



PROGRAMMING FOR PARTICIPATION:

Building Partnerships with the Immigrant Newcomer Community

By Chryss Mylopoulos

Public libraries are gradually getting more involved in partnerships with community-based organizations with which they share the same vision, mission, and philosophy regarding services to their culturally diverse communities. The benefits from such an involvement can be significant in areas such as:

- Knowledge sharing and exchange
- Expanding the scope of service
- Promotion of the service
- Accessing community resources

There has also been a growing recognition of partnerships as a value that provides opportunities for city-supported services such as public libraries to form alliances or to link up with other sectors, including the private sector, and strengthen their image as an important community resource accessible to the immigrant public.

Under the umbrella of multicultural library services, the Toronto Public Library got involved in partnerships focusing on immigrant settlement services and on facilitating access to information related to newcomer and immigrant needs. As a result of this relationship the public library has become very close to the immigrant services sector, which has grown in sophistication and importance over the past years, and engaged them in the planning of programs and services.

The Immigrant Settlement Services

The immigrant services sector resembles a “community of practice”—to borrow and apply a term coined by Etienne Wenger, a pioneer in communities of practice related to corporations and their organizational structure. It is a commu-

nity that includes a group of people who know each other, connect in a helping way, and work toward developing a sense of common good practices when dealing with newcomer individuals and groups. Through sharing of insights and experiences these communities have also managed to create a valuable knowledge network around common problems faced by newcomers, offering possible solutions as well as approaches.

The settlement sector is valuable in serving as a sounding board for organizations that need expertise and information on the “unique realities of immigrants and refugees” (OCASI fact sheet, 1996). According to a report written by Francis Frisken and Marcia Wallace of York University in Toronto, immigrant settlement “is recognized as a localized phenomenon and as a highly localized activity that intersects with the activities of a large number of local political institutions and a network of community agencies.” An organization such as the public library needs to recognize the role of this community and acknowledge its expertise and the invaluable contributions it makes toward the settlement and integration of the new immigrants. In particular, the library also needs to recognize the fact that the settlement sector’s firsthand knowledge of newcomer communities can help, first by informing the library’s decisions about the type of services needed and second, in bringing the newcomers closer to the library.

Most important of all, the public library as a local political institution should join the settlement sector in this network and contribute its expertise, knowledge, and other skills as well as its facilities to maximize the benefits to the immigrant community. As the document “A Social Development Strategy for the City of Toronto” (2001) points out, “Local

community cultural centers,...libraries...are important community resources which must be accessible for public use.”

The Toronto Environment: Facts and Figures

Before I describe the settlement program in which the Toronto Public Library is involved, I would like to give a snapshot of the immigrant and refugee communities in the city. The 2001 Census revealed that 49 percent of Toronto's total population of 2,456,000 was born outside Canada, 46 percent of residents reported a mother tongue other than English, and close to 30 percent of city residents primarily speak a language besides English at home.

According to Statistics Canada, the major recent source countries for immigration were China, India, Pakistan, Philippines, Korea, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Romania. In regards to the refugee population between 1991 and 2001, Toronto received approximately 100,000 refugees belonging to all categories, such as refugee claimants and Geneva Convention refugees. Averaged on an annual basis, Toronto receives between 5,000 and 10,000 refugees, accounting for 30-35 percent of the total refugees coming to the country.

How the Partnership with the Immigrant Sector Started

The Settlement and Education Partnerships in Toronto (SEPT) program, as it relates to public libraries, grew out of the close connection that existed between the Multicultural Services in the East Region of the Toronto Public Library (formerly Scarborough Public Library before the amalgamation of all regional libraries into the Toronto Public Library in 1998) and the immigrant settlement sector. When the SEPT program was first introduced, it operated only in schools. Yet many immigrants arrived close to the end of the school year, and it became evident that the settlement workers needed a space to meet the newcomers and their families during summer. The library, a public and neutral place with many branches located all over the city, was thought to be a good place for this program during the summer months.

However, when the multicultural coordinator of the East Region first approached the new East Region director in the spring of 1999 and requested that consideration be given to the idea of the library becoming the place for the summer SEPT program, the idea was met with a negative response. The director feared that having consulting and referral services for immigrants in the library would lead to other social agencies demanding library space. Clearly this view demonstrated a lack of understanding of the nature of immigrant settlement services, and the significance and contributions of

the settlement workers working at the library and bringing hundreds of people closer to this institution. It also underscored a shortsightedness regarding the value of such a partnership in a culturally diverse and immigrant-based city.

