apply only to swimmers with disabilities as defined in Section 105 of the USA Swimming Rules & Regulations, i.e., "a permanent physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities."

Athlete Programs and Services

Support swimmers with a disability by insuring that they are eligible to participate in every program conducted by the LSC and by informing them of opportunities for national-level competition and recognition. Here are some examples of effective inclusion.

. □ ***American Records for Swimmers with a Disability.*** Provide proof-of-time for swimmers who better American Records for swimmers with a disability. The records are posted in the adapted swimming section of the USA Swimming web site. Printed meet results and signatures from key meet officials suffice as proof-of-time.

. □ ***USA Swimming Disability Championships.*** Promote participation in the USA Swimming Disability Championships by swimmers, coaches, and officials by listing this meet on the LSC calendar. This meet is part of the family of national-level meets conducted by USA Swimming as described in the national

championship section of the rule book.

- . □ **Travel funds** . Provide travel funds for swimmers with a disability to participate in the USA Swimming Disability Championships. Examples of eligibility criteria include registration in the LSC for a specified time period and/or participation in LSC meets. Most LSCs currently offer some level of support, some equivalent to the support provided to “able-bodied” swimmers who compete at the national championships and some determined on the basis of available funds, travel distance, or other variables.
- . □ **Camps**. Plan for the inclusion of athletes with a disability in LSC camps and other athlete development activities.
- . □ **Recognition**. Recognize the accomplishments of swimmers with a disability through LSC award ceremonies, newsletters, web sites, special awards, and swim guide recognition pages. Provide recognition when an LSC swimmer establishes a new American or World record for swimmers with a disability.
- . □ **Speaker**. Invite a swimmer with a disability to speak at programs, camps, and workshops. Members of the USA Paralympic Team and USA Deaf World Games Team have fascinating stories to tell and can provide perspective and motivation to athletes, parents, coaches, and officials.

Education

Include information about adapted swimming in LSC workshops, swim guides, newsletters, brochures, and policies.

- . □ **Swimmers and parents**. Welcome swimmers with a disability to participate in meets and other LSC athlete development programs. Provide copies of meet inclusion policies to swimmers and parents upon request. Inform swimmers and their parents about the USA Swimming Disability Championships and the availability of LSC travel funds.
- . □ **Clubs**. Encourage clubs to accept swimmers with a disability and to contact the LSC adapted swimming liaison or USA Swimming headquarters for any resource materials or information they might need.
- . □ **Coaches**. Educate coaches about LSC policies related to inclusion in swimming meets. Consider using LSC travel funds to support coach participation at the USA Swimming Disability Championships, both to support athletes from the LSC who are competing, and to help the coach learn more about adapted swimming.
- . □ **Officials** . Discuss meet inclusion policies at clinics so that officials are prepared to implement those policies fairly at LSC meets. Consider using LSC travel funds to support participation by officials at the USA Swimming Disability Championships, with the expectation that they subsequently educate other LSC officials about adapted swimming.
- . □ **Meet directors**. Provide copies of meet inclusion policies to meet directors and require that a summary of the policy be printed in meet information packets.

Adapted Swimming Liaison

Each LSC should have an individual who serves as the adapted swimming liaison. The liaison's responsibilities may include helping to educate members of the swimming community about adapted swimming, promoting participation by swimmers with a disability in LSC meets and at the USA Swimming Disability Championships, facilitating recognition of the accomplishments of swimmers with a disability, and serving as a "disability conscience" at LSC administrative meetings to promote inclusion in LSC policies and programming.

An LSC may combine positions and responsibilities such as outreach and/or club development with that of the adapted liaison to suit local needs. Regardless of how this position is conceptualized, consider making the adapted swimming liaison a member of the LSC Board of Directors and/or House of Delegates. LSCs are also encouraged to fund adapted swimming liaisons to attend the annual USA Swimming convention so that they can participate in meetings and workshops about adapted swimming.

Conclusion

Every LSC has swimmers with a disability. In many cases these swimmers already are included by member clubs and at LSC meets with no need for accommodations. Other swimmers with a disability are just waiting for a little nudge to participate in USA Swimming programs.

- . Welcome swimmers with a disability by giving visibility to the goal of including all swimmers in USA Swimming programs.
- . Educate members of the swimming community about inclusion and appropriate disability accommodations to facilitate a successful experience for swimmers with a disability.
- . Establish policies on meet inclusion to provide guidance to meet directors and officials.

- . Support swimmers with a disability by providing travel funds to national-level meets and by recognizing their accomplishments.

Resources

LSCs that need additional information about adapted swimming or the USA Swimming Disability Championships are encouraged to contact USA Swimming headquarters:

USA Swimming One Olympic Plaza Colorado Springs, CO 80909 (719) 578-4578 www.usa-swimming.org

Other sources of information include:

- . USA Swimming rule book (especially Article 202.2.13 and Article 105).
- . LSCs with policies on inclusion in meets, e.g., Illinois Swimming, Lake Erie Swimming, Louisiana Swimming, Michigan Swimming, Montana Swimming, Pacific Swimming.
- . LSCs with travel fund policies that include swimmers with a disability, e.g., Illinois Swimming, Middle Atlantic Swimming, Oregon Swimming, Pacific Swimming.

Acknowledgements

This brochure was developed by the Adapted Swimming Committee as a service to Local Swimming Committees.

This “Guide for Local Swimming Committees” is part of a series of five brochures on including swimmers with a disability. USA Swimming has also published guidelines for swimmers and parents, coaches, officials, and meet directors and safety directors.

The mission of the Adapted Swimming Committee is the full inclusion of swimmers with a disability in USA Swimming programs.