

# How Canada's libraries are bridging social-service gaps

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**August 20, 2019**

**RABBLE SERIES** (</NEWS-STORY-TYPE/RABBLE-SERIES>)





building's entrance. Students with bulging backpacks meander at the top of the steps, while parents hold squirming toddlers in their arms and wait for the building to open.

The entrance of the new central branch of the Calgary Public Library -- which opened on November 1, 2018 -- doesn't really feel like a library at all. The airy \$245-million space is packed with more than just books. It boasts a recording studio, interactive history exhibits, a book escalator that shuttles books from the drop bin up to a sorting room and an interfaith room where patrons can pray or meditate. The building feels like an amalgam of a library and an architect's attempt to earn a spot on a tourist's must-see list. But to some, it represents much more. It is a vision for public libraries to come. Cities like Ottawa are looking to replicate Calgary's success with its own forthcoming central library branch, and Edmonton, whose new central branch will open in February 2020.

Users of the third-floor computer station offer up a smorgasbord of demographics normally found at any public library: a female library staff member teaches an elderly man how to manipulate a mouse to check his emails; young professionals work through an online distance course together; a man speaks to someone over Skype -- raising his voice slightly -- as he recounts how his clothes were taken from him at a nearby shelter.

But hiding amid the blinking computer screens and between the pages of the books there is one truth about the library -- it's an institution greater than that of just the Calgary Public Library -- a public institution that has survived centuries.

For more than two decades, public libraries in North America have had to prove their worth to sustain funding. Their mere existence hinged on pushing back against budget cuts. They've countered questions about their relevance in a digital age and where access to information -- regardless of whether or not it's accurate -- has permeated the mainstream.

The library has its champions, but politicians rarely include more funding for libraries as one of their top campaign promises. According to Eric Klinenberg, author of *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization and the Decline of Civic Life*, elected officials think that a public institution that lends out printed resources in the 21st century seems almost quaint, if not obsolete. Regardless, he believes that "the library is among the most critical forms of social infrastructure that we have."

And he's not alone.



the public supported removing books and shelves from the library in favour of new technologies -- a ripple also felt in Canada as book publishers pivoted towards **pushing out more ebook content** (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/will-books-survive-as-libraries-turn-the-page-in-the-digital-age-1.2617801>). But just a year later, Pew had found that **attitudes on discarding physical books had cooled** (<https://www.pewinternet.org/2016/09/09/libraries-2016/>), suggesting that the digital takedown of libraries wasn't as widespread as previously thought.

Meanwhile, the traditional guardians and curators of information -- librarians -- have been stretched beyond the confines of their traditional roles. Each day they work with patrons struggling with mental health issues, homelessness or addictions. Librarians do what they do best -- trying to connect these patrons with resources and information, but increasingly many are realizing they just can't do it alone.

Social workers began teaming up with librarians nearly a decade ago with a trend that started on the West Coast of the United States where higher homeless populations had begun to change the clientele of libraries in states like California. According to the 2009 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, there were 133,129 homeless people living in that state. That same year, the San Francisco Public Library was the first North American library **to hire a social worker** (<https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-biz-libraries-hire-social-workers-1027-story.html>), after serious safety concerns, such as drug use, violence and people having sex in the library's washrooms could no longer be ignored. Adding more security personnel wasn't a sustainable long-term solution for the well-being of these vulnerable library patrons. Now, there are more than 30 public libraries with social workers in the United States. At least eight public libraries have social or outreach workers in Canada -- the city of Edmonton having one of the oldest and most well-established of these programs.

In high-density urban centres, daily interactions with someone sleeping on city streets is just part of what it means to be a modern-day librarian in Edmonton.

"I really like the hustle and bustle of things downtown -- there's adrenaline," says Richard Thornley. He's a former biochemist turned librarian -- the current manager of the downtown Enterprise Square branch at the Edmonton Public Library.

"I've been assaulted, and while I don't welcome that, those situations really force you to think about what you did to contribute to the situation. Working downtown really tests me every day," he says.



new Canadians and vulnerable populations, while the Idylwyld branch in the Bonnie Doon neighbourhood -- a nod to Alberta's first premier Alexander Cameron Rutherford's Scottish roots -- has a high number of Francophone patrons.

The Abbottsfield-Penny McKee branch in northeast Edmonton doesn't quite resemble a traditional library from the outside. It's housed in a strip-mall style building, although later this year it'll move to a new location one block east. The colourful rectangles of the Edmonton Public Library's logo, meant to resemble book spines, stands out against the concrete backdrop.

The branch serves many vulnerable individuals living in a lower socioeconomic neighbourhood with a diverse ethnic make-up. The neighbourhood also has one of the largest First Nations, Inuit and Métis populations in the city.

Inside the building, all the desktop computers are in use, but some users are hunched over their keyboards, nearly asleep in their chairs.

