HEARTLAND DRAGONS HOCKEY ASSOCIATION – HOKEH

Help Our Kids Enjoy Hockey

New & Gently-Used Equipment Program

HELP OUR KIDS PLAY HOCKEY

INTRODUCTION

HOKEH stands for *Help Our Kids Enjoy Hockey*. It is an equipment access and exchange program operated by the Heartland Dragons Hockey Association.

The program was introduced in 2021 to reduce the cost of purchasing and repeatedly replacing equipment as children grow.

Heartland Dragons is a Mississauga-based minor hockey association, part of the Mississauga Hockey League (MHL), serving approximately 700 players.

The association describes its broader approach as promoting hockey through fun, fitness and friendship.

HEARTLAND DRAGONS HOCKEY ASSOCIATION

The letters behind the HOKEH program say exactly what it is all about: **Help Our Kids Enjoy Hockey.**

Hockey is an incredible sport, but for some families, financial and other barriers can make it difficult for their children to participate and enjoy the game.

The Mississauga Hockey League is proud to recognize the **Heartland Dragons and the HOKEH program** for their commitment to helping families overcome these barriers and providing more children with the opportunity to experience hockey at an affordable cost.

Through the HOKEH program, the Heartland Dragons are helping reduce financial barriers for young athletes and their families—not only within their own community, but across the City of Mississauga. Their efforts are helping make hockey more accessible, inclusive and enjoyable for all.

Ted Varty
Executive Director
Mississauga Hockey League

HOKEH – OBJECTIVES

HOKEH IS INTENDED TO:

- Make hockey more affordable for families.
- Keep existing players in hockey by reducing the cost of replacing outgrown equipment.
- Help eligible new-to-hockey players obtain the equipment needed to begin playing.
- Extend the useful life of hockey equipment through collection, inspection, sanitization and redistribution.
- Encourage families to return or donate equipment that no longer fits.

HOKEH is designed for new-to-hockey players from U7 to U18.



WHO THE PROGRAM SERVES

HOKEH primarily services players registered in the Heartland Dragons Hockey Association. The program was initially designed to bridge the gap that exists from participants who have completed the NHL/NHLPA First Shift and transition sessions, to then join recreational hockey the following season.

RETURNING HEARTLAND DRAGONS PLAYERS

- Families can exchange equipment their children have outgrown for suitable new or gently-used equipment. This is particularly valuable for younger players who may need different sizes every season.

NEW-TO-HOCKEY PLAYERS

- New-to-hockey players from U7 to U18 may also qualify for new or gently-used equipment. For children aged four to six, the Heartland Dragons separately offer starter equipment kits to new first-year players joining the Jr. Dragons Initiation Program, while supplies last.

CORE COMPONENTS OF SUCCESS

COST

HOKEH fee is **$25 per player**. This fee provides access to available new or gently-used equipment based on the needs of the player.

The $25 fee should be understood as participation in the equipment program rather than the purchase price of a guaranteed complete equipment set. Equipment is distributed according to:

- The needs of the player
- Proper sizing and fit
- The condition of the equipment the family already owns
- The program's available inventory

The program does not provide personal protective or personal-use items such as:

