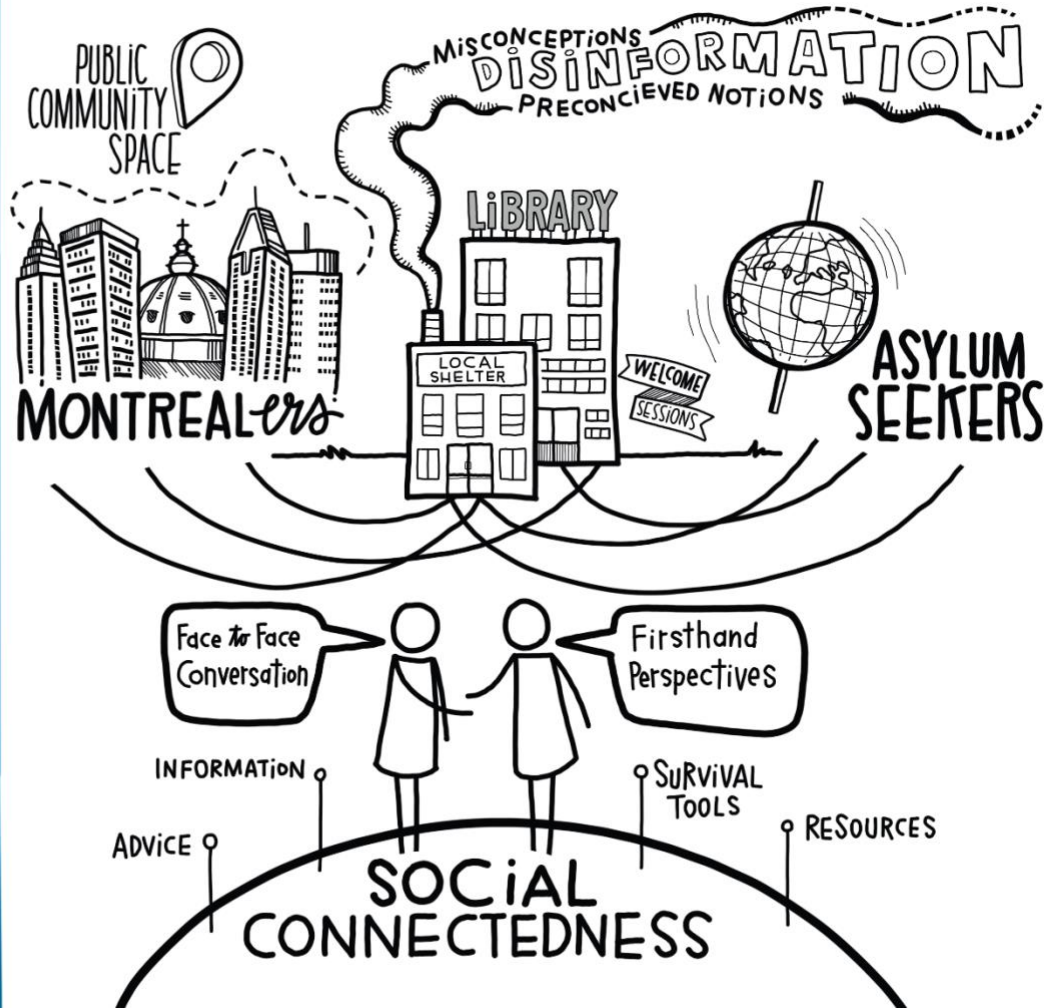


A WORLD WHERE EVERYONE HAS A SENSE OF BELONGING TO COMMUNITY & INDIVIDUALS FEEL EMPOWERED TO TAKE ACTION TO BETTER THEIR COMMUNITY

WELCOME SESSION FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS



Welcome Sessions Toolkit

The Context



Every day, between 60 and 100 asylum seekers arrive in Montreal, after having crossed the border between New York and Quebec to seek asylum. Their countries of origin include – among many others—Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, El Salvador, Nigeria, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Angola, South Sudan, 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 Road, which straddles Champlain, New York and Hemmingford, Quebec, about a 45-minute drive from Montreal. The irregular, albeit fairly safe, crossing can be a traumatizing process, during which the whole family must first be



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arrested before being taken for processing. From the border, they are taken to the YMCA Residence in downtown Montreal, where they are given a two-three 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.

