

Welcome Policy Program Access - Update

Date: September 2, 2025

To: Economic and Community Development Committee

From: General Manager, Parks & Recreation

Wards: All

SUMMARY

Parks and Recreation is committed to improving the quality of life for Toronto residents through the provision of high-quality recreational spaces, programs and services that are welcoming, affordable, accessible and equitable for all ages and stages at:

- 128 community recreation centres
- 20 enhanced youth spaces
- 41 indoor arenas
- 54 outdoor artificial ice rinks
- 64 indoor pools
- 59 outdoor pools
- 85 wading pools
- 10 supervised swimming beaches

Parks and Recreation offers high quality recreational programs and services to meet the needs of the diverse communities across the city and supports youth development and employment through certification opportunities and employment readiness programs. These include Building Skills Through Recreation and Enhanced Youth Spaces, which lead to thousands of newly employed youth into Parks and Recreation job opportunities across the city every year.

This report outlines how Parks and Recreation Division ensures equitable access to recreational, leisure and leadership opportunities, and specifically responds to recommendation 8 under [EX23.5](#), adopted by City Council on May 20 and 21, 2025, which requested staff to report back on:

- which swim and other programs are not covered by the existing Welcome Policy and options to make them available under the Welcome Policy; and
- whether the lack of access to programs under the Welcome Policy may have had an impact on youth not pursuing a path to lifeguarding and other jobs with City of Toronto and, if so, what measures would need to be taken to encourage youth to pursue swimming accreditation levels.

The Welcome Policy subsidy can be applied to all registered Parks and Recreation programs including but not limited to learn to swim, sports, and certification and leadership courses. Residents who do not qualify for Welcome Policy and/or continue to face financial barriers can access programs and services through other measures, as described in this report.

The Welcome Policy represents one key component under a multi-pronged approach used by Parks and Recreation to reduce financial barriers and increase access to recreation for Toronto residents. Other components include:

- Place-based subsidy at 39 Free Centres across the City of Toronto.
- Low-cost options for primary and introductory recreation programs.
- Universally subsidized free drop-in and leisure programs.

Parks and Recreation delivers a variety of programs in a growing network of recreation facilities that offer drop-in and instructional programs, swimming, camps and after-school care, seniors' activities, youth programs and spaces that foster leadership, life skills, and provide youth employment readiness and hiring opportunities. Over 1.2 million hours of recreation programs are being offered in 2025 including registered and drop-in programming opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Interim General Manager of Parks and Recreation recommends that:

1. Economic and Community Development Committee receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

The 2025 Operating Budget for the Community Recreation service is \$289.9 million gross and \$193.2 million net. This budget includes \$96.7 million in revenues, related to paid centres for registrations, memberships and tickets sales and location permits.

Parks and Recreation currently operates 39 Free Centres with a 2025 net budget of \$38.9 million and approximately \$10.0 million focussed on dedicated youth outreach, programming, development and employment readiness.

The City of Toronto's Welcome Policy is a fee subsidy program that helps individuals and families with low income who live in Toronto to access City-operated recreation programs. The 2025 Welcome Policy budget is \$6.8 million, an increase of \$2.1 million from 2024 to reflect growing program utilization, with annual review and adjustments, as part of the Budget process, to address changes in demand.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the information as presented in the Financial Impact Section.

EQUITY IMPACT

Parks and Recreation is committed to improving the quality of life for Toronto residents through the provision of high-quality recreation programs and services that are welcoming, affordable, accessible, and equitable. Removing financial barriers is vital in improving access to recreation programs, employment readiness, and leadership certification programs, especially as it relates to Indigenous, Black, and equity-deserving groups of Toronto, inclusive of youth.