- Jocks or jills
- Undergarments

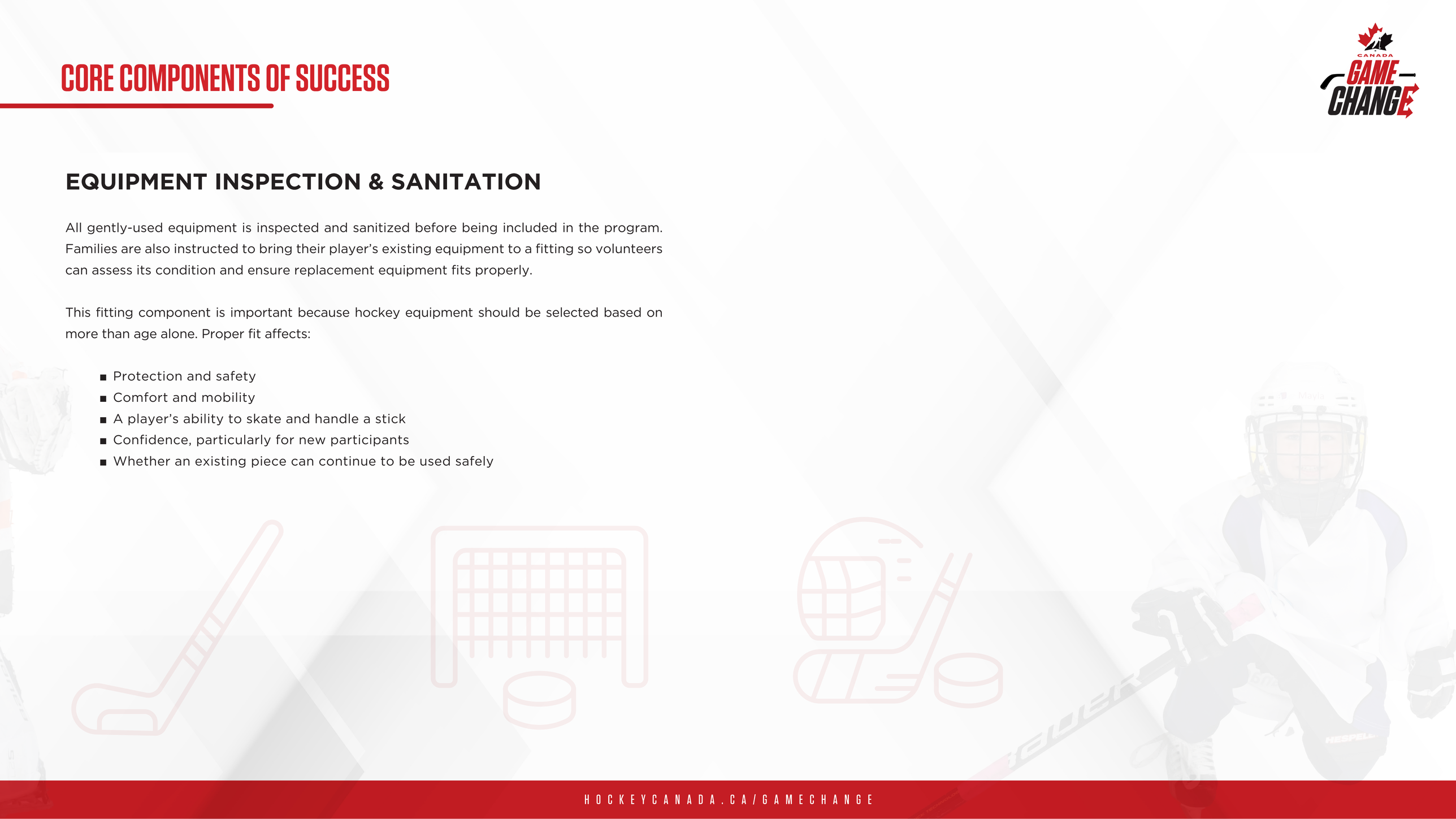
Families should plan to purchase these items separately. Mouthguards and other personal items may also need to be purchased independently.

EQUIPMENT INSPECTION & SANITATION

All gently-used equipment is inspected and sanitized before being included in the program. Families are also instructed to bring their player's existing equipment to a fitting so volunteers can assess its condition and ensure replacement equipment fits properly.

This fitting component is important because hockey equipment should be selected based on more than age alone. Proper fit affects:

- Protection and safety
- Comfort and mobility
- A player's ability to skate and handle a stick
- Confidence, particularly for new participants
- Whether an existing piece can continue to be used safely



HOW THE EXCHANGE MODEL WORKS

- The family registers the player with the Heartland Dragons or confirms the player is eligible for HOKEH.
- The family completes separate HOKEH registration.
- The $25 membership fee is paid, unless a specific exemption applies.
- The family brings their child and any current equipment to a fitting or arranged appointment.
- Program representatives assess equipment needs, sizing and the condition of existing items.
- Available new or gently-used equipment is issued based on those needs.
- The family can donate or exchange equipment that no longer fits.
- Returned equipment is inspected and sanitized before being made available to another participant.



CORE COMPONENTS OF SUCCESS

DONATIONS

The Heartland Dragons accept donations of new and gently-used hockey equipment for HOKEH.

