

## Special Olympics World Games seen as boost to Los Angeles-area economy

By David Montero , LA Daily News

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Special Olympian Debi Anderson and Olympian Rafer Johnson sneak pose with a birthday cake celebrating the 47th anniversary of the Special Olympics World Games at the Los Angeles Convention Center Monday, July 20, 2015. The Special Olympics World Games open at the Los Angeles Memorial Colosseum on Saturday. ( Photo by David Crane/Los Angeles Daily News )

The Special Olympics World Games, kicking off with Saturday's opening ceremonies, is being billed by organizers as an inspirational event designed to highlight individual athletic ability instead of participants' intellectual disabilities.

But [the event](#) drawing 6,500 athletes from 165 nations is also expected to offer another ancillary benefit: a large economic boost for the city.

Officials project about \$128 million in direct spending will filter to restaurants, hotels and other tourist attractions during the nine-day competition.

Patti MacJennett, senior vice president of the Los Angeles Tourism and Convention Board said the Special Olympics World Games are the largest sporting event the area will see this year.

"It delivers a very strong economic benefit to the Los Angeles economy," MacJennett said. "We are prepared to roll out that red carpet."

An economic impact study done by Micronomics — a national economic research and consulting firm — showed the overall economic impact could exceed \$400 million when athlete delegation accommodations, sales tax revenues and production-related spending are added to the total.

The World Games are coming back to the United States after a 16 year absence. Former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who sits on the organizing committee LA2015 and [helped lure the games](#) to the city, said Monday there would be economic impacts brought to the region.

But he said he was focused on the long-term effect the World Games could have on attitudes toward the intellectually disabled.

"My hope is as a result of these games ... we'll lead the way to provide more opportunities for the people who have been great athletes," Villaraigosa said. "That we will be able to see, in the next few weeks, that we can also see them in our workplaces and in our schools. I think that's what this is all about."

Founded 47 years ago by Eunice Shriver Kennedy at the first games in Chicago, the Special Olympics is centered on providing athletes with intellectual disabilities a place to compete in Olympic-style events — including track and field, swimming and kayaking. Some of the intellectual disabilities of the athletes include Down syndrome and autism-related disorders and fragile X syndrome.

Debi Anderson, a Special Olympics athlete and gold medal winner in track, said the message of the World Games will mirror her personal motto: Nothing is impossible.

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“(The athletes) will have the time of their lives,” she said. “One of the best parts of the games will be the friends they make from the other countries and to be ready to show what Special Olympics athletes can do.”

Most of the athletes will arrive Tuesday, and this week will include a series of events for the delegations at about 100 host towns between San Luis Obispo and San Diego. Each city hosts at least one delegation and, for three days, provides the athletes and their contingents with entertainment specific to the community.

With nine venues scattered throughout Southern California, organizers said they are optimistic that the games will draw about 500,000. All of the sporting competitions are free — though parking at the venues will cost \$12 a day and the organizers are aggressively pushing people to use public transportation [through rail lines](#) operated by the county Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Patrick Preusser, executive officer with Metro, said some key routes for events will have expanded services and said the largest event of the World Games — the opening ceremony — will see the Expo Line running until 2 a.m to accommodate passengers.

The opening ceremony is the only event that requires buying a ticket. It’s a production that has been in the planning stages for about eight months, according to Mark Poncher, executive producer for the opening and closing ceremonies.

His production company, Los Angeles-based FiveCurrents, [produced the ceremonies](#) for the Olympics in London in 2012, Sochi in 2014 and the Pan American Games in 2011.

The ceremony will feature first lady Michelle Obama officially declaring the games open, and several musicians, including Stevie Wonder and Avril Lavigne, will perform before an expected crowd of about 50,000. Rehearsals for the opening ceremony begin Tuesday.

He said they will follow Olympic protocols for the raising of the flag, the march of the athletes entering the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum and the lighting of the torch.

When asked if he knew who would light the torch, he deflected demurely.

“No clue,” he said.

It will be a Special Olympics athlete, but the identity — much like in the Olympics — is always a guarded secret.

“We always have surprises,” Poncher said.

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