


A young boy with dark hair, wearing a blue and grey patterned t-shirt and blue shorts, is sitting inside a green and black SootheSpace tent. He is smiling at the camera. The tent is set up on a grassy area. The background shows a black tarp and a green leaf-shaped object on the grass.

SootheSpace:

Bringing Calm and Comfort to the Community

By Alex Engelhardt, Executive Director, Fox Valley Special Recreation Association

Attending large community events and festivals can be overwhelming for anyone, and they are often incredibly taxing for people with disabilities. Imagine navigating the diverse array of sights, sounds, smells, and choices at a local event without having access to a space that promotes sensory regulation. With the new SootheSpace from Fox Valley Special Recreation Association, people with disabilities, and their family and friends, have a safe space to regroup, recharge, and then continue to enjoy the event.



***Our hope is that
SootheSpace
becomes a game
changer in a sensory-
rich world.***

SootheSpace origin story

During Covid-19, following safety protocols, FVSRA had to shut down in-person programs. Residents with disabilities at local group homes were among the many who were isolated and shuttered. They could not attend the over 600 year-round programs previously provided by FVSRA. To bring recreation and leisure activities to those community members, the staff at FVSRA created a mobile therapeutic recreation program to conduct fitness programs in their front yards to support their physical health. FVSRA also created Break Bags full of sensory equipment and other helpful resources for individuals to utilize in the comfort of their home to support their mental and emotional health. Over 500 free Break Bags were disseminated to the community to provide sensory support to those in need. FVSRA knew it needed to

jump into action to maintain recreational programming for participants in the seven communities in which it serves. FVSRA partners with the Batavia, Geneva, Fox Valley, Oswegoland, St. Charles, and Sugar Grove Park Districts and the Village of South Elgin Park and Recreation Department.

SootheSpace mobile recreation promotes inclusivity

What started as a response to a need during the pandemic has morphed into SootheSpace: a sensory regulation station on wheels. As outdoor events and festivities slowly returned, FVSRA heard from the special needs community who needed something more to participate successfully. FVSRA gathered community feedback through online focus groups and collaborated with its Certified Therapeutic Recreation



Specialists (CTRS) team. FVSRA realized the mobile recreation concept combined with the sensory Break Bags could be the solution to making the events and festivals more welcoming to the disability community.

With \$100,000 in funding from the Fox Valley Special Recreation Foundation, the FVSRA team collaborated with a team at a5, a Chicago-based branding and digital firm, to develop and adopt the SootheSpace name and brand. Today, the portable programming concept is a fully operational inclusive program that the community can use and be proud of.

SootheSpace is equipped with sensory integration equipment and staffed by Certified Therapeutic Recreational Specialists (CTRS). The goal is for all community members to enjoy events and festivals, knowing there will be a safe space to regroup and recenter if there is sensory overload. FVSRA hopes that, in the near future, SootheSpace will be as common as first aid tents, so people of all abilities can maximize their enjoyment and attendance at community events without getting overstimulated or having to leave early.

SootheSpace cultivates a fresh take on accessibility

"Many festivals and carnivals offer a special needs pre-event hour", says Claire Howes, Superintendent of Recreation. "At FVSRA, we want to expand on this starting point and encourage the entire event to be inclusive and mindful of the community's various needs."

In just a few short months, SootheSpace has welcomed hundreds of visitors during its appearance at UnPlug Illinois Day in South Elgin and various events in Geneva, Aurora, St. Charles, Wheaton, and Elburn. Howes added, "Our SootheSpace tents let children who are sensitive to stimulation regulate by interacting with equipment and tools that support sensory integration." Weighted blankets, noise-canceling headphones, bubble tubes, mini trampolines, gel pads, fidgets, and body socks are just a few items housed in the SootheSpace tent.

We empower people with disabilities to live active, healthy, fulfilling lives

FVSRA is committed to making partner agencies' events and programs as accessible as possible for everyone. SootheSpace empowers and enables visitors to enjoy events on their own terms. To experience SootheSpace for yourself or to learn how you can create a SootheSpace in your community, visit www.fvsra.org/sootherspace. To schedule SootheSpace, contact SootheSpace@fvsra.org.