A community donation model can help the association:

- Maintain a range of sizes
- Replace damaged or outdated inventory
- Respond to increased demand from new families
- Reduce waste by keeping usable equipment in circulation
- Create a culture of mutual support among association members



STRENGTHS OF THE HOKEH MODEL

- **It addresses a practical barrier directly.** Rather than providing only financial information or referrals, HOKEH gives families access to the actual equipment needed to participate.
- **It supports retention as well as recruitment.** Many equipment initiatives focus only on first-time players. HOKEH also helps returning players who have outgrown their equipment.
- **It creates a circular equipment system**. Equipment can move from one family to another instead of sitting unused or being discarded.
- **It includes fitting support.** Requiring families to bring existing equipment allows volunteers to focus on actual gaps rather than automatically distributing a complete package.
- **It is integrated into the association.** Because the program is operated by the same organization delivering hockey, equipment support can be connected to registration, initiation programming and ongoing participation.
- **The fee is low and easy to communicate.** A flat $25 fee makes the program understandable and avoids families having to negotiate individual equipment prices.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- The program has demonstrated strong success, based on positive feedback received from parents during one-on-one HOKEH equipment-fitting appointments. This success is also reflected in the continued growth of HOKEH membership since the program began in 2021.

- In 2021, HOKEH had a total of 55 members. By 2025, membership had grown to 121 members, representing an increase of approximately 120%.

- Key benefits observed include:
  - Strong participant retention.
  - Providing a unique program that is not currently offered by other MHL associations.
  - Referrals from other MHL associations, directing families who require equipment support to the Heartland Dragons.
  - Positive written testimonials from parents highlighting how meaningful the program has been and the important role it played in enabling their child to participate in hockey.



An equipment-access program, similar to the HOKEH model, can be implemented by individual minor hockey associations to reduce equipment-related barriers, support new-to-hockey families and help retain players as they grow.

The program should be simple enough to operate with volunteers, while including clear processes for equipment safety, fitting, inventory management and family service.

ESTABLISH A CLEAR PROGRAM PURPOSE

The minor hockey association should define the program as a local service that helps players access properly fitted hockey equipment at an affordable cost.

The program may support:

- New-to-hockey players who do not own equipment
- Returning players who have outgrown their equipment
- Families experiencing financial barriers
- Players transitioning from Try Hockey, First Shift or learn-to-play programs
- Players who need replacement equipment during the season
- Goaltenders who require access to specialized equipment

The program should be positioned as an equipment-access and exchange service rather than solely as financial assistance. This reduces stigma and makes the program welcoming to all families.

SELECT AN OPERATING MODEL THAT FITS YOUR MHA

Each minor hockey association should choose a model based on its registration size, volunteer capacity, storage space and available inventory.

- **Equipment Exchange**
  - Families return usable equipment their child has outgrown and receive appropriately sized replacement equipment.

- **Equipment Loan**
  - The MHA retains ownership of the equipment. Families return it at the end of the season or when it no longer fits.

- **Equipment Grant**
  - Equipment is permanently provided to the player. This may be appropriate for starter kits, donated packages or families for whom returning equipment would be difficult.

- **Hybrid Model**
  - The MHA combines approaches. For example, protective equipment may be loaned, while socks, jerseys and certain personal items are provided permanently.

The program must clearly explain whether equipment is being exchanged, loaned or given to the family.

APPOINT AN MHA EQUIPMENT COORDINATOR

The minor hockey association should designate one person to oversee the program. This may be a board member, volunteer or staff person.

The Equipment Coordinator should be responsible for:

- Managing equipment donations
- Organizing inspections and cleaning
- Maintaining inventory records
- Coordinating fitting appointments
- Training volunteers
- Identifying missing equipment and sizes
- Reporting program results to the MHA board
- Ensuring unsafe equipment is removed from circulation

The coordinator should have at least one trained backup to reduce reliance on a single volunteer.

INTEGRATE EQUIPMENT NEEDS INTO REGISTRATION

Families should be able to request equipment directly through the minor hockey registration process.

Suggested registration questions include:

- Is the player new to hockey?
- Does the player require hockey equipment?
- Which pieces are required?
- Does the family have equipment to exchange or donate?
- What is the player's approximate height, weight and skate size?
- Does the player require a complete kit or selected items?

The MHA can then contact the family to schedule a fitting. This allows the association to understand demand before the season and identify inventory gaps early.



KEEP ACCESS SIMPLE & LOW BARRIER

The process should be easy to understand and should not require families to complete extensive financial-assistance applications.

The minor hockey association may use:

- Open access for all registered players
- Priority access for new-to-hockey families
- A simple self-declaration of need
- A low annual membership fee
- A refundable deposit for loaned equipment
- A fee-waiver option when cost remains a barrier

A modest fee can help cover cleaning, repairs and replacement purchases, but no child should be excluded because the family cannot pay the program fee.

