

Good going for Foundation

Last year was a stellar year for the Foundation of Greater Montreal (FGM). Donations reached \$58.8 million – the largest in its 18-year history – bringing its total endowment capital to \$248 million. To date the FGM has distributed more than \$28 million in grants to over 1000 charitable organizations in Greater Montreal. In 2017, the Foundation will be investing \$1.6 million to support 71 projects in 20 target areas in city.

Founded in 1999*, the FGM administers funds from donors who want to contribute to betterment of the community. Donors can set up personal, family or corporate foundations within the FGM to benefit their designated charitable causes, or contribute to allocations made by the FGM to support community organizations involved in health and social services, culture, environment, sports and family issues.

One of the signature activities of the Foundation is its annual publication, *Vital Signs*, a summary of the health and vitality of communities within the Greater Montreal area. Each addresses an issue or challenge that marks the quality of life of Montrealers, with a view to helping guide public policies and practices. It also influences the choice of projects the Foundation will support in future.

The 2017 edition of *Vital Signs* will focus on children. The Foundation will be drawing a global portrait of the situation in which the city's young people are living, touching on those elements affecting their lives and their healthy development. Such issues as homelessness, poverty, mental health and domestic violence will be explored. Children themselves will be consulted for their ideas and solutions that they would propose on issues that touch them directly. The report will be published in October. For information: 514 866 0808.

*(The Red Feather Foundation was one of the founding members of the FGM, creating an endowment fund of \$500,000 to establish the Red Feather Fund, to be administered by the FGM for projects benefitting the community.)

New ideas for old agency

Now marking its 80th year, the Volunteer Bureau of Montreal (VBM) is poised to adopt significant change in its future operations. New executive director **Pierre Morrissette** is looking to both broaden the Bureau's ties and deepen its base. He is also bent on securing a more stable financial situation for the agency.

"We are a very strong organization," Morrissette affirms, "but in the last few years, a significant drop in funding has forced some serious staff cuts. My first task is to improve our financial base to maintain our services and build on them."

Developing corporate membership in the Bureau is central to this plan. "I see a greater interplay with the business world," says Morrissette. "We do get lots of support for many one-off projects, but instead of just asking for donations, we can partner with companies to develop employee-oriented volunteer policies for them. We would be the intermediary between business and community organizations needing volunteers. This is happening successfully elsewhere in Canada, but hasn't been tried yet here."

Stronger ties with member organizations is another goal. "We want to add value to our services so that current members stay with us and others join," explains Morrissette. "We'll involve them more with governance and participation in our action plan – it is their Bureau, after all. In April, we'll be starting a new series of activities to allow for more synergy among member organizations. There is a lot of experience and expertise among them; we can all benefit from an interchange of ideas. And our training programs for volunteer management will be updated, with new content and new approaches."

The VBM is the largest of seven volunteer bureaus in Montreal. Last year it received over 1,600 requests for volunteering, and made over 2,000 volunteer referrals to client organizations. Forty-five per cent of Bureau volunteers speak languages other than English or French, while 35 per cent of them are recent immigrants.

AMI at forty

Faced with the burden of coping alone with a mentally-ill family member, four Montreal couples in 1997 decided to join forces for mutual support and encouragement. That was the beginning of Action on Mental Illness, AMI-Québec, an organization that has become a key resource for family caregivers and a pioneer in opening channels of communication on the subject of mental illness.

“It’s been central to our existence to continuously fight against stigma,” affirms **Ella Amir**, executive director for the past 26 years. “More people are more aware of mental illness today, and those affected are less hesitant to seek help, but there is still a long way to go. Too often the families are identified by healthcare professionals as the culprit in mental illness. That continues to be a very sensitive issue.”

AMI serves its clients through a variety of workshops, discussion groups and programs. Over 5,000 people participated in its outreach programs last year. It has nurtured partnerships and collaboration among other community groups province-wide to advance the cause. AMI has also spearheaded the introduction of school programs that teach resiliency to young people. “We’re now into social media too,” says Amir. “We want to keep reaching out to that younger demographic because the number of young people who are care-giving in their families is astounding. They can use our help.”

Food for thought

The SouthWest United Church and Mission in Verdun has introduced a program to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to the community, especially seniors, at affordable prices and in small amounts that are suitable for people living alone. As well as encouraging healthy eating habits, these “mini-markets” provide isolated Verduners an opportunity to socialize. Plans are now under way to take the markets to people who cannot get to the church, especially those living in social housing. For further information: 514 567 7756.

Services to Black seniors

Social isolation, a serious and growing problem among Quebec’s elderly population, is the focus of a pilot project recently launched by the African Canadian Development and Prevention Network (ACDPN). The goal is to seek out vulnerable English-speaking Black seniors and guide them into programs and services that will enhance their wellbeing. The two-year project is being carried out in Côte-des-Neiges, LaSalle and NDG.

“Those are the neighbourhoods where we have the highest concentrations of Black seniors,” says **Tania Callender**, executive director. “In a total of 2250, there are 925 living alone, and 780 are living in relative poverty. We’ve come to realize that for various reasons some are not comfortable availing themselves of support services and programs that are actually available for them. So there are a lot of Black seniors who need our help. The challenge is to reach them.”

That will be done by volunteers. The ACDPN has started recruiting for people who will seek out these at-risk seniors and help them break out of isolation. “The objective is two-fold,” Callender explains. “We want to get them out of the house and become active in community events but, more importantly, we’ll provide them with the help necessary to navigate the health and social services system.”

