



**MARCH 20, 2009**

**OFFICIAL STATEMENT FROM SPECIAL OLYMPICS CHAIRMAN  
TIMOTHY SHRIVER**

**REGARDING U.S. PRESIDENT OBAMA'S COMMENT ON  
THE TONIGHT SHOW WITH JAY LENO**

“President Obama called last night and expressed his regret and he apologized. He said that he did not intend to humiliate Special Olympics athletes or people with intellectual disabilities. He was sincere and heartfelt, and said that he is a fan of our movement and is ready to work with our athletes to make the United States a more accepting and welcoming country for all people with special needs.

“Words hurt and words matter. Words can cause pain and result in stereotypes that are unfair and damaging to people with intellectual disabilities. And using “Special Olympics” in a negative or derogatory context can be a humiliating put-down to people with special needs.

“This is a teachable moment for our country. We are asking young people, parents and leaders from all walks of life to engage in conversation and help dispel negative caricatures about people with intellectual disabilities. We believe that it’s only through open conversation and dialogue about how stereotypes can cause pain that we can begin to work together to create communities of acceptance and inclusion for all.

“Special Olympics is not a program, but a worldwide movement operating 30,000 events a year in more than 180 countries. Every one of them is a chance for people of all ages to get involved, to think differently about attitudes and perceptions they may have about people with intellectual disabilities, and to make a difference.

“And so we challenge people to join our “Spread the Word to End the Word” campaign, a youth-led national awareness effort that will launch on March 31, where we are asking people to pledge their respect for people with special needs. We’re asking people to sign our “R-word” pledge, to join in our Unified Sports programs, to volunteer, and to be fans of our athletes and our movement.

“Additionally, we challenge policy leaders at all levels to commit to improving the support and resources for people with intellectual disabilities in areas such as healthcare, education, housing and recreation.

“Finally, we invite the President to take the lead and consider hiring a Special Olympics athlete to work in the White House. In so doing, he could help end misperceptions about the talents and abilities of people with intellectual disabilities, and demonstrate their dignity and value to the world.

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