ESTABLISH CLEAR EQUIPMENT ELIGIBILITY

The minor hockey association should publish which items may be distributed.

Common program equipment may include:

- Helmets
- Shoulder pads
- Elbow pads
- Hockey pants
- Gloves
- Shin pads
- Skates
- Hockey bags
- Sticks
- Goaltender equipment

Personal-use items should generally not be redistributed, including:

- Mouthguards
- Undergarments
- Jocks or jills
- Used water bottles
- Base layers

The MHA should clearly tell families which items they will need to purchase separately.

CREATE EQUIPMENT SAFETY & INSPECTION STANDARDS

Every piece of donated or returned equipment should be inspected before being issued.

The minor hockey association should check for:

- Cracks or structural damage
- Missing straps, clips, screws or padding
- Excessive wear
- Mold, contamination or persistent odour
- Evidence of modification
- Damaged skate holders, blades or eyelets
- Required certification labels
- Compatibility between helmets and facial protectors

A simple condition-rating system can be used:

- **Green — Ready for use**
  - The item is clean, safe, functional and ready to be issued.

- **Yellow — Repair or further review**
  - The item may be usable but requires repair, sharpening, replacement hardware or additional inspection.

- **Red — Remove from service**
  - The item is damaged, unsafe, contaminated, altered or missing required certification.
  - Red-tagged equipment should be separated immediately and should never be returned to active inventory.

Helmets should be managed conservatively. When possible, the MHA should prioritize purchasing new helmets through sponsorships, fundraising or program revenue.



STANDARDIZE CLEANING & SANITATION

The minor hockey association should establish a consistent cleaning process based on manufacturer instructions.

The process should include:

- Inspecting the equipment
- Separating unsafe or rejected items
- Cleaning equipment using suitable products
- Allowing equipment to dry completely
- Completing a final inspection
- Recording the item in inventory
- Storing it in a clean, dry and ventilated area

Equipment should never be placed into storage while damp.

The MHA may partner with a local equipment-cleaning company, sporting-goods retailer or skate-sharpening provider if volunteers cannot complete all cleaning and maintenance internally.



REQUIRE PROPER EQUIPMENT FITTING

Families should attend an in-person fitting with their children. Equipment should not be distributed based only on age.

The fitting should assess:

- Helmet security and facial-protector compatibility
- Shoulder pad and elbow pad coverage
- Glove fit and wrist protection
- Hockey pants fit
- Shin pad length
- Skate length, width and overall condition
- Player comfort and movement
- Equipment the family already owns
- Remaining equipment gaps

The family should bring all existing equipment to the appointment so volunteers can determine what can still be used safely.

At the end of the fitting, the family should receive a checklist showing:

- Equipment issued
- Equipment still required
- Return or exchange expectations
- Basic cleaning and drying instructions
- How to report damage
- How to request a replacement size



MAINTAIN A SIMPLE INVENTORY SYSTEM

The program should maintain enough information to know what equipment is available and who has received it.

A basic spreadsheet can track:

- Equipment identification number
- Item category
- Size
- Brand and model
- Condition
- Certification information where applicable
- Date received
- Date inspected
- Date cleaned
- Player assigned
- Date issued
- Expected return date
- Date returned
- Final disposition

Labels, numbered tags, barcodes or QR codes can be used depending on the capacity of the minor hockey association.

The system does not need to be complex. It must simply allow the MHA to identify available equipment, missing sizes and overdue returns.

OPERATE ON A PREDICTABLE ANNUAL SCHEDULE

A consistent operating cycle will make the program easier for volunteers and families.

End of Season
- Collect loaned and outgrown equipment
- Conduct a donation drive
- Ask returning families about future equipment needs

Spring & Early Summer
- Inspect and clean returned equipment
- Update inventory
- Remove unsafe items
- Identify missing sizes and equipment categories

Registration Period
- Allow families to request equipment
- Recruit volunteers
- Purchase high-priority inventory gaps
- Confirm sponsors and donation partners

Pre-Season
- Hold scheduled fitting sessions
- Provide complete kits to new players
- Exchange outgrown equipment for returning players

During the Season
- Offer replacement or exchange appointments
- Support new registrations
- Address equipment that becomes damaged or too small

BUILD LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

The minor hockey association should develop relationships with organizations in its own community.

