

Waterbury PAL adds Special Olympics to its schedule Program may be a national first, official says

BY MICHAEL PUFFER
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

WATERBURY — Edgar Hilario II was crushed when he failed a tryout for the West Side Middle School's soccer team.

Hilario has cerebral palsy. It affects his vision and coordination. He struggles to speak simple words. When he had played with the East Mountain Athletic Association's soccer league for three years, he wasn't as good as his peers, but they always gave him time on the field.

After Hilario's disappointing miss, his mother, Amy, complained to school officials. They told her about a Special Olympics program organized by the Police Activity League of Waterbury. Now he goes every Sunday, playing with children of similar ability.

"They've been so good," Amy Hilario said. "It has brought out Edgar. He wants to socialize more with the other kids. When he gets home, he tells me the names of other kids, who hit the ball and how much they scored."

On Tuesday, city officials held a press conference to announce the program at PAL's recreation center in the North End.

Police Superintendent Neil O'Leary said he got the idea from Michael Buzzuto, head of a food distribution company headquartered in Cheshire. This summer, O'Leary asked how he could thank the company for its support of PAL. Buzzuto asked him to look into Special Olympics.

Special Olympics of Connecticut President Robert Doherty said his organization struggled to launch a program for young children in Waterbury for years, but only met success after linking with PAL.

PAL has its own gymnasium, buses and van. It has money for uniforms and equipment. And it has relations with the schools that allow it to recruit participants in a hurry.

"That's leverage," Doherty said. "That absolutely means it will get done."

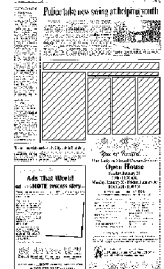
Doherty said he believes PAL is also the first law enforcement

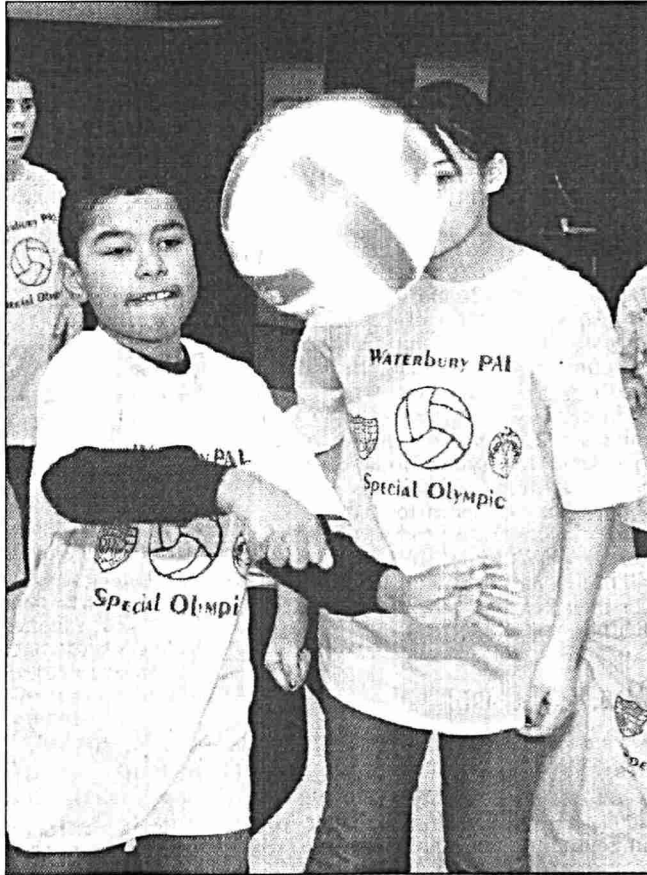
group in the nation to become so engaged. Other departments often raise money for Special Olympics, but no other actually runs a program. He plans to share Waterbury's story at an upcoming conference for thousands of law enforcement professionals.

About a dozen developmentally disabled children participate in Waterbury's program. They're matched by a roughly equal number of "partners," local students who have volunteered as mentors. Amy Hilario's daughter, Amber, 11, is one. "I wanted to help (Edgar) and other people like him," Amber said. "Even if they struggle, they can still try."

A dose of responsibility has also been good for mentors, some of whom struggle with behavioral issues or milder forms of learning disability.

"It makes me feel good, being involved and helping in the community," said mentor Rosemary Pronovost, 19, who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Tourette Syndrome.





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Chase Taylor, 9, serves a volleyball as volunteer Cleo Burke, right, looks on during an exhibition game at the Waterbury Police Activity League building on Division Street in Waterbury on Tuesday. PAL announced a partnership with Special Olympics earlier in the day.

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