Despite widespread media coverage stating that these are illegal crossings, it is important to note that under Canadian and International Law, if the purpose of the crossing is to seek asylum, it is **not** a punishable offense to cross a border without authorization.



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About the Program



Initiated in April 2019 by the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, the Montreal Welcome Sessions continue to run weekly, thanks to a collaborative effort by a group of dedicated volunteers from the Montreal community, and key partners including *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) Urban Spaces, the Atwater Library and Computer Centre, PRAIDA (*le Programme régionale d'accueil et d'intégration des demandeurs d'asile*), and the YMCA Residence for 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 may feel when they first arrive.



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Each Tuesday, volunteers go over to the YMCA Residence and walk through the common areas, inviting residents next door to the library for an hour of conversation about life in Montreal. Once in the library, volunteers divide into small groups by language. The group conversations offer the opportunity for newcomers to ask questions about life in their new city, and for volunteers to share tips. Topics often include: finding free events in the city, learning about the various neighbourhoods, 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 asylum seekers to the city and to its welcoming residents, these face-to-face exchanges also expose Montrealers to people from different cultures and backgrounds, allowing them to better understand the realities of forced migration. In the process, volunteers become better able to combat misconceptions about migrants, and contribute to building a positive narrative.



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Who's Involved?

Between April and December 2019, the group has conducted **34 Welcome Sessions**, welcoming **over 640 asylum seekers** who have recently arrived (between 0 days and 3 weeks) to Montreal.

Spanish-speakers comprise 56% of the asylum seekers who attend our sessions, **Anglophones 37%**, **Francophones 30%**, **Arabic speakers 5%** and **Portuguese 4%**. Roughly **63%** of the asylum seekers we see are **men**, and **37% are women**. The adults are largely between the ages of **25 and 45**. Many of them come with families. At each session, we host between 15 and 25 adult asylum seekers and typically several children. Asylum seekers come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Some have worked in agriculture their whole lives and have had little to no schooling, while others are doctors, lawyers and engineers.



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Key Partners



- [The Atwater Library and Computer Centre](#): Provides the venue for the sessions, staff to help facilitate, and use of their computers during the sessions.
- [Médecins Sans Frontières \(MSF\) Urban Spaces](#): An initiative that seeks to welcome and integrate migrants in six cities around the world: Montreal, Mexico City, Johannesburg, Athens, Turin, and Istanbul. As a partner of SCSC, the MSF Urban Spaces group in Montreal has been involved in the sessions from the beginning, and played a role by recruiting members of the Quebec Association to volunteer and contributing to the design and strategic growth of the sessions.



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- [The YMCA Residence for Asylum Seekers](#): The YMCA houses asylum seekers for the first two weeks of their arrival. They assist with the promotion of the sessions to their residents and occasionally provide their site as a venue.
- [PRAIDA](#) (*Programme régional d'accueil et d'intégration des demandeurs d'asile*): This is an arm of the Quebec Government responsible for all matters relating to the integration of asylum seekers. PRAIDA provides key information, statistics and support to ensure the volunteer-led activities are complementing the government services.

Other partners include:



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Start Welcome Sessions in Your City

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 the YMCA Residence.

2. **Identify partners.** Each of the key players will allow a different critical function of the project to be carried out.
 - a. Project Management/Coordination
 - i. 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 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.



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It may also offer them resources such as community events, use of computers, ability to borrow books, etc.

- 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.

