

How Canada's largest library system is removing barriers and advancing inclusion

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budget and more than 912,991 active library cardholders.

Toronto took a step back to see how it could improve its programs for vulnerable and homeless patrons through an approach that would permeate through its entire library system -- not just at one or two branches.

The fall of 2018 marked the first time that the Toronto Public Library hired a social worker as a permanent staff member, overseen by Aly Velji. He's the manager of adult literacy services at the Toronto Public Library based out of the North York Central branch -- a newly renovated yet well-used facility that turns 50 this year.

Velji says hiring a social worker wasn't the result of one, isolated incident at one of its branches, but rather that library staff noticed housing was becoming a real issue with some of the library's patrons. He felt that it was the right time to have a social worker join their team now that the library's new strategic plan emphasizes reducing barriers and **increasing inclusivity in the library.**

(<https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/about-the-library/strategic-plan/2016-2019/index.jsp>). While anyone can come in and use the library space, the Toronto Public Library makes the special distinction between people who may not have stable housing or who are homeless without a permanent address. As long as they have name identification, they are eligible for a 12-month library card allowing them to borrow up to five items at a time and access library computers.

This isn't the first time that a social worker has been added to the Toronto Public Library's staff -- the first case was a temporary, one-year position funded by the Toronto Public Library Foundation, focused in the Malvern area of Toronto. It was a more traditional social worker role in the sense that the position was created to focus on frontline work, like counselling, at a youth gathering space in the library called The Spot.

The Toronto Public Library has created a new, full-time social worker position for Rahma Hashi, funded through the library's operational budget.

"It's part of a bigger movement of bringing the human service to the person as opposed to expecting them to knock on your door," says Hashi.

One barrier to accessing services is that some people may not have stepped into a library for years for fear of overdue fines. As such, they didn't know what the library had to offer. In some instances, the

especially in colder weather.

People fearful of homeless or vulnerable patrons in the library could be because of a lack of exposure to people in socio-economic groups dissimilar from their own.

"It's not coming from a place of hate; it's coming from a place of unknowing," Hashi says.

The reality of homelessness and the library was envisaged on the big screen last fall, when *The Public*, an Emilio Estevez-directed film, debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival. The plot of the movie is not too distant from the severe winter Toronto suffered through in 2019. The fictional storyline is set in Cincinnati, Ohio, at the downtown library branch where homeless patrons organize a sit-in at the library to protest overcrowding at emergency shelters that has led some to freeze to death in the streets. The film centres around this complication, offering a nuanced perspective of the library's most vulnerable patrons and how a librarian must reconcile his patrons' demands with the rules and regulations of the library.

During the film festival, the Toronto Public Library Foundation organized a viewing of *The Public*. Hashi says that the movie not only spurred a conversation about flagrant homelessness and invisible homelessness -- like couch surfing -- but how all types of homelessness directly impact the library.

A September screening of *The Public* during TIFF at the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatre proved popular with library staff from across the province. One of the first scenes was met with knowing nodding from the audience -- familiar to many who work in downtown library branches -- when homeless men gather to shave at the bathroom sinks.

Many attendees sported their library's logo or their library's uniform -- emblazoned on brightly-coloured T-shirts. They shouted and applauded at several crucial moments in the film that spoke to the importance of the library. The biggest response came at the climax of the film, when the homeless occupiers are threatened with arrest and Estevez himself declares: "The public library is the last bastion of true democracy that we have in this country."

Librarians such as Velji find truth in that line. The library is more than just a free space, Velji says. It's an equalizer.

For Velji, helping people learn how to read and write eventually expanded to working with vulnerable populations, including partnering with correctional facilities, and developing a Wi-Fi hotspot lending program for low-income families.

"Letting people in on the secret of the value of libraries is really cool," he says.

Going into meetings with different agencies and other partners, Velji often gets people asking, "Why is the library here?" but ultimately, he says that these conversations with community members reveal more about what the library has to offer.

At the Ontario Library Association conference in late January 2019, Velji, Hashi and Kevin Berry from the Mississauga Public Library shared their experiences on how other libraries could incorporate social work in their own library systems.

The Toronto Public Library is continually looking to extend its reach beyond its four walls to connect with people outside the library, including those who may never have stepped inside the library before.

The Toronto Public Library has six specialized community librarians that complement Hashi's social worker role. They look at how they can get people involved in the library who may have no prior knowledge of the space -- starting with signing people up for library cards out in the field or connecting them with programs that may fit their needs. Two librarians are embedded with Toronto Employment and Social Services, one works in the shelter system, one with the refugee system, one in digital innovation services in the Albion Road area -- and another working with correctional centres.

For some transient patrons, "it could be pretty easy for some patrons to fall back into their old patterns," says Velji. Some Toronto library branches may be open seven days a week -- meaning it could be the one stable place they visit each day. Velji and Hashi are hopeful that the librarian-social worker partnership will help provide a cushion, an array of social service resources, for these patrons facing difficult periods in their life.

"And it's all free," Hashi exclaims.

Last week: Part 2 of rabble's series: "How Canada's Libraries Are Bridging Social-Service Gaps" (<http://www.rabble.ca/news/2019/08/how-canadas-libraries-are-bridging-social-service-gaps>).