

NFL Foundation Certified Athletic Trainer Grant Initiative

I. Background

According to the National Athletic Trainers Association (NATA), only approximately 50% of high school students nationwide have access to a full-time certified athletic trainer (ATC). Access to ATCs is particularly challenging in low-income and rural communities.

Athletic trainers play an important role in keeping young athletes safe. A recent study from the American Academy of Pediatrics showed that the presence of athletic trainers can have a significant positive impact on student-athlete health, resulting in lower injury rates, improved diagnosis and return-to-play decisions for concussion and other injuries, and fewer recurrent injuries.

The NFL Foundation, as part of its commitment to enhancing sports safety, has introduced a new segment of the Club Youth Football Matching Grant program designed to help NFL teams increase access to certified athletic trainers in their communities.

II. Grant Parameters

The NFL Foundation allocated \$500,000 in club matching grants for ATC outreach initiatives in 2014. The application will be available on the GAMS site and clubs will apply as they do for all other NFL Foundation grants.

The grant is structured as a 1:1 match, with the NFL Foundation providing one dollar for every dollar a team commits to the program, up to a limit of \$25,000 in NFL Foundation funding per club. Matching grants in excess of \$25,000 will only be considered in connection with extraordinary, far-reaching ATC outreach initiatives.

Matching funds must be supplied directly by a club, one of its sponsors, or a service provider participating in the program. While cash matches are preferred, in-kind services provided by a third-party will also be considered as matches if these services are direct contributions to the program and the NFL club is directly involved in the initiative.

This grant opportunity is primarily focused on expanding access to athletic trainers at the *high school* level. However, applications will be considered to support ATC outreach programs associated with *youth sports* programs if sufficient need can be demonstrated. All high schools that receive athletic training services through this NFL Foundation grant will be required to enroll their football programs in USA Football's Heads Up Football initiative – ensuring a comprehensive approach to player safety that includes coaching certification and proper teaching techniques.

NFL Foundation funding should be used to expand access to athletic trainers in underserved communities that do not currently have ATC coverage. This program is not designed to subsidize or replace existing coverage.

While this grant program is primarily focused in increasing access to certified athletic trainers, outreach initiatives that put other medical providers (e.g. medical residents, sports fellows, etc.) on the sidelines may be considered in select circumstances.

III. Programmatic Considerations

A. Levels of ATC Coverage

The gold standard for care at the high school level is to have one or more full-time certified athletic trainers that provide preventative, acute, and rehabilitative care to student-athletes on a daily basis. This coverage model allows for maximum on-site coverage and the development of trusting ATC/student relationships.

Given the fiscal challenges facing schools though, the full-time ATC model is not always utilized. Another model is contracting certified athletic trainers to cover games but not practices. As an example, in 2013 the Chicago Bears partnered with their official physical therapy partner, Athletico, and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) on an initiative that provided game-day ATC coverage at select CPS fields. With funding support from the Bears, ATCs from Athletico staffed 146 CPS football games in 2013. In addition to onsite coverage, Athletico offered a complimentary follow-up injury screening appointment at one of its clinics to all CPS football players. Some of the athletes that came to an Athletico clinic for an injury screening went on to receive physical therapy with Athletico, allowing the company to drive new revenues. In addition, Athletico received significant PR and promotional benefits from the program, including signage at each of the stadiums it covered. The Bears, Athletico, and CPS are expanding the program in 2014 to cover all CPS football games.

A third ATC coverage model – in addition to full-time coverage and game-day coverage – is a hybrid approach in which a group of ATCs is responsible for providing coverage to multiple high schools, with each individual ATC covering several schools. These trainers regularly make rounds to their assigned high schools and cover select practices and games at each school. As an example, Houston Methodist has a program through its concussion clinic in which 16 full-time athletic trainers serve more than 300 schools in the greater Houston region. Methodist reaches all of the schools through trainer-to-trainer relationships, or where a school ATC is lacking, through a relationship with other school personnel.