Parks and Recreation is committed to reducing barriers faced by residents of all ages with low income and providing youth opportunities for employment readiness, certification, and employment. The availability of free drop-in and leisure programs, free centres, Welcome Policy subsidy program, and low-cost options for primary and introductory recreation programs has increased equitable and local access to affordable recreation opportunities for residents who otherwise would face financial barriers to participate.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on May 20 and 21, 2025, City Council adopted 2025.EX23.5 2025 Update to SafeTO Implementation and requested the General Manager, Parks and Recreation to report back to the Economic and Community Development Committee on which swim and other programs are not covered by the existing Welcome Policy and options to make them available; and whether the lack of access to programs under the Welcome Policy may have had an impact on youth not pursuing a path to lifeguarding and other jobs with City of Toronto and, if so, what measures would need to be taken to encourage youth to pursue swimming accreditation levels.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.EX23.5>

COMMENTS

Parks and Recreation is committed to providing equitable access to recreational programs and services, leadership and certification programs, and employment opportunities, particularly for youth in the city of Toronto.

Access to Recreation Programs

Parks and Recreation ensures access to recreational and development opportunities through the following:

Welcome Policy

The Welcome Policy is a recreation fee subsidy to help Toronto residents access and participate in City-run recreation programs. This is an income-based individual fee subsidy program, available to all Toronto residents with a before tax family income of less than Statistics Canada's Low-Income Cut-off (LICO).

Eligible individuals and families receive an annual financial credit which can be used towards the cost of all registered recreation programs including all instructional swim and sports programs, camps, and after-school care programs, as well as memberships and multi-use passes for various drop-in programming.

In addition, the Welcome Policy can be applied to aquatic leadership and certification programs offered by Parks and Recreation. In 2025, children and youth (up to age 24) receive a credit of \$669.65, while adults and older adults receive a credit of \$308.43. The Welcome Policy subsidy is valid for a 12-month period and funds do not carry over into the next year. Residents apply and submit required documents annually, and residents who receive Ontario Works are automatically eligible.

In 2024, the Welcome Policy subsidy usage totalled \$5.418M and supported over 48,000 registrations in recreation program (10% of total registrations and 14% of paid program spaces), with 42% of the total subsidy used to support registration in learn to swim and leadership programs, including the City's learn to Swim curriculum and certification opportunities such as Bronze Star/Medallion/Cross, National Lifeguard, Swim Instructor, Ski, Snowboard and Counsellor-In-Training programs. These programs prepare youth for potential employment with the City of Toronto as a Camp Counsellor. In 2025, the approved Welcome Policy budget is \$6.8 million, an increase of \$2.1 million from 2024 to respond to growing program utilization.

Free Centres

While the Welcome Policy can assist in addressing barriers to access recreation, individuals who do not qualify for the program or continue to face process or financial barriers can experience challenges accessing introductory and leadership or certification opportunities. In response, Parks & Recreation offers additional avenues to accessing recreation and employment readiness opportunities.

Parks and Recreation offers 39 community centres locations where recreational programs and services are offered to participants for free. Free Centres are community centres in neighbourhoods with a high proportion of low-income residents and were originally established to increase access to recreation and support participation. All City-delivered, registered and drop-in programs are delivered at no cost to residents at these centres.

In 2024, over 170 leadership courses were offered at Free Centres across the City with over 2,100 participants and in 2025, over 200 leadership courses will be offered with approximately 3,200 spaces, ensuring location-based subsidy availability in communities where access can be significantly compromised due to financial barriers.

Free and low-cost programming

Most leisure drop-in programs in Parks and Recreation facilities are offered at no charge, including leisure skate, leisure swim, drop-in children, family, youth and older adult programs. Some programs may require fees (e.g. aquatic fitness and lane swim). In 2025, the Division is offering over 460,000 hours of free drop-in programming which is 67% of all drop-in program hours offered.

In addition, all registered primary programs offered by Parks and Recreation are delivered at low cost across the city, recognizing the overall value and benefits of these programs on residents' health, skills building and social connection. Primary program examples include Learn-to-Swim, Learn-to-Skate, CampTO, and introductory programs that focus on physical literacy, health, and life-skill development, and are delivered in group-based settings, which maximizes the use of community centre space and staffing resources. In 2025, the Division is offering over 611,000 spaces and 520,000 hours of registered programs comprised of:

- 168,900 spaces (28%) and 122,800 hours of free programs
- 385,300 spaces (63%) and 336,300 hours of low-cost primary paid programs
- 57,500 spaces (9%) and 76,400 hours of secondary and specialty paid programs

Leadership Development Programs and Youth Employment

Even with all available subsidy options, youth in the city continue to face barriers to employment. Parks and Recreation provides youth programs aimed to promote leadership and provide certification and employment readiness opportunities.