"It really is a third space, particularly in an area like this where we have so many people experiencing homelessness, this is literally their living room," branch manager Margo Till-Rogers says. "If you're coming into your living room, you're going to expect that you can be comfortable, you can trust that you'll be safe and that you'll be heard."

The room is small, but cozy -- dotted with colourful library book displays, bright red computer chairs and interactive children's activity stations. The gaming and computer consoles are usually a big hit with children and teenagers at this branch because they may not have access to these devices at home. Some don't even have Internet, says Till-Rogers.

"At this branch in particular we are extraordinarily relationship focused," she says. "We greet everyone that comes here. We often can do it by first name."

Calling people by their first name can be used as a security precaution -- making it clear to patrons that they are physically seen by staff as they walk in, but also as a means of recognizing them as an individual. It could also be the only human-to-human interaction they have that day.

"It may be the only time they hear their name in a day," Till-Rogers says. "That's pretty powerful, and that's what makes me want to come to work. That's why I'm a librarian."



The outreach team was conceived as a limited three-year pilot project in 2011 funded through a provincial program called the Safe Communities Innovation Fund. The project required a stringent evaluation process and expected a high return on investment in the program, which was reported back to the provincial government. The program wasn't without its critics -- people who thought it would attract problems to the library, says Thornley.

"The goal wasn't actually to bring more vulnerable people to the library, but to work with the vulnerable people who were using the library anyway," he says.

Since 2015, three full-time outreach worker positions have been added to the library's staff, based mostly out of the Enterprise Square branch, but they do occasionally work at other branches. Initially, the outreach worker would wander through the library to connect with patrons. Now the outreach team has its own office space to allow conversations with more privacy.

According to Thornley, people who use the library's outreach services are usually going through multiple stressors at the same time such as addictions, mental health, food security or divorce -- but it's not up to the library to define what issue should be tackled first. It's about letting the patron express to the outreach worker what their needs are at that moment.

For Thornley, it's difficult to define a typical day. He walks around the library and talks with patrons, paying special attention to those he's been concerned about, interacting with the security team, and handling patron complaints "about the size of the library: it's not big enough or it's too big, there aren't enough computers or that there are too many of 'those people' in the library."

By those people -- Thornley refers to homeless patrons or other vulnerable patrons that may be dealing with addictions or struggling with mental health disorders. In one instance, the Edmonton Public Library worked with an individual who had been banned because of bad behaviour from Alberta Hospital -- a mental health institution in northeast Edmonton. So long as these patrons haven't done anything wrong in the library, Thornley says, they are still welcome here.

For homeless patrons -- each day is fraught with challenges, like finding a safe and dry place to sleep at night, accessing healthcare for chronic illnesses or knowing where they can spend their days without being asked to leave for loitering.



The reaction from Winnipeggers was swift. Millennium for All -- a community group who opposes the recent library security changes -- organized **a read-in to protest the new security measures on April 2** (<https://www.facebook.com/events/303181287020286/>), saying that these bag checks disproportionately affected homeless individuals. It's not uncommon to see homeless patrons lugging a buggy, stroller or wheelie bag containing clothes, food, a hot plate and other necessities into the library with them.

Two days after the read-in where protesters peacefully demonstrated in the library's lobby, a city committee ordered a verbal report about security incidents at the library be delivered back to the city.

Joelle Schmidt with the City of Winnipeg's communications team said the decision to add security measures was based on a marked increase in the severity of incidents in the library, though she did not say how many incidents occurred or the nature of these incidents.

"The Millennium Library remains a welcoming place for all," Schmidt replied in a March 12 emailed statement. "The front lobby area is open extended hours where people are able to take shelter from the elements. In addition, the library also has two community crisis workers on staff who are qualified to assess and assist as required. Staff and crisis workers continually reach out to social organizations to discuss ideas on how to reduce harm and better reach vulnerable people in the library."

### **The Winnipeg Free Press reported in late June**

(<https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/cherry-picked-data-drove-security-increase-at-millennium-library-advocate-511852752.html>) that an advocacy group accused library management and city staff of having "deliberately exaggerated incidents of violence" as grounds to implement security scans, not unlike those found at an airport.

Other Canadian libraries have introduced library policies that could disproportionately affect homeless people navigating the shelter system. In 2016, libraries in **Newmarket** (<https://www.yorkregion.com/news-story/6498500-newmarket-library-ceo-apologizes-for-odour-letter-/>) and **Kingston** (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/kingston-library-code-of-conduct-homeless-1.3555734?cmp=rss>), Ontario, were criticized for new policies that banned foul body odour -- which many advocacy groups said mostly impacted the homeless who use the library.



"It was increasingly stressful on staff to be seeing this diverse group of people who they weren't feeling they could help or give them the supports they needed," says Laura Reed, a Mississauga library manager. "We aren't social workers, we don't have that background, and don't necessarily have that same skillset."

