



International Observatory of Mayors
Living Together

CASE STUDY

Program: Liaison Officers - Montréal

CASE STUDY NO 1

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1. Context

Montréal has at its disposal a network of 45 libraries all across its 19 boroughs. The mission of Montréal's libraries, which take an active part in borough life, is to offer access to reading, information, knowledge, culture and recreation. With a collection of more than 4.2 million documents, more than 12 million books borrowed yearly as well as a variety of services offered to the population (1,988,423 people in 2014,¹), the library network has become more and more popular. Montréal libraries are at the top of the list in terms of Montrealers' satisfaction rate with municipal services. They represent the most frequently visited cultural and social institution in the city, with more than 7.9 million visitors in 2015.

More than 70% of newcomers settle every year in Montréal, creating an ever-changing portrait of Montréal's inhabitants. Through the services libraries offer and their easy access (extended opening hours 7 days a week, on-line services, out-of-the-walls activities), the libraries of the city of Montréal are a vehicle for welcoming and integrating immigrants and newcomers and promoting living together in Montreal. By fostering French-language discussion, intercultural relations and social inclusiveness, libraries are a great way to bring together people of all backgrounds.

The project *Liaison Officers in Libraries* offers more substantial services with respect to newcomers' needs and based on agreements with other municipal services and external partners (community organizations and associations, health services, education services and so on). Developed and coordinated since 2008 by two municipal departments (Service de la Diversité social et des sports, and the Service des bibliothèques), this project is funded within the agreement between Montréal and the Québec Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Diversité and de l'Inclusion (referred to hereafter in this text by its acronym, MIDI).

2. Objectives

The *Liaison Officers* project takes a specific form in every borough, as realities change greatly from one borough to another. A number of factors have influenced the evolution of the project, mainly the social-demographical portrait of the boroughs and neighbourhoods, the organization of the different communities in the borough, the nature of social fabric and the presence of public, institutional and community services in the area. The main idea of the project is that libraries can have a positive impact on newcomers' integration: by facilitating the access to knowledge and by fostering the development of knowledge about the host society, they contribute, from many points of view, to the fight against social inequalities and to improving living conditions.

¹ Source: Montréal in Statistics.



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The objectives of the *Liaison Officers* project take recommendations from program evaluations into account, as well as from the guidelines as identified in the agreement between Montréal and the MIDI. The targeted clientele are immigrants and so-called vulnerable persons but, according to MIDI criteria, their main target is newcomers, women and children. Establishing specific objectives is done in each of the boroughs, according to the reality and needs of each library.

The Liaison Officers' mission includes the following:

- To contribute to living together in Montréal by welcoming and socially integrating immigrants, especially newcomers;
- To improve the inclusiveness aspect of services offered by the libraries by:
 - Developing, in the borough, services adapted to newcomers' needs (information, training, support to learn the French language, pre-employability, etc.).
 - Developing services that promote diversity and closer intercultural ties, allowing the recovery of values of the culture of origins and those of the host culture.
 - Adapting or developing, in a cross-functional vision, the intercultural component of all library services.
- To promote the cultural role and the social mission of the library and its services, as well as those of the community and the institutional partners, by:
 - Involving all libraries' concerned staff.
 - Sharing the experiences and tools that are developed.

In order to achieve these objectives, the librarians/Liaison Officers get involved in neighbourhood life. Through their presence in libraries and in many living environments, they build relationships with members of the communities within the neighbourhood, take part in round tables and create complementary partnerships with other industry stakeholders.

3. Implementation

As part of the Triennial Administrative Agreement (2007-2010) between Montréal and the MIDI, the *Liaison Officers* program was developed by the Division de la diversité sociale (now the Service de la diversité sociale et des sports) in collaboration with the Division des bibliothèques and Montréal's Service de la Culture in 2008 (see Appendix 1 – Funding). This program primarily aims to contact non-library users, including newcomers and vulnerable and isolated people.

In response to a call for submissions, several boroughs have submitted pilot projects adapted to their environment and the program has been launched in four boroughs: Ahuntsic-Cartierville, LaSalle, Montréal Nord and Villeray-Saint-Michel-Parc- Extension.



