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Season to Shine for Concierges

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Jessica Martinez checking in packages for residents of the AVE rentals in Clifton. Services offered at various New Jersey buildings include gift-wrapping and tax-free shopping trips.

By ANTOINETTE MARTIN

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AT a cozy multicultural party earlier this month in the clubroom of the Residences at Vail Mansion in Morristown, condo owners exchanged holiday cookies and recipes. The event had been arranged by the concierge service.

At the Crystal Point tower in Jersey City, the concierges bought people's gifts for them — including big-ticket electronics available tax-free in Delaware, if a shopping list was submitted before Dec. 9, when a large van was dispatched with a crew of personal shoppers. Also, in the lobby on Tuesday night, there will be a wrapping event, at which residents of the 142-unit tower can bring unwrapped gifts, pick out paper and bows and have them done up prettily for a nominal fee.

At the AVE Clifton rental apartments, the concierge staff has hidden packages from spouses or children in the backs of closets, handed out discount coupons for a massage at the in-house spa, and coordinated travel plans for residents' guests coming in for the holidays — right down to taxi service to the door.

"Everyone knows how holidays can be stressful as well as joyful," said Lauren Marks, director of sales and service for Chapman Concierge, one of several companies that have recently begun providing these and other hotel-like services at buildings in northern [New Jersey](#). (Vail Mansion and Crystal Point are her company's clients.)

"We are able to offer residents customized stress relief," Ms. Marks said. During the holidays, she and other concierge service providers said, they try especially hard to cater to residents' particular cultural bent with the festivities and décor — and also to anticipate all the little extra tasks and duties associated with the particular season.

For Cinco de Mayo last spring, the front-desk concierge at One Hudson Park in Edgewater wore a sombrero and handed out goodie bags with milagros necklaces, said Mary E. Kusen, the marketing director for Planned Lifestyle Services, a concierge service based in Parsippany.

When Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, was celebrated at Crystal Point in October, Ms. Marks helped a group of residents with traditional “supercolorful” décor for a party. (She even tried to spice up her own customary all-black attire, donning a bright blue-and-yellow shirt; residents presented her with a sari to wear next time.)

Last spring, she recalled, her company was hired to provide a “corporate concierge” service for the tenant companies — and their individual employees — of Headquarters Plaza, a commercial complex in downtown Morristown.

Ms. Marks says concierge service requests made at the office are mostly the same as those made from home: “help with arranging a child’s first birthday party, [Hanukkah](#) candles in a hurry, gift-wrapping, dinner and theater reservations or travel arrangements.”

“We provide convenience and assistance to busy people with full lives,” she said.

If the required assistance is particularly personal or labor-intensive, or involves a spa treatment, an extra fee is involved, according to various concierge service providers, including Lea Ann Welsh, president of AVE, which operates two extended-stay rentals in New Jersey in addition to its Clifton complex, one in Union and the other in Somerset.

As Ms. Welsh described it: “We host the holiday party, provide hot chocolate with the complimentary breakfast this time of year, set up extra hours when the massage therapist or reflexologist will be available. Residents pick and choose what extra services they want in a personalized package.”

For grocery shopping and delivery, Ms. Marks of Chapman Concierge says her company usually hires college students or retirees to do the actual chore, and collects a fee of about \$30 per hour from the client.

For other services — specialized shopping, specialty decorations or personal service — hourly rates usually apply as well. But occasionally, the cost of the service is divided by the number of participants; as in the tax-free shopping trip to Delaware, for which the fee worked out to about \$100 each, on top of the cost of the items.

“One more thing that makes people feel good at the holidays is to be able to do good,” said Ms. Kusen of Planned Lifestyle, which provides concierge service at Harborside Lofts, a condo in Hoboken, and the Palisades Condominium in Fort Lee, in addition

to the rentals at Xchange Place in Secaucus. “So we make it easy and convenient for people to make donations to Toys for Tots.”

“The concierge posts fliers and sends e-mails, sets up a bin in the lobby, is available for advice as to where the best and closest toy store is, alerts people when there are sales and discounts,” Ms. Kusen added. “Then, he makes sure the gifts get picked up and delivered.”

After these holidays comes the next set, of course. At Chapman-served properties, a “resolution-keeping package” is being offered for the New Year.

“We line up with local providers so that we can help you accomplish whatever you decide needs doing,” Ms. Marks said.

A group rate is negotiated with various service providers so that concierge clients get a discount but they don’t have to pay extra to the concierge. The service provider pays a fee to Chapman for bringing in new clients.

“You say, ‘I want to lose 20 pounds,’ we partner with a local gym and personal trainers, and set that up,” she said. “You want to clean out your closets? We will put you in touch with a home organizer.”

And the possibilities don’t stop there. For instance, Ms. Marks said, if someone feels the need for a puppy in his or her life, “we will research what type of dog is best for your situation, arrange for pet services, grooming, training, veterinarian services and even home sitters for when your busy life takes you away from the residence.”

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