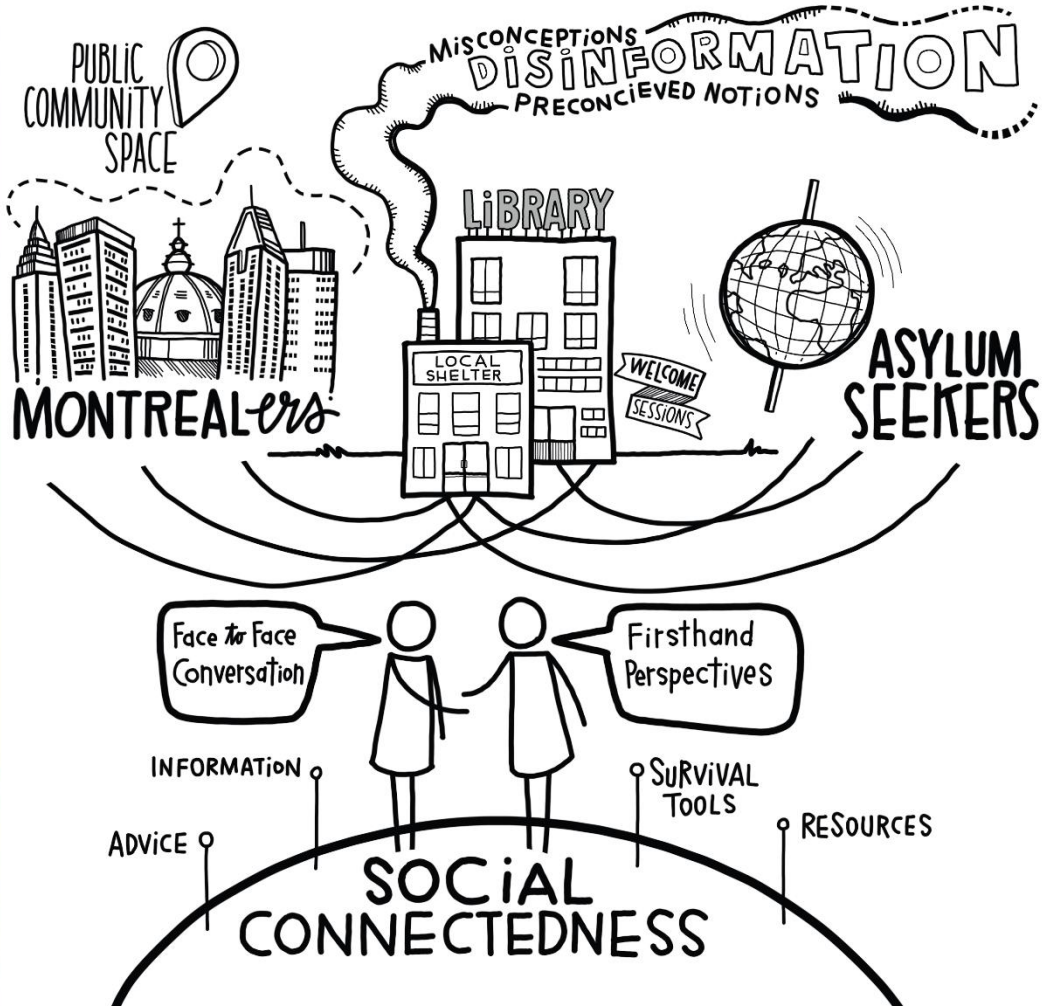


A WORLD WHERE EVERYONE HAS A SENSE OF BELONGING TO COMMUNITY & INDIVIDUALS FEEL EMPOWERED TO TAKE ACTION TO BETTER THEIR COMMUNITY

WELCOME SESSION FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS



Welcome Session Write-Up for MSF Toolbox

Context:

Every day, at least 60 asylum seekers arrive by bus in Montreal, after having crossed the [border between New York and Quebec](#) to seek asylum. Their countries of origin range from Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, El Salvador, Nigeria, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Angola, South Sudan, Chad, Senegal, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Palestine, Iran and Lebanon.

