RELAX, RENEW, RECHARGE PROGRAM THROUGH TOURISM TORONTO

In the summer of 2008 Tourism Toronto approached respiteservices.com with a plan to assist families in the GTA with receiving a respite weekend. The idea behind the plan was that in recognition of the toll that taking care of an individual who has special needs can take on a family, Tourism Toronto wanted to provide an opportunity for respite. An opportunity for the family to relax, renew and recharge themselves. As a result, this program that partners Tourism Toronto with respite agencies was developed.

WHAT IS THE PROGRAM?

Tourism Toronto has a catchment area of the City of Toronto, areas of Peel and areas of York region. They are offering a program whereby they approach donors and organizations to provide limo service, hotels, events and meal vouchers to families for a weekend getaway. Families in need of such a respite option as a weekend getaway are identified by different respite agencies or by the family themselves. Those families provide contact information to Lorna Powers at respiteservices.com and in turn a weekend is put together for that family on a specifically booked weekend.

The families can choose from one of three types of weekends. The first is a family weekend where the parent(s) or caregivers and the other siblings in the family can enjoy a weekend in Peel, York or Toronto. This would include a child friendly hotel perhaps with a pool or play area; it would include passes to events that would be of interest to a family such as Hockey Hall of Fame or Science Centre. If the family will be enjoying a weekend in Toronto then limo service will be arranged to the hotel on Friday and home on Sunday. TTC passes will be provided for travel within the weekend. If the family is enjoying a weekend in either Peel or York then they need to have access to their own vehicle and some of the events to be enjoyed may be seasonal events and fairs, Wonderland, etc. Restaurant vouchers will also be available to locations that would have child friendly menus.

The second type of weekend would be a couple’s weekend. This type of weekend might have a more romantic theme – perhaps a hotel with a spa package, dinner out at a quiet restaurant, events such as dancing, etc.

The third type of weekend would be a single parent’s weekend. This would perhaps involve events of a quieter nature, such as a spa, movie tickets, meals out, etc.

The idea is that the family get an opportunity to have a break—therefore the individual with special needs is not included in attending the weekend getaway. This provides the family a break and also provides the individual
a break as they stay with other caregivers or in a residential respite location.

HOW TO REGISTER?

There is a short referral form that is available from Lorna Powers at respiteservices.com. You can either email her at lpowers@respiteservices.com or you can phone her at 416-322-6317 ext 2. Other respite agencies within Toronto, Peel and York have access to the referral form as well. Such agencies as Community Living Toronto, Bloorview Kids Rehab, Safehaven in Toronto and York region, Reena in York region, Peel Crisis Network, Kerry’s Place in Peel, Erinoaks, etc.

Once the blank referral form is received either by the family or by the agency then it should be filled out in its entirety. There is a section regarding who is referring the family, if they are referring themselves then please leave that blank. The family information is crucial as that gives us the contact info for Tourism Toronto to connect with once the weekend has been planned. As well, if the family has an email address Tourism Toronto will use it only to provide the itinerary for the weekend including limo pick up and drop off confirmations. If the family does not have an email address then the family will receive a phone call approximately two weeks before the scheduled weekend.

The form asks about what type of weekend the family would enjoy as well as information about the individuals in the family. The reason the form asks about the individual with special needs is so that a memento of the weekend can be provided to the family for that person. As well if the family is going to be having a family weekend it is necessary to have the gender and ages of the children attending the weekend so that appropriate activities are planned.

Remember that the individual with special needs is not to be included in the weekend as the program is about Respite which is a break for the caregiver.

The referral form asks if the family can provide a credit card number to the hotel when they check in and that is strictly for the purpose of covering costs that might be incurred by the family that are not covered by Tourism Toronto. That would be the cost of pay per view movies or the mini bar snacks. If a family would like to indulge in these items they may do so but need to be aware that they will be charged for those items. As a result the hotels will ask for a credit card number – if the family does not have one to provide then Tourism Toronto will provide their number. If Tourism Toronto provides their credit card information to the hotel then those charges that would be deemed outside of their services will be charged back to the family.
The other issue that has come up during some of the weekends is in regards to tips and alcohol purchases at some of the restaurants. The restaurants who donate to the program may not understand how the program works and so may not realize that even if Tourism Toronto leaves their credit card information it may not register as that is what it is for and they then may ask for payment from the families. Tourism Toronto wants to ensure that all costs are covered and that no embarrassment is caused for any family so they are prepared to reimburse families for such costs after the fact.

The referral form asks for whether or not a family can drive themselves to activities. This is particularly important if activities such as Canada’s Wonderland is one of the venues the family will enjoy or if the family will be enjoying a weekend in York region or Peel. If the family cannot do this then the assumption is that their weekend will be planned in the City of Toronto where the limo service will take them to their hotel but where TTC will be used to get to activities and events.

Any activities or events the family feels they would particularly enjoy can also be registered on the referral form and as best as possible those requests will be honored.

Please note that Tourism Toronto relies on the donations of their members and cannot always provide for families the exact event that they have requested. Families cannot demand that particular services be provided though Tourism Toronto will try their best to meet the requests. As well, Tourism Toronto has a responsibility to all the three regions they cover as an organization so your weekend may be planned for York or Peel instead of Toronto. Specific tourism events happen in those regions on various weekends and that is what will be included in the weekend. You will be informed as best as possible about those events and given an opportunity to request a change in weekends if possible.

Lastly, information on the pick up times and drop off times is necessary as that is how Tourism Toronto knows to book the limo.

If any information is not provided on the referral it takes time to follow up with individual families so it is appreciated if the form is filled out in its entirety before being submitted.

Unforeseen circumstances happen within a family and so if the families scheduled weekend is not able to happen please contact Tourism Toronto or Lorna Powers as soon as possible in order to ensure that either another family can use the weekend or that the donations from hotels, restaurants, etc., can be cancelled in a reasonable time.
What can you expect from a Relax, Renew, Recharge getaway. The program is reliant on donations from the members of Tourism Toronto, unfortunately Tourism Toronto does not have access to every theatre production or restaurant, but will do their best to give a family a good weekend break.

The minimum you can expect:

- 2 nights in a hotel in the GTA – they access all hotels so families will be staying in a variety of hotels within the GTA
- Either a limo pick up from your home to the hotel and back again with TTC passes OR a gift certificate for gas and hotel parking if you drive yourself
- Two evening meals for all guests including tax and tips
- Two breakfasts for all guests
- Vouchers for lunch at Tim Hortons or similar
- Passes to two attractions or events
- A gift for your child in respite

Tourism Toronto uses this program as a way to promote tourism in Toronto, Peel and York region. Feedback from families that could be provided to Tourism Toronto as a way of promoting the program to other donors will be appreciated. After you have enjoyed your weekend if you could forward comments to Lorna Powers at lpowers@respiteservices.com she will forward them on to Tourism Toronto.