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The duration of the project has been extended with modifications as part of the 2011-2014 agreement and subsequent renewals of the agreement until September 2017. Minor adjustments to the project are made on a regular basis, following activity reports (reports for purposes of the Montréal-MIDI agreement) and more formal evaluations (report from an external firm in 2012)².

Liaison Officers are professional librarians with master's degrees and are assigned to one or more libraries, depending on the neighbourhood. The project is coordinated jointly by the Service des bibliothèques, the Service de la culture, and the Service de la diversité sociale et des sports) and locally managed in libraries, offering much latitude in the choice of locally preferred actions (increasing reactivity, favouring innovation) while ensuring the cohesiveness of projects developed between boroughs. Project guidelines confirm the importance of intercultural approaches in promoting living together at the municipal level, for example the concept of "intercultural mediation," or the more recent phenomenon of "intercultural cities." Montréal also has a long history of actions in this area and was recognized by the Council of Europe as an "Intercultural City"³ in 2011.

The different categories of activities organized by Liaison Officers (mixed activities, specialized activities, coaching and mediation) reflect the importance of mainstreaming in municipal actions. Different strategies are used to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the program, many of which are also identified in 2011 as being conditions favourable to the success of the program⁴, such as:

1. Involvement in and commitment to the community, in consultation with various community partners, including participation in roundtables and neighbourhood consultations, social mechanisms of action that are highly developed in Quebec⁵. Liaisons can develop with many other public departments, aiming for complementarity and avoiding duplication of activities and services (see Appendix 2 - Partners):
 - a. Internal partners (with other city departments, including recreation and culture)
 - b. External partners
 - i. Institutional sector (health, education, research, etc.)
 - ii. Community organizations from the association sector (services to newcomers, food banks, family homes, support for job search, etc.)
2. A significant off-site presence in order to meet people in the busiest places in the area (clinics, laundries, nurseries, community organizations, schools, etc.), sometimes with the support of an interpreter or with leaders of cultural, religious and linguistic communities to facilitate the connection to clients who are the hardest to reach.

² [Evaluation of the Liaison Officers program in Montréal libraries](#), (in French only) Darvida Conseil, 2011.

³ "Montreal has made interculturalism a principle of action and management. This principle promotes exchanges between people and groups of different cultures in a dynamic interaction, relying therefore on intercultural relations within the community. According to the municipal vision, interculturalism is a bearer and guarantor of two important concepts: the right to cultural expression as well as to interaction and exchange between cultures with regard for common values of Québec society (democratic society, French language, rule of law, the secularity of the State, gender equality, etc.). [Abstract from the text: "Montréal: Intercultural City, General Presentation on Intercultural Relations](#) - Addressed to the Council of Europe." (Montréal, June 2011).

⁴ See : [Program Evaluation](#), p. 14-15.

⁵ See [section](#).



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3. A presence in libraries to accommodate people officers met outside the library and promote a sustained use of services
4. Actions that foster cultural enhancement, not only of the host culture, but also different cultures of origin
5. A participatory approach towards the empowerment of target audiences for a greater involvement of newcomers and an acquisition of skills in addition to knowledge
6. Activities that promote everyone's participation and facilitate closer ties (between people of different ages, parents of different origins, residents of different neighbourhoods, etc.)
7. Developing sustainable trust relationships between the various partners and the clients, resulting in sustained and personalized support (when needed).

Here are some examples of project activities:

3.1 In libraries:

- Job Café
- Cultural mediation and promotion (intercultural film festivals, art exhibitions, etc.)
- Computer workshops
- French-language conversation workshops
- Coffee and Chat
- Evenings dedicated to newcomer students and their families
- Information sessions (municipal organization, rights and responsibilities, listing neighbourhood resources, etc.) and training to newcomers (government services, citizenship exams, how to write a résumé, etc.)
- Committee of immigrant women
- Networking activities for isolated immigrant women (tea and knitting, urban agriculture, etc.)
- Specific activities for newcomers

3.2 Outside activities:

- Storytime, reading awareness activities (organizations, family daycare, etc.)
- Reading activities in day care centres, early childhood centres, parks, and other public service areas
- Special evenings in primary schools, activities in high schools
- Reading and social activities and social animation in youth centres
- Activities of French learning (special projects, promotion of services, etc.)
- Visits to target groups in different neighbourhood hotspots, community organizations or with other partners
- Promotional booths at borough parties and community events