Potential partners include:

- Local sporting-goods retailers
- Equipment manufacturers
- Municipal recreation departments
- Schools
- Service clubs
- Community foundations
- Junior, university, PWHL or NHL teams
- Local businesses
- Equipment-cleaning companies
- Skate-sharpening providers
- Newcomer and settlement organizations

Partners may contribute:

- New equipment
- Financial support
- Storage space
- Cleaning services
- Skate sharpening
- Replacement parts
- Volunteer support
- Transportation
- Promotion of donation drives

The MHA should prioritize partnerships that provide equipment that is difficult to obtain through donations, such as helmets, youth skates and goaltender equipment.

ORGANIZE REGULAR DONATION DRIVES

Donation drives should take place at predictable times, particularly at the end of the season and before registration.

The minor hockey association should communicate:

- Equipment currently needed
- Sizes that are in short supply
- Items that will not be accepted
- Required condition standards
- Donation drop-off dates and locations
- Whether financial donations are also accepted

The MHA should avoid accepting unlimited quantities of low-demand equipment. Donation requests should be based on actual inventory needs.

PROVIDE A WELCOMING FAMILY EXPERIENCE

The program should feel like a normal minor hockey service.

Recommended program language includes:

- Equipment exchange
- Gear library
- Equipment-access program
- Grow-with-the-player program
- Community equipment bank

Families should not be publicly identified as receiving financial assistance.

Appointments should be welcoming, respectful and private where possible. Volunteers should explain the equipment patiently, particularly to families who are unfamiliar with hockey.

SUPPORT NEW-TO-HOCKEY FAMILIES

New families may require more than equipment distribution.

The minor hockey association should provide simple instructions on:

- What each piece of equipment is called
- Why it is required
- How it should fit
- The order in which equipment is put on
- How to carry and store equipment
- How to dry equipment after use
- When equipment needs to be exchanged
- Which items must be purchased separately

A visual checklist or short demonstration video can be especially helpful.

Information should be available in the languages most commonly used in the community where feasible.

CONNECT THE PROGRAM TO INTRODUCTORY HOCKEY ACTIVITIES

Every local Try Hockey, learn-to-play or newcomer event should include information about the equipment program.

The intended pathway should be:

- Try hockey
- Receive equipment support
- Register with the MHA
- Exchange equipment as the player grows

Families should understand that equipment support continues after the introductory event. This can increase the likelihood that participants move from trial activities into full registration.

CREATE DEFINED VOLUNTEER ROLES

Depending on the size of the minor hockey association, responsibilities may be divided among several volunteers:

- Program coordinator
- Equipment inspector
- Fitting lead
- Inventory lead
- Donation coordinator
- Cleaning and repair volunteers
- Sponsorship lead
- Registration liaison

Smaller MHAs may combine these responsibilities.

Each role should have a short-written description and checklist so the program can continue when volunteers change.



DEVELOP BASIC VOLUNTEER TRAINING

All volunteers involved in inspections and fittings should receive consistent orientation.

Training should cover:

- Program purpose
- Respectful family service
- Equipment inspection
- Certification requirements
- Proper fitting
- Helmet and facial-protector considerations
- Cleaning and storage
- Inventory procedures
- Equipment that must be rejected
- How to report concerns or incidents

More complex equipment, particularly helmets, skates and goaltender equipment, should be assessed by volunteers with appropriate knowledge.



ESTABLISH CLEAR PROGRAM PRIORITIES

The minor hockey association should approve written policies covering:

- Eligibility
- Fees and fee waivers
- Equipment ownership
- Return dates
- Lost or unreturned equipment
- Normal wear and damage
- Inspection standards
- Cleaning requirements
- Helmet distribution
- Donation acceptance
- Equipment recalls
- Privacy
- Storage
- Incident reporting

Families should sign or acknowledge a simple participant agreement explaining their responsibilities.

The MHA should also confirm that the program is consistent with its Member and insurance requirements.

The HOKEH program is made possible through the dedication and contributions of **Joe Indovina**, along with the support of many committed volunteers from **Heartland Dragons Hockey Association.** Their time, effort and ongoing involvement have been instrumental in delivering the program and ensuring families have access to the equipment and support they need to participate in hockey.

QUESTION OR SUPPORT

If you have any questions or require additional support, please don’t hesitate to reach out.

PROVINCIAL OR REGIONAL MEMBER: Contact your Member representative for localized guidance and program assistance.

HOCKEY CANADA: Email **gr@hockeycanada.ca** for general inquiries, resources and support.

We’re here to help make your program a success!