With cooperation from the city's recreation department, staff at the library drafted a proposal for Innovative Solutions to Homelessness, a microgrant offered by Employment and Social Development Canada. The competition was open to non-profits, municipal governments and Indigenous groups whose projects set out to reduce and prevent homelessness in Canada.

Peel Region -- an area that includes Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon -- reported in 2017 that nearly 17 per cent of its residents lived below the poverty line.

Of the 50 microgrant recipients across the country, Mississauga was the only library system to receive a grant from the organization. With \$122,524 in federal financing, Mississauga created the Open Window Hub. The one-year program offered a drop-in space and support for Mississauga's homeless populations, as well as training for library staff to help them de-escalate verbal and physical confrontations in the library.

Mississauga Public Library's drop-in sessions are held in a small room furnished with four matching red arm chairs and a blue loveseat. At first glance, the space looks more like a teacher's lounge than a counselling space. But a box of tissues on an end table hints at the difficult conversations that unfold here.

Kevin Berry is the lone social worker with the Open Window Hub program. He's been the social worker at the library since the program launched in September 2017. Berry is proficient in "system navigation," able to connect people who may be homeless with social services in the city.

In the library, when Berry would approach someone who may be homeless to see how he could help, most were wary of a stranger coming up to them.

"From there, it's about getting a little piece of their story and providing support," he says.

Berry has compiled a number of success stories from library patrons: the 27-year-old man with a schizoaffective disorder who barely made eye contact is now enrolled in an adult math course; the man

webinar. Berry says that Ontario seems to be at the vanguard for mixing social service programs into library space.

Through the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport's Ontario Libraries Capacity Fund, a \$10-million grant offered over three years that ended in March 2018, the Windsor Public Library received \$200,000 to launch the Library Hubs Meeting Community Needs program. It was a program similar to Mississauga's Open Window Hub and equipped with a social worker, acting as a blueprint for other libraries in Essex County.

Reed predicts that more social workers will be stationed in libraries in the future. Although Mississauga's microgrant only financed the Open Window Hub until the end of 2018, the library received a donation from the P. and L. Odette Foundation for \$390,000 to continue the program for another three years.

"It just makes so much sense now for public libraries. It's a way for us to connect with the community in a new way and it's really positive for staff, too," Reed says. "That pressure and stress on staff seeing people in need and not being able to help -- you can't overstate that."

Working with homeless and vulnerable populations can lead to burnout for library staff -- especially in urban centres where librarians voice that emotional and physical fatigue is a common complaint.

The Edmonton Public Library offers counselling support for its staff. This, in tandem with crisis intervention training, focuses on how to de-escalate confrontational situations in the library space. The library also offers job exchanges, allowing library staff who have experienced distressing situations in the workplace the opportunity to work in another branch to decompress.

"You have to be the kind of person who can work with the guy in three-piece suit who's looking for stock market stuff but you also got to be ready to talk to the guy who you know you suspended last week because he urinated in a garbage can in the library," says Thornley. "But today he's back, he's sober, he's no longer suspended and he's looking for a copy of the newspaper. You've got to treat him with the same dignity and respect that you treat the other guy and vice versa."

"I don't feel that the library is an unsafe place but there are unsafe situations that arise," he says. "But they're just as likely to arise on the streets, in the mall or in city hall."



Thornley rattles off situations in which he has been snubbed by patrons: given the silent treatment for handing out a suspension to a patron for viewing pornography on a library computer; to being followed to his car; or someone becoming irate at being suspended for being visibly intoxicated. Meth use in the library is also an issue and one mirrored in Edmonton's downtown core.

"We do genuinely care about people who've done some awful things in the library," he says. "Oftentimes it's not their fault."

In some cases, Thornley says patrons may forget they were suspended, only to realize it when they can't log into a computer. People living in and out of homeless shelters are just trying to survive day-by-day. Even if verbally informed of their suspension, sometimes their mental health impedes them from remembering that a suspension has been handed out in the first place.

But when Thornley looks at the bigger picture, he says other issues may complicate things.

"Maybe you are a residential school survivor or maybe your family is scattered to the winds. Maybe there was alcohol and child abuse. All of these things play into who that person is."

Thornley says the library is in the early stages of developing a restorative justice approach for youth at the Edmonton Public Library -- a strategy that takes into account a rehabilitative versus punitive approach. Some restorative justice methods look at remedies that emphasize healing the harm and rehabilitation to avoid repetition of these actions, often in concordance with Indigenous practices.

All in all, Thornley enjoys working with such a diverse group of library-goers.

"I really wanted to work with real people," he says. "These are my neighbours this is my community and personally I feel much more rewarded."

**Last week: Part 1 of rabble's series: "The Future of the Public Library is Under Attack"**  
(<http://rabble.ca/news/2019/08/future-public-library-under-attack>)

**Next week: Part 3 of rabble's series: How Canada's Largest Library System is Removing Barriers and Advancing Inclusion** (<http://rabble.ca/news/2019/08/how-canadas-largest-library-system-removing-barriers-and-advancing-inclusion>)