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4. Lessons and results

The success of the Liaison Officers project offered a unique opportunity for institutional development and monitoring. This project has been renewed several times and has undergone several stages of analysis and assessments, first in 2011 (Darvida Council) and more recently as part of an action-research project with the Research Laboratory in Intercultural Relations (LABRRI) at the Université de Montréal (LABRRI Report, January 2016). The results of these studies have documented more closely certain aspects of the project. This external point of view has helped to clarify three aspects in particular: structural issues, implementation challenges, and contributions to living together.

5. Structural issues

The program is linked to the funding of the MIDI-Montréal Agreement and the precarious positions of librarians/Liaison Officers have a direct impact on the project. This weakens the ties with different communities (the project is on hold between renewals) and contributes to a change of staff which has a negative impact on the Liaison Officers (thorough knowledge of the environment, establishment of trust with the organizations). The librarians/Liaison Officers have a small operating budget for the development of promotional and operational materials, special projects, or support for activities. It would be possible to enhance the project's impact in terms of people reached in the same sector by supporting more activities and using additional resources, measures that could be deployed quickly if needed.

Since libraries are under the jurisdiction of the boroughs and that each district has specific features (type of immigration, the number of newcomers, many cultural communities already existing in the borough, number of cultural communities in the area, library resources, etc.), it is important that the program maintains enough flexibility to facilitate its adaptation to local realities. In return, central project coordination is essential to ensure optimization of services (avoid duplication, promote complementarity of actions, clearly define the intercultural approach) to keep reinvesting the developed expertise and to ensure the achievement of identified mandates.

The LABRRI report found difficulties with recreating libraries' traditional image, either as an elite institution or as a place of introspection and silence (a little dusty!), quite a difference from the vision of the 21st century library developed by the Montréal public libraries⁶. This problem pertains usually to the structure of libraries in general, but also to the great social and ethnic diversity of the people who attend those libraries.

⁶ See [Libraries website](#).



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6. Implementation challenges

The role of Liaison Officers could be further leveraged by renewed collaboration with other institutions. For example, a collaborative experience to help newcomers get settled, offered by the MIDI, took place in LaSalle, with positive results, especially increased participation of women. The program's current guidelines also limit the development of employment-related services or economic development that fall under an agreement with a department other than MIDI. While employment integration is one of the important elements of social integration and with libraries already supporting the development of skills, the activities related to economic development could be strengthened.

There are also issues related to participation: 1) the absence or non-participation of certain groups or communities in certain categories of activities (e.g.: radicalized groups, certain cultural communities, some groups of young people or single women) 2) The absence of Quebecers with French ancestors who have lived in Quebec for a long time in activities designed to promote inclusion through interactions or exchanges. Overall, the interaction between the majority and minority groups can be a source of tension, but an intercultural perspective is important to create the conditions for productive discussions between them.

In the analysis of the project, we have seen tension between wanting to organize activities for groups with special needs and the provisions of the mandates of public institutions regarding the promotion of a common public culture; this tension can also arise from the agents' mission. On one hand, officers must develop activities specifically dedicated to newcomers (as per MIDI's orientation); on the other, they must develop activities that promote diversity and reconciliation (requiring much effort, as social and cultural diversity is difficult to achieve in reality). Moreover, some immigrants will use the library services 10 or 20 years after their arrival, a long time after being a newcomer (this term that refers to people who immigrated 5 years or less). Their needs in terms of inclusiveness can be very different, but equally essential that those of the newcomers. This dual mission is a challenge for the Liaison Officers, who are mandated to develop the intercultural aspect of regular activities in and for the library.

Several reports have noted discomfort in supervising certain activities that promote discussions about values and standards. Sometimes the discomfort is expressed by the Liaison Officers and employees of libraries and sometimes it is the users who express discomfort. From an intercultural perspective, this discomfort is quite normal, but some individuals feel more discomfort than others. Analysis of interactions based on an intercultural model underline the existing links between discomfort, stereotypes and prejudice and insists that prejudices are part of every human interaction, but they must be explained and validated in order to avoid the emergence of new forms of discrimination and exclusion⁷. That being said, the explanation of prejudice could be a double-edged sword, and this exercise requires caution and professional supervision.