Building Skills Through Recreation (BSTR)

This free employment readiness program is designed for youth ages 15 to 24 across Toronto and recognizes that not all youth, particularly Black, racialized, and Indigenous youth, have access to the supports and tools needed to navigate the City's hiring process or the requisite certifications for employment. BSTR helps participants develop transferable skills and build the knowledge needed to obtain, retain and advance in meaningful employment. BSTR supports youth by offering free access to certifications in nationally recognized programs including First Aid, aquatics (Bronze Medallion/Cross, National Lifeguard, Swim Instructor, Aquatic Fitness), coaching (National Coaching Certification, Fundamental Movement Skills) and leadership, as well as resume writing and guidance through the job application process. More than 1,000 youth participate in this program annually, and Parks and Recreation has doubled its engagement target to 2,000 for the 2025-2026 cycle.

For youth interested in pursuing Aquatic Leadership certifications who do not possess the required swimming proficiency, Parks and Recreation also offers a free pre-certification development program called Future Lifeguards. This program began in late 2024 and provides an opportunity to assess and strengthen swimming proficiency of interested participants and connect them to BSTR, followed by certification and employment opportunities. Future Lifeguards is being expanded in Neighborhood Improvement Areas and other communities, to ensure enhanced access to swimming

proficiency and aquatic leadership access at no cost, which can lead to direct recruitment and employment opportunities in Parks and Recreation.

Employment and Hiring

Parks and Recreation implements approaches to employing youth in recreational opportunities, where they can serve their communities. The Division employs a number of tactics to engage, develop, hire, and place youth in local jobs.

Youth are engaged and enrolled through a number of different outreach strategies, including leveraging youth outreach workers, BSTR program, community centre staff, and strategically deployed employment open houses and job fairs. Intentional outreach through schools and community organizations, provision of employment readiness and training programs provide certification/accreditation and required preparation to support youth through the recruitment and hiring process, and positioning for eventual employment in various recreation positions.

Parks and Recreation employs up to 10,000 part-time Recreation Workers each year, with approximately 80% youth aged 14 to 29. Positions available include lifeguards, swim instructors, wading pool attendants, camp leaders, and customer service staff. Parks and Recreation hires approximately 3,000 new staff each year.

Outreach and Engagement

Parks and Recreation leverages a multiple outreach and engagement tactics to promote the City's recreation programs and services, inclusive of both traditional and digital media, in addition to a variety of on-the-ground marketing to support public awareness. The Division has an extensive front-line network comprised of 290 Recreation and Youth Programmers, 32 Youth Outreach Workers, and 15 Recreation Liaisons who play a significant role in engaging clients directly through established partnerships with schools, libraries, and community organizations. Recreation Liaisons specifically work in partnership with multiple City of Toronto divisions (Parks and Recreation, Employment and Social Services, Public Health) and collaboratively with parents, children, and various recreation providers to facilitate engagement in recreation for families who are in receipt of Ontario Works (OW) benefits and living in high-needs, marginalized communities. Their role involves facilitating engagement in recreation by coordinating with various city departments, community partners, families, and children to promote positive recreational experiences and improve the quality of life for residents.

While these approaches exist, there continue to be opportunities to improve the Division's reach and visibility and, improving the client's experience when interacting with information relating to access and participation in recreation programs. The Division continues to enhance outreach and engagement approached, particularly in relation to Free Centres and Welcome Policy, to expand resident reach and to ensure accessibility to affordable recreational opportunities, in partnership with other City Division including Social Development, Employment and Social Services, Toronto Public Health, and partner agencies.

Conclusion

Parks and Recreation is committed to the provision of high quality and accessible recreational, leisure, and skill development opportunities to Toronto residents. The Division leverages a number of affordability and subsidy mechanisms to ensure residents have a barrier-free opportunity to participate in programs and services and to provide youth with pathways to employment with the Division, inclusive of certification, leadership and employment readiness programs, especially focussed on Neighbourhood Improvement Areas and within equity-deserving communities.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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