A key element of this project is that it includes both senior and young volunteers. “It will work on a buddy-system basis, with volunteer pairs out meeting with isolated individuals,” says Callender. “This inter-generational approach is different from our other programs, but we think it will be effective and beneficial to all participants. Many members of both generations are immigrants who lack extended family relations here, their core families are too busy to visit or live at a distance, and many young Blacks have no grandparents here. I see a lot of exchange happening. There has been very good response to our recruitment so far; I’m glad that so many people want to make a difference.” For information: 514 737 3213, ext. 300.

Hidden homeless need help

Usually considered an affluent suburb of Montreal, the West Island nonetheless contains striking pockets of poverty from which has emerged a disturbing and growing number of homeless youth. “We call it invisible homelessness,” says **Tania Charron**, business development manager with AJOI (Action jeunesse de l’ouest-de-l’Île), an organization dedicated to seeking out and helping these young people. “They couch-surf among friends or crowd in large numbers into one apartment. Some exchange domestic or sexual services for a place to sleep.”

AJOI was formed 10 years ago to help such young people, hiring street workers to seek them out on the street, in parks and local hangouts. “We listen to them,” explains Charron, “and we offer support, referrals to healthcare services and accompaniment. Total numbers are difficult to determine, but we get at least two calls a week from young people with no place to sleep. They don’t want to go home.”

Several elements contribute to this situation: poverty, single-parent households, conflicts between immigrant parents and children trying to integrate. In turn these issues lead to high dropout rates, substance abuse, gang activities and mental health problems. The areas most affected are east Pierrefonds and east Dollard-des-Ormeaux.

“The major problem is that there are no resources at all in the region to help these kids,” says Charron. “We have to accompany them to services downtown, where they’re exposed to even more risk factors. There is a desperate need for a local facility to accommodate them over short periods while they’re getting help. It’s becoming increasingly urgent.”

That is why AJOI has launched a campaign to set up a youth-specific shelter that would provide accommodation and in-place support systems. “We’re now getting important support from the community,” says Charron. “A feasibility study has been done, architectural plans prepared, and meetings held with local groups involved in social services. I’m very optimistic about this project.”

Lifting language barriers

With all good will, there are frequent incidents where francophone public healthcare providers and English-speaking seniors experience serious difficulty in communicating with each other. As stressful for the caregiver as for the client, language barriers are costing the healthcare system money and time, as well as emotional anguish. The East Island Network for English-language services, REISA, has come up with a simple and straightforward approach to the problem that seems to work.

“We’ve developed tools that homecare workers can use to assess their language capacities so that those with more proficiency can intercede in cases where required,” explains **Janet Forsythe**, REISA advisor. “We piloted them at two CLSCs in the East End where individual workers evaluated their own second-language competency and cited occasions when they did experience a language barrier.

“That was a real eye opener,” Forsythe says. “Managers thought there was no problem because they assumed most workers speak enough English to handle problem situations. But 56 per cent of staff said that because of language lapses they were not satisfied with the quality of their relationships with patients; 40 per cent worried about risk to clients.”

The upshot of that test was that each homecare team now knows which colleagues have sufficient English-language fluency to be called upon for help in an emergency. And there are now plans to adopt this approach for 10 CLSCs in the region.

Coaching caregivers

The Assistance and Referral Centre (ARC) is offering anglophones on the South Shore courses in caregiving. Called ReCharge, the six-week course is teaching how to prevent falls among the elderly, reduce the spread of infection and what actions to take during emergencies. It will also provide information on available health and social services in English. For information: 450 812 0981.

New public health plan

In January, the Montreal regional public health directorate launched a five-year Regional Public Health Action Plan that will involve the region's five CIUSSSs and partners from all health sectors. Its purpose is to find common priorities and to coordinate actions of the players involved.

The focus is on prevention, and the new plan has four strategic sections: holistic development of children and youth; promotion and creation of healthy and safe lifestyles and environments; prevention and control of infectious diseases; and management of health risks and threats and emergency preparedness. Prevention today, live better tomorrow is its theme.

Mergers in mental health

The Mental Illness Foundation (MIF) and the Fondation Québec Jeunes have joined forces to form the Fondation Jeunes en Tête. Together, they will be providing financial support to 30 organizations that assist youngsters aged 11 to 18 years who suffer or are at risk for mental illness.

Over the past five years, these foundations distributed some \$3.3 million to community groups involved in 300 inner-city schools across the province. The programs they manage are aimed at resolving such problems as addiction, bullying and school drop-out. The new foundation will continue this support.

Information for nonprofits

The Centre for Community Organizations (COCO) is offering some helpful guidelines to management of nonprofit organizations. Available on its website, they cover such topics as: How to make your AGM great, not just necessary; six things to consider when developing a website for your nonprofit organization; and measuring your board's efficiency. Contact: www.coco-net.org.

In brief

Gerry Lafferty, a director of the New Hope Senior Citizens' Centre, has been awarded a National Assembly's outstanding service award.

Nicolas Steinmetz was presented with the Sovereign's Medal for Volunteers by the Governor-General of Canada.

Samuel Watts was appointed CEO-executive director of the Welcome Hall Mission.

Centraide of Greater Montreal has announced a return of over \$55 million in its 2016 annual fund-raising campaign.

The Salvation Army is celebrating its 135th anniversary this year.

Welcome Hall Mission marks its 125th anniversary.

St. Columba House is 100 years old this year.

Chez Doris is 40 years old this year.

The Lighthouse celebrates the 10th birthday of its unique pediatric palliative care facility.

A conference on school-based mental health will be held on March 31 at the Holiday Inn in Pointe-Claire. For information: AMI-Québec: 514 486 1448.

REISA is holding a forum that will address the availability of services for English-speakers with special needs on April 27. It is to be held at the Leonardo de Vinci Centre, 8370 boul. Lacordaire. For information: 514 955 8370, ext. 2217.

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The editor welcomes story ideas: 514 937 4309.

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