⁷ See Bob W. White, Danielle Gratton & François Rocher, "The conditions for inclusion in an intercultural context." Memo presented to the Commission des relations avec les citoyens, MIDI, in February 2015.



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Libraries favour the creation of relatively neutral spaces that can encourage both discussion and introspection. An analysis of the Liaison Officers project revealed tension between these two aspects; how is it possible to use the premises for introspection purposes as spaces for exchange, especially in intercultural environments where users do not have the same definition of the library or public services? The activities of Liaison Officers provide an excellent opportunity for further study of interactions in an intercultural context, but for this to be possible, libraries must be able to supervise a process of reflection about adapting their services. The current evolution of the type of activities offered in libraries, which tends to seek a balance between the traditional supply often focused either on 100% free activities (browsing books, exhibitions, etc.) or 100% previously planned activities (fixed hours and place, registration required, etc.) will certainly allow interesting pilot-projects later in the project.

Ties with community organizations is a very important matter, not only for avoiding duplication with the various agencies that provide services to immigrants in each territory, but also to further inform workers in different fields of practice about the complementarity of services offered by libraries. Possible tensions with associations are foreseeable mainly because of the precariousness of funding of community organizations, and the fact that these organizations have much expertise in the field, but they are not always officially recognized for the work they perform.

These tensions also come from a misunderstanding of the role of libraries in the context of the new urban diversity. While the cultural mission of libraries is rarely questioned, its social role – which has become more and more important in recent decades - often remains unrecognized. If libraries are increasingly ensuring the function of education and support to the development of the person, it is because these roles are mentioned in the different versions of the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto since its first release in 1949⁸. Much work remains to be done for all to hear libraries' strong desire to work in complementarity and better define their role, both internally (dynamics between Liaison Officers and other library employees) and externally (especially with community partners already working to support immigrants and newcomers).

7. Contributions to living together

A key objective of the Liaison Officers project is to contribute to living together in Montreal by welcoming and socially integrating immigrants, mostly newcomers. Thus, there is a strong interest in maintaining the program, in part due to its potential to mobilize various actors; not only members of different cultural communities but also community organizations that provide services to an increasingly diversified population, multiple partners and the library staff.



⁸ Sources : First Manifesto [La bibliothèque publique force vive au soutien de l'éducation populaire](#), 1949 and the present version [Manifeste de l'UNESCO sur la bibliothèque publique](#), 1994



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The Liaison Officers, who primarily serve newcomers and immigrants and ensure a continuum of services in the communities they serve, play a unique role in welcoming and integrating newcomers. As such, the impact of their work would be even greater if they were deployed throughout the country instead of a limited number of them in more sensitive areas. This would provide a continuum of not only local services, but in all areas too, considering that almost half of the residents of a neighbourhood change every five years⁹.

Besides the reception and integration of newcomers, libraries act in complementarity with formal language learning provided by MIDI and community organizations which are responsible for teaching the French language. Libraries promote the use of French language on the basis of an intercultural mediation approach deployed via its numerous entertainment activities (story time, thematic meetings, discussion groups, creative writing workshop, etc.). Programs such as *Contact* reach newly arrived families in the places they frequent (health centres and social services, community organizations, cultural centres, family centres, etc.) in order to educate parents about the importance of emergent reading and writing and to generate interest in learning French. Libraries contribute to French-language learning particularly in terms of informal learning and in a non-didactic framework (unrated). Their document collections promote self-guided learning and development of French (such as online language courses and alphabet books for toddlers).

Libraries are increasingly a space where people of diverse backgrounds find resources and information. Montréal's libraries retain this primary mandate, but are increasingly developing a mission of welcome, integration and convergence between residents of various origins. The intercultural focus that has been part of library practices for several decades can serve as a transmission belt in several respects. The Liaison Officers project will change people's relationship to knowledge because it educates residents about the host society while creating a space for discussions around diversity and issues of discrimination in an intercultural context.