The director's refusal delayed the involvement of the library for a year, and it was not until the next year, in June 2000, when SEPT, adopting another strategy, officially approached the administration of the amalgamated Toronto Public Library to request a sharing of facilities. The administration collectively accepted the recommendation, approved the hosting of the program that year, and suggested an evaluation of the program in 12 months to determine its future. In 2001 the program began in a coherent organized fashion.

The Partnership: SEPT Program

SEPT is a primary example of a partnership and the first of its kind between federal levels of government (Citizenship and Immigration Canada) and public institutions (schools, public libraries, parks and recreation facilities) funded by federal, provincial, and city taxes and widely supported by all three as a result of the continuous advocacy by the immigrant settlement sector of the city. SEPT is most closely a partnership between the Toronto School Boards and agencies in the immigrant settlement sector funded by Citizenship Immigration Canada. Settlement workers employed by community agencies work as the school settlement workers (SSWs) of the SEPT Program. The schools and the agencies have formed seven clusters to coordinate the work of SSWs. The program started in 1998-9 with settlement workers assigned to selected schools. After five years in operation it has been expanded to include both public and Catholic schools and employ more workers. The public library and Parks and Recreation joined the SEPT summer program in 2000.

The purpose of the program is to assist newcomers during their initial adjustment period by using schools as a base to meet newcomers; by providing settlement information, translation and interpretation; and by linking and referring new immigrants to programs in schools and community.

Organizational Structure

SEPT currently has a coordinator from the immigrant sector community, a Steering Committee, a cluster coordinator, a Library SEPT coordinator, and SEPT liaisons from each local library. The schools and the agencies in each of the seven clusters have agreed that one agency will act as the lead. The agency hires the cluster coordinator, who works closely with the school principals and coordinates the work of SSWs. The lead agency also hires the school settlement workers.

The director feared that having consulting and referral services for immigrants in the library would lead to other social agencies demanding library space. Clearly this view demonstrated a lack of understanding of the nature of immigrant settlement services, and the significance and contributions of the settlement workers working at the library and bringing hundreds of people closer to this institution.

The school settlement workers (SSWs) are based in elementary and secondary schools during the school year and link newcomer families and students to services that promote settlement. Using the school as a base, they meet with parents and children, provide information and answer questions, and link parents with various programs within the school and the community. SSWs help newcomers learn about services and community programs and overcome difficulties they may experience when integrating into the society.

SEPT Program at the Library

The library summer program was approved in 2000, and it was a pilot program in 2000-2001. It was approved on a long-term basis in 2002 and has expanded from 15 to 29 libraries. During the two summer months of July and August, the library offers its facilities in 29 library locations to settlement agencies and their staff to provide consultation and information and referral in the immigrant's home language for a few days a week.

The purpose of the partnership is to allow the SSWs to use the public library as a base to meet families during the summer, when school is not in session. During these meetings, the SSWs provide settlement information, translation, and interpretation; assist newcomers with information and referrals to a wide range of services in the city; and identify and try to resolve their more specific needs. Secondly, because of their extended outreach activities, the SSWs bring people to the library, promote awareness and understanding of the library as a community resource, and extend support for the services and programs at the library.

Benefits of SEPT Program at the Local Library

The settlement workers are an excellent resource for the staff. They benefit and assist the local library in:

- communicating with members of the community in languages other than English
- reaching out to the newcomers and attracting them to the library
- creating awareness of library resources and services in the newcomer/immigrant community
- providing staff with background information about the cultural diversity of the community
- informing staff about reading interests and information needs of newcomers and other immigrants
- assisting the library in organizing information/orientation programs
- assisting in the preparation of joint library/SEPT promotional materials in newcomers' languages

Benefits of Developing a Partnership with SEPT

As we see above, there are definite benefits for individual libraries hosting a SEPT program. But the partnership with SEPT benefits the library as an organization by:

- building up contacts and developing an ongoing liaison with immigrant serving community-based agencies and

the School Boards

- tapping the most recent information that is gathered either by settlement agencies or School Boards on newcomer groups and languages
- using this information to inform allocation of resources, programs, and services

What Kind of Information Is Requested

Through this program hundreds of newcomers visited the library and were introduced to its programs and services. In all, 3,000 newcomers came to the library for SEPT meetings in 2000, 2001, and 2002. There was a 60 percent increase in 2002 over the previous year. Eighty-five percent of the newcomers had been in Canada less than six months.