Due to the [Safe Third Country Agreement](#), it is forbidden to request asylum at an official land port of entry into Canada, on the premise that one must request asylum in the first safe country they enter. As such, asylum seekers arriving by land in Canada are forced to enter irregularly. In fact, 96% of all irregular crossings in Canada take place at Roxham Rd., about a 45 minute drive from Montreal. The irregular, though fairly safe, can be a traumatizing process, during which the whole family must first be arrested before being taken for processing. From the border, they are taken to the YMCA Residence in downtown Montreal, where they are given a 2-3 week period of food and shelter before they must find their own housing and then find their way. During this period, they face many challenges including, but not limited to: learning a new language(s), finding employment and housing, dealing with the trauma of displacement, lengthy and

complex legal processes, registering children for school, family separation (which may occur due to some family members being detained), integrating into the community and making friends.¹

About the program:

The Tuesday evening Welcome Sessions are a collaborative initiative between the Atwater Library, the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness and MSF Urban Spaces. The programme is supported by the YMCA Residence for Asylum Seekers and PRAIDA (the Quebec Government's programme to welcome asylum seekers). The purpose of the initiative is to welcome newly arrived asylum seekers to Montreal and introduce them to members of the Montreal community as well as to community resources, including the library itself. It is also to foster a sense of solidarity and connectedness between newcomers and Montrealers, and ease --if only momentarily-- the sense of isolation and fear that people feel when they first arrive. Each Tuesday, volunteers go over to the YMCA Residence and walk through the common areas, inviting residents next door to the library for a welcome session with tea, biscuits, and conversation about life in Montreal. Once in the library, volunteers divide into small groups by language. The group conversations centre around

¹ A forthcoming SCSC research will report will describe the mental health impact in the period following post-migration in more detail.

life in Montreal-- how to find out about free events in the city, what the various neighbourhoods in the city are like, where to find language classes at community centres, festivals over the summer, cultural centres, etc. While the adults converse, several volunteers assist by reading books, colouring and playing with the children. Beyond introducing the asylum seekers to the city and to residents who know the city well, these sessions also build shared understanding between Montrealers and newcomers. Montrealers have the opportunity to learn about different cultures and backgrounds and can begin to understand the realities of forced migration.

How this could be replicated:

1. Identify the entry point for newly arrived migrants in your city.

- a. Find out whether there is a shelter where new arrivals stay when they first arrive in your city. In the case of Montreal, this is the YMCA Residence.

2. Find partners. Each of the key players in this collaboration allow a different critical function of the project to be carried out.

- a. Project Management/Coordination:

- i. SCSC: Responsible for the day-to-day functioning and coordination of the project, liaising between partners and volunteers, scheduling, recruitment of volunteers.
- b. Venue
 - i. Identify a location in close proximity (ideally short walking distance), to the shelter in which to hold the sessions. Libraries, community centres, or cultural centres work very well, because they introduce asylum seekers to a space in the community that is free to access, easy to come back to, and opens the door to future opportunities and interactions with community members in the city. It may also offer them resources, like community events, the use of computers, ability to borrow books, etc.
 - ii. Atwater Library
- c. Access to asylum seekers/new arrivals
 - i. Identify the government body responsible for processing and offering official services to asylum seekers, and seek their permission (if necessary) and buy-in. This way they can refer asylum

seekers to you, and vice versa. Having the buy-in of the government also helps to establish the legitimacy of the sessions, and (depending on the context) may help to gain the trust of the participants.

- ii. PRAIDA: This is the arm of the Quebec government responsible for asylum seekers. They view our sessions as complementary to the official services they already offer. Whereas the government offers services to help asylum seekers access the healthcare system, schools, and assistance processing their claims, our informal Welcome Sessions introduce newcomers to community and neighbourhood level resources, social networks, etc.
- d. MSF Urban Spaces (see below in volunteer section)