Given the cross-functional nature of services, especially in the Liaison Officers project, Montréal's libraries play an important role in the process of knowledge transfer in an intercultural context. On one hand, they teach immigrants and newcomers about the history and inner workings of the host society and vice versa; on the other, they create new institutional spaces for different expressions of diversity (religious, sexual, social, professional and cultural) in order to forge a common and shared civic identity. Hence the idea of living together, a relatively new concept in the municipal world, takes on its fullest meaning¹⁰.

⁹ Mobility of population between 2005 and 2010

¹⁰ À ce sujet, voir Bob W. White « Le vivre ensemble comme scénario de l'interculturel au Québec », dans Francine Saillant (éd.), *Pluralité et vivre ensemble*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval. Pp. 39-62. 2016.



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8. Attendance and achievement of objectives

Between 2012 and 2014 (27 months), the project has reached more than 15,000 people, while in 2014-2015 alone (12 months), more than 10,000 people were affected by the four Liaison Officers. The benefits are numerous – targeted clients are better welcomed and supported in their journey, the partners are working in better complementarity to the library and intercultural expertise is growing in libraries.

More specifically, the project evaluation shows that:

- The services offered by the Liaison Officers do reach non-users and newcomers
- The presence of Liaison Officers helps to better inform and educate newcomers
- The activities developed by the Liaison Officers ensure a more inclusive provision of library services:
 - Services of participating libraries are better suited to the needs of target groups.
 - Directly or through community agencies, targeted groups are consulted and involved to determine their needs and aspirations.
 - Access to information and library services is fairer.
 - Libraries and their human resources are implementing strategies that cross cultural barriers.
- The activities that were developed and supported within the program framework promote awareness of services by the target customers and, ultimately, the use of these services.
- Libraries contribute to the social integration of target audiences, especially newcomers, to the library, which becomes a significant location or anchor in the integration process.

It is not surprising that many Montréal libraries wish to implement the model of Liaison Officers in their area. In its briefing submitted as part of the consultation on the document "*Towards a New Quebec Immigration Policy, Diversity and Inclusion*"¹¹ in 2015, the city stipulates the following:

"The Liaison Officers in Public Libraries project (...) has multiplied activities in the cultural centres for immigrant families and individuals and encourages the attendance and the participation of newcomers in the social and cultural life of the community by joining them directly on site.

¹¹ Mémoire de la Ville de Montréal, dans le cadre de la consultation portant sur le document « Vers une politique québécoise en matière d'immigration, de diversité et d'inclusion », présenté à la Commission des relations avec les citoyens de l'Assemblée nationale, 2015 (in French only).



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Many boroughs wish to implement this model, which has proven itself. Several Canadian cities such as Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary are improving their neighbourhood libraries in a similar perspective.

The experience of Liaison Officers demonstrates the potential of this model: creating reception centres around a dynamic and friendly place like the library, the city can become a major player in welcoming new residents in each stage of their integration at the neighbourhood level. [...] It is time [...] to set up an integrated approach to a continuum of efficient services that takes into account all the needs of the residents of immigrant origin, and in close collaboration with community and institutional partners.”



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Appendix 1 — Partners

Different types of partnerships make the Liaison Officers project possible, both in terms of program management and its local implementation.

Program management

- Financial partners:
 - Québec's Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Diversité et de l'Inclusion (via MIDI-Montréal agreement)
 - Boroughs
- Partners of expertise (coordination)
 - Service de la diversité sociale et des sports
 - Direction des bibliothèques, Service de la culture
 - Participating libraries

Program implementation

As noted in the Implementation Section, local partners are numerous, varied and essential to local implementation of the project. Types of partnerships include reference, providing help with recruiting and soliciting, consultation, training, information distribution, activities, support for the organization and participation in activities, etc.

We have noted internal partners (Montréal) as well as external partners in the community (associations) and other public and institutional services.



Appendix 2 — Funding

The financial plan distributes funding as follows:

	MIDI- Montréal Agreement	Boroughs
Basic salary of Liaison Officers	X	
Benefits, bonuses, other expenses		X
Basic operating budget of Liaison Officers	X	
Additional operating budget of Liaison Officers (activity expenses) human resources (managers, assistant librarians, designers, etc.)		X
Material resources (prints, documents, etc.)		