Newcomers, both immigrants and refugees, requested information and referrals in the following areas, identifying and reaffirming their information priorities:

- Employment, language training
- Education and the school system
- Libraries and recreation
- Health, childcare, housing, immigration rules, and finances

Success Factors within the Library

Over the first three years of operation we concluded that the success of the program at the libraries had to do with a number of factors. The first was the awareness of the program on the part of library staff. Presentations by SEPT program staff at library staff meetings were crucial in this respect. Following the initial presentation, regular meetings between library staff and the SSWs helped to establish an ongoing communication and a feeling of partnership.

Logistical factors included availability of space and other facilities such as desks and tables, computers, and phone access. Staff time had to be allotted to provide a local library orientation to the SSWs stationed at each library. Successful libraries also organized library orientation tours and group education programs for newcomers, which introduced the library catalog, the collection, and facilities for using the Internet. Finally, the successful libraries engaged in promotional activities and arranged an informational display on settlement resources, such as a poster with SEPT service hours at the library.

External Success Factors

In addition to factors originating within the library, there were others related to the community and SEPT organization. These included the location of the library in a neighborhood with many new immigrants, the accessibility of the library, especially to public transportation, the lack of competing settlement agencies in the area, consistent and organized outreach to targeted communities on the part of the SEPT program, and frequent and regular SEPT service hours at the library. Other factors had to do with the SSWs themselves: that there were enough to staff the library-based program, that they educated themselves to take full advantage of the

library's resources, and that they had sufficient facility in the languages spoken in the surrounding area.

Success Measures/Indicators

Each year the program is evaluated by Citizenship and Immigration Canada-appointed evaluators, but in addition to the federal-level evaluation, the library uses criteria that relate to the purpose of having the program at its facilities. The following indicators have been used to determine whether the program was successful from the library perspective:

- Number of people who were introduced to the library by SSWs
- Participation of the immigrants in library orientation activities and events and in other "user education programs" with the assistance of SSWs
- Referrals to and participation in library programs such as children's summer programs
- Information offered by SSWs to library staff on demographic changes in the community
- Building ongoing liaison with SSWs and their respective agencies and participation of the library in orientation programs during the school year
- Library publicity provided in other languages with the assistance of SSWs for translation and distribution

The success of the partnership of SEPT with the Toronto Public Library during the two summer months has led to discussions on similar partnerships with the public libraries

in other cities and regions. The program has now expanded to the cities of Hamilton, Kitchener/Waterloo, and Ottawa, and the Peel and York regions in the Province of Ontario.

It is very encouraging to see that the value of a collaborative partnership between public libraries and the immigrant services sector is finally recognized and pursued. This is the true meaning of practicing multiculturalism at the public library.



Sources

Ethnocultural Portrait-2001 Census. (2001). Toronto: Urban Planning and Development Services.

Friskien, F. and Wallace, M. (2001). *Immigrants and Municipal Services: Client Perspectives.* Toronto: York University.

Immigration Overview: Facts and Figures. (2002). Ottawa: Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

Scarborough Network of Immigrant Service Organizations. (2000). *Building Effective Partnerships: A Resource Manual for Community Agencies.* Toronto: Scarborough Network of Immigrant Service Organizations.

Toronto Community and Neighborhood Services. (2001). *A Social Development Strategy for the City of Toronto.* Toronto: City of Toronto.

Chryss Mylopoulos was the multicultural services specialist at the Toronto Public Library from 1981 to 2003. She presented an earlier version of this article at a symposium on immigrant and refugee communities at the joint meeting of the Canadian Library Association and the American Library Association in Toronto in June 2003. E-mail address: chryss@cs.toronto.edu.



Available Now!

ONCE UPON A CUENTO

a YA collection of short fiction by Latina/o writers
edited by Lyn Miller-Lachmann

These stories explore heritage and history, identity, language, and relationships, from the perspective of Chicano, Cuban American, Dominican American, and Puerto Rican writers: Carmen T. Bernier-Grand, Luna Calderón, Diane De Anda, D. H. Figueredo, Xavier Garza, Juleyka Lantigua, Lorraine López, Nicholasa Mohr, Fernando Ramírez, Malín Alegría Ramírez, Alvaro Saar Ríos, Nelly Rosario, Virgil Suárez, and Sergio Troncoso.

1-880684-99-3 • \$15.95 paperback
distributed by Consortium

CURBSTONE PRESS

www.curbstone.org