3. Recruit Volunteers

1. There are several key characteristics to creating an ideal volunteer group:
 - a. Diversity of:

- i. Language: Having multiple language capabilities among each volunteer group is essential and allows for breaking out into smaller groups, and providing more intimate, personalized interactions during the session. In Montreal, the vast majority of asylum seekers speak English, Spanish or French. As such we ensure that these languages are represented every time. When possible, we also have volunteers who speak Portuguese, Arabic, Urdu, Russian (among other languages).
- ii. Age: Asylum seekers come in all ages, and it's wonderful if the volunteers do as well.
- iii. Occupations: This broadens the skills and experiences, and tips on job searching that volunteers can offer.
- iv. Background: helps create the feeling that newcomers are being welcomed into a multicultural environment where they can feel a sense of belonging.
- v. Neighbourhood: Expands the capacity to offer suggestions on where to search for housing, and community-level resources within neighbourhoods.

- b. Low Barrier to Entry:
 - i. Make it easy to volunteer! Of course, it is wonderful to have a committed group who wants to come back each week, but it is equally valuable to have people who do not have as much time to give. We have found that allowing people to give whatever it is they want to offer (even if that means only volunteering 1 or 2 times in the span of 4 months), fosters an even greater enthusiasm to participate.

- c. Make use of MSF Association members:
 - i. The skills, experience, tact and energy of the MSF Asso members are unparalleled! Because many MSFers have worked in the regions from which asylum seekers are coming, they have a deep level of understanding of the kinds of conditions that have forced people to flee.

4. Prep:

- a. Volunteer Meeting: If you have a large pool of volunteers, you are bound to have new faces at each session. Having volunteers get acquainted with each other before each session helps to create a sense of solidarity within the group, and therefore a greater sense of welcome for the asylum seekers. It is also helpful to learn about each volunteer's background, interests, professions, and language capabilities beforehand. That way, you can create a referral network within the session. If Asylum Seeker A wants to know about sending their child to school, and is interested in film, and Volunteer A is an engineering student, she can refer them to Volunteer B who has her own kids in school and works for the local film festival. During the volunteer meeting, volunteers can discuss upcoming free events, or new resources in the city to share with the participants.
- b. Resource Guide: See attached for reference. Especially for volunteers who are unfamiliar with resources available for asylum seekers, this is a good way to guide the conversations, and give the participants something they can take home. Ideally, have multiple translations available.
- c. Recruit your participants: Depending on the context, this can take different forms.

- i. On-the-spot: If your venue, is very close to the shelter/residence from which you are drawing participants, it is possible to go to the shelter 15 minutes before each session and recruit participants. Regardless, it is helpful to promote the sessions in the shelter itself, with a poster, and ensuring shelter staff/volunteers know about it.
- ii. Pre-planned: Partner with groups already working with newcomers and spread the word by email and online.

5. Carry out the Sessions

- a. You're now ready to begin your Welcome Session! It helps to create a welcoming atmosphere by sharing with your participants your objective for the sessions. We typically let everyone know that we are all volunteers from the Montreal community, who want to welcome you to the city, and share with you what we love about the city, as well as helpful tips. Following an initial welcome, split volunteers and participants into groups based on language. Volunteers can first find out what it is their participants want to know. Are they looking for housing? Do they want to know more about the different neighbourhoods? How to survive winter in the city? Where to start free language classes? What kind of free events they can go to? If there are computers available at your venue, use them to pull up different websites, maps of the city, etc.

- b. Designate a few volunteers to play with the children. Ensure there are a variety of materials that could be suitable for a range of age groups-- picture books in multiple languages, colored pens and papers, chapter books for teenagers, or other games.
- c. Stay in touch with the participants. Find a way to collect email addresses so that you can send invitations or updates to the participants, or email them your Resource Guide following the session. You may also like to create a Facebook group, where the participants can ask questions, volunteers can post about events going on around the city, or other helpful tips, and just create more opportunities for community.

6. Vary the content:

- a. On a few occasions, we took the asylum seekers to a nearby park, and held our conversation circles there, while some volunteers played sports with the children. Other times, we invited drama therapists and music therapists to attend, and had more active, fun sessions with games, dancing, music and art.
- b. You can also create mini-workshops within the Welcome Sessions. If there are volunteers with specific talents, such as helping with CV's, offer this as a sub-session.