B. Identifying A Partner

NFL clubs interested in launching an athletic trainer outreach initiative will likely want to identify a partner that will be responsible for employing the ATCs and implementing the program. As a first step, a club may want to explore whether one of its healthcare sponsors is the right partner for this initiative. Many hospital systems, outpatient clinics, and physical therapy centers already have ATC outreach efforts that serve in part as community outreach initiatives and in part as efforts to derive new revenue sources by gaining referrals and “downstream” revenue from patients that come in through affiliated ATCs. A club sponsor with an existing ATC outreach program would likely be very interested in joining with its NFL partner to increase the visibility and extend the reach of its program. Other club healthcare sponsors may be interesting in launching a new ATC outreach initiative given sufficient interest from a club.

Another potential partner is a local college or university that has an undergraduate and/or graduate program in athletic training. In fact, one way to lessen the cost of an ATC program is to utilize graduate assistants (GAs) that are pursuing a Master’s degree in athletic training or a related field. Several universities already employ this model as a way to serve their communities. The University of South Carolina, for example, has more than 200 undergraduates and 36 graduate students serving at local high schools. GAs usually receive compensation in the form of tuition reimbursement and cost coverage, and only receive a modest salary or stipend for their work as an ATC. An NFL club could make the opportunity to serve in a local high school very attractive to a GA or other entry-level ATC by providing ways to connect with the NFL team (e.g., volunteer opportunities during training camp, mentorship from NFL ATCs, etc.).

A third possible partner for an NFL club to execute an athletic trainer outreach program is Athletico, the Chicago-based physical therapy company that has partnered with the Bears on their ATC initiative. While Athletico only has a physical presence in select NFL markets (Chicago, Indianapolis, Milwaukee), they are interested in speaking with all NFL clubs who want to launch local ATC outreach efforts. Athletico is willing to provide their services in an “unbranded” way, so as to not encroach on existing club sponsorship agreements. Anyone interested in speaking with Athletico should contact Payten Gerjerts at pgerjerts@athletico.com.

Lastly, NFL clubs could also go directly to local school boards and propose a partnership in which the club would financially support ATC coverage for high schools across the district. In this case, it would be the responsibility of the school district to secure and negotiate employment terms with the ATCs that provide the coverage.

C. Selecting Which High Schools to Cover

As part of an effort to place ATCs in local high schools, a NFL team (and any partners affiliated with the program) would decide where to place the ATCs. To enhance the reach of the program, the selection process could be structured as part of a competitive process in which schools apply and are awarded an ATC based on specified criteria that include need and community support for the position. Such a contest could help justify the selection of some schools and not others.

D. Sustainability

Any program that places an ATC in a high school should be designed with long-term sustainability in mind. For example, one way to structure a program would be as a 3-year initiative – with 100% of the cost of the ATC covered in year 1, 50% covered in year 2, and 25% in year 3. To be eligible for the program, the school or school district would be required to have a plan to ensure sustainability beyond the 3 year timeframe of the grant.

IV. Next Steps

We recommend the following steps for clubs interested in taking advantage of the NFL Foundation’s new ATC matching grant opportunity:

- Speak with your team’s Head ATC and training staff. NFL trainers are the very best in the business and will likely have good contacts and ideas to help advance this initiative in your market. The Professional Football Athletic Trainers Society (PFATS) and the National Athletic Trainers Association (NATA) have both endorsed this initiative and pledged their strong support.
- Contact the league office. NFL staff has done extensive research regarding the athletic training landscape and is prepared to work closely with all interested clubs to bring this program to life. Please contact David Krichavsky (david.krichavsky@nfl.com) or Britney McCoy (britney.mccoy@nfl.com) regarding ATC outreach programs, and Anna Isaacson (anna.isaacson@nfl.com) and Alexia Gallagher (alexia.gallagher@nfl.com) with questions about NFL Foundation grants. For questions concerning the online Grant Application Management System (GAMS), please contact Melissa Schiller (melissa.schiller@nfl.com).
- Explore potential healthcare organizations to partner with on your ATC outreach initiative. As indicated above, club healthcare sponsors are a good starting point for this exploration. It may also make sense to speak with local colleges and/or Chicago-based Athletico.