

By Carolyn Lee

The Imperial Republican

The Chase County area may soon be home to Special Olympics teams. At a meeting Tuesday night area residents expressed interest in forming "unified" teams, which consist of youth with special needs and those without special needs.

Regional Directors Julie Schwasinger and Susan Gieschen of Ogallala presented a program to interested persons. They said Special Olympics is more than sports.

"It benefits athletes and adults, with courage, joy, respect, learning, hope, friends and attitude changes," they said.

Jason Gieschen of Ogallala, a Special Olympian, said he began participating as a freshman in bowling. Now he's playing 10 sports and sang the National Anthem at one event.

"Special Olympics has opened up a whole life for me and my family," he said. "What matters is I'm accepted just for who I am. Special Olympics is more than sports. It's giving us chances, understanding, belonging and making friends. It's changed my life."

Local coordinators Stephanie and Tom Rau are looking for coaches and volunteers to help field teams in such sports as bowling, basketball, swimming, volleyball, power lifting and more.

Coaches must be NSAA certified in at least one sport. Volunteers may be adults, and will help with such things as helping car pool, writing down scores, taking times for swimming and track, and more.

Special Olympians, for competition, may be eight years old "to forever," according to the regional directors. They may have significant learning disorders, cognitive delays, vocational problems or intelligence disabilities.

The Olympians first compete at the local level in a sport, then move on to the regional division, state and national levels.

There are 5,000 athletes and 1,000 coaches nationwide, with about 4,000 volunteers.

Funds are raised for the non-profit organization by local groups. All funds raised remain in the area and used for uniforms, travel expenses, equipment and food.

Stephanie Rau said those interested in the Holyoke, Colo., Benkelman, Grant, Wauneta and Imperial area may contact her for more information at 308-882-4604.

Special Olympics was initiated by Eunice Kennedy Schriver about 42 years ago in her backyard. It's a year-round sports training and athletic competition in Olympic-style sports.