3. **Recruit volunteers.** There are several key characteristics to creating an ideal team:

- 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



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- represented every time. When possible, we also have volunteers who speak Portuguese, Arabic, Urdu, or Farsi (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 set of skills, experiences, and job searching tips that volunteers can offer.
 - iv. **Background:** Volunteers from a variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds can help foster a greater sense of belonging for newcomers.
 - v. **Neighbourhood:** Volunteers from a variety of neighbourhoods bring a broader knowledge base on where to search for housing, and community-level resources within neighbourhoods.
- b. Low Barrier to Entry:
- i. Make it easy (and fun) to volunteer! It is great to have a committed group who comes back each week, but it is equally valuable to have people who do not have as much time to give. Allowing people to give what they can offer (even if that's only volunteering one or two times in four months), often fosters a greater enthusiasm to participate. We



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also encourage those without prior experience working with migrants to volunteer. All that's required is a motivation to expand the circle, an openness to all cultures, backgrounds, religions, etc., and a willingness to learn!



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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. It is also beneficial for volunteers to learn about each other's backgrounds, 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: Especially for volunteers who are unfamiliar with resources available for asylum seekers, creating a Resource guide is a good basis from which to facilitate the conversations and give the participants something they can take home. Ideally, have multiple translations available.



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- 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 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 sessions! Create a welcoming atmosphere by sharing your objective with participants. We let everyone know that we are all volunteers from the Montreal community, and we want to welcome them to the city; to share what we love about the city, and offer helpful tips. Following an initial welcome, split volunteers and participants into groups based on language.



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- 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 ages—picture books, chapter books, coloured pens and papers, or other games.
- c. Volunteers conversing with adults can begin by providing participants with the resource guide, introducing themselves, and learning a bit more about the participants. Volunteers can then facilitate the conversation according to what the participants wish to know more about. 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.
- d. Stay in touch with the participants. Collect email addresses so that you can send invitations or updates or email them your Resource Guide following the session. You may also create a Facebook group, where participants can ask questions and volunteers can post about events or opportunities in the community.



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Diversify the Sessions

Occasionally, we take the asylum seekers to a nearby park and hold our conversation circles there while some volunteers play sports with the children. Other times, we invited drama and music therapists to attend, and had more active, fun sessions with games, dancing, music and art. We also held a “Welcome to Montreal” holiday party in December.



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Testimonials from Asylum Seekers

“I have been here only a day and a half, and until you [the volunteers] came, I’ve felt hopeless and frustrated. Arriving here was an emotional and mental shock. Just today, I was reaching my breaking point emotionally, and then the volunteers arrived and gave us a wonderful experience, a walk on the mountain. We felt calm and relaxed for the first time since arriving. It is like a kind of yoga, or meditation, something spiritual, a hope, that everything will be fine.”

— *Monica, Age 40, Mexico*

“I came to Canada to be safe. Tonight, here at the library was amazing, to visit and talk with the very nice people and learn information.”

— *Samer, Age 18, Iraq*



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Testimonials from Volunteers

“As someone who works for the philanthropic sector, sometimes I feel we spend too much time sitting on our desks and looking at data on migration, climate change and inequality. That helps us guide our work, but I think we also need to go outside, leave our offices, our ivory towers, and experience the day-to-day challenges that people are facing. Through this welcome group, we get an opportunity to connect with those who need help the most. And to actually be put out of our comfort zones. When I volunteer at the sessions, I am reminded that in the end, we're all the same regardless of where we come from. We all struggle with the same things— with loneliness, isolation and lack of a sense of belonging.” — *Jorge*



When I leave here, I feel as if I've made a little bit of a difference—not huge—but when they thank me at the end of the session, I feel as if I've given them something practical and useful. It's really a small investment for what we can provide.” — *Andréanne*



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Of course, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to welcoming newcomers, and there will be different obstacles, opportunities, and contexts of migration in each community. If you are interested in beginning Welcome Sessions in your community, and are looking for support, advice or materials, reach out to us at commonthreads@scscglobal.org.



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