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AlterGo
News Bulletin

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN ACTION

Montreal: A model of accessibility in leisure?

Imagine such a headline without the question mark. Montreal: a city setting the standard for accessibility in recreational services. The question should be, "Why not?" Should we not consider that treating ALL citizens on an equal footing while ensuring leisure services for ALL is business as usual?

Companion services for leisure activity: Action and reaction!

The City of Montreal and 17 boroughs took important steps in that direction this past summer. Financial support at the municipal level allowed 85 more children living with a disability to attend day camps, while many more had the opportunity to increase the number of weeks spent at the camps.

The burning question remaining is, was this summer of fun for the children just a flash in the pan, or was it the spark for engendering true accessibility in the leisure sector over the long-term?

Nathaniel, Swen and Jacob: Will there ever be another summer like '04?

Nathaniel had a great time this summer. Ditto for Swen and Jacob. And what they had in common was a companion for several weeks with whom they could enjoy the benefits of attending day camp. Take Jacob, for example. A child who has autism, he was able to attend day camp for 8 weeks, thanks to the Companion Program.

"Jacob made wonderful progress. As the weeks wore on, he felt more and more at ease with his surroundings. When he first attended, the slightest noise would set him off in all directions. But by the end of the session, he was participating in group activities where there was often a good deal of noise, and he had no problems with it. Even his mother couldn't believe the change in his demeanour. The number of

weeks he was able to attend obviously made a huge difference," stated Valérie Leclerc, from the Mgr Pigeon Day Camp in the southwest district.

Municipal support

If the summer of 2004 was one for the ages, it was due in large part to financial support at the municipal level (please see table, page 2), which supplemented the provincial Companion Program in Leisure Activity. The municipal contribution amounted to \$173,657.00, thus allowing 32 day camps to respond to 55% of the provincial program's

demands coming from families representing persons living with some type of disability. Without this financial support, the day camps would have been able to respond to a mere 21% of the demand.

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Percentage of special needs day camp applications fulfilled through the financial contributions of the 17 participating boroughs — Summer 2004

	Borough	% of applications filled by the provincial program	% of applications filled with the additional municipal funding
1	Anjou • Municipal recreation services	23%	47%**
2	Côte-des-Neiges / NDG* • YMCA NDG • Centre Loyola	0% 0%	29% 100%
3	Côte St-Luc / Hampstead / Montreal West • Municipal recreation services	25%	67%
4	Dorval / Dorval Island • Municipal recreation services	30%	47%
5	Lachine • Municipal recreation services	21%	61%
6	Lasalle • Municipal recreation services	16%	84%
7	Mercier / Hochelaga / Maisonneuve • Centre St-Donat • Service de loisir Ste-Claire	17% 17%	58% 37%
8	Montreal North • Municipal recreation services	16%	35%
9	Mount Royal • Municipal recreation services	23%	54%
10	Plateau-Mont-Royal • Autisme Montréal • Girouettes du Plateau • Au cœur de la ville • YMCA du Parc	38% 17% 25% 25%	48% 100% 82% 32%
11	RDP / Pte-aux-Trembles / Montreal East • Le Relais du Bout • Centre Don Bosco • Société Loisirs Ressources	25% 31% 21%	38% 46% 37%
12	Rosemount / Petite-Patrie • Loisirs Soleil	31%	57%
13	Saint-Laurent • Municipal recreation services	21%	65%
14	Saint-Léonard • Municipal recreation services	17%	100%
15	Southwest • St-Henri recreation • St-Charles recreation • Centre Mgr Pigeon	23% 26% 20%	95% 96% 95%
16	Ville-Marie • Centre de loisir Ste-Catherine	19%	51%
17	Villeray / St-Michel / Park Extension • Loisirs Ste-Lucie • Joie des enfants • Jeunes du Parc-Extension • Patro Le Prévost • Maison des jeunes Par la Grande porte • Maison St-Michel • Centre Lajeunesse	20% 23% 23% 21% 19% 22% 22%	26% 29% 26% 27% 29% 33% 33%
	TOTAL:	21%	55%

* The applications from the two organizations were received too late for inclusion in the provincial program.

** This figure corresponds to the agreement made with the City of Montreal. In fact, Anjou answered the needs of 100% of Companion Program applicants.

Nathaniel, Swen...

(cont'd)

Among the boroughs that participated in the program, the southwest district contributed no less than \$28,000.00, an amount that helped finance companion services for 3 day camps in their community, including Mgr Pigeon.

"We didn't have to refuse any children with special needs this summer," confirmed Valérie Leclerc. "The municipal support made all the difference. We were able to answer the needs of 95% of applicants, compared with 50% last year. The children were able to attend camp for 4 to 8 weeks, depending on what the parents requested. Being able to spend more time at camp allowed the children to form friendships and to feel more confident in a group dynamic, once they got through an initial period of adjustment."

In the Saint-Laurent borough, the municipal contribution amounted to \$24,000.00. For Stéphanie Matton, activity co-ordinator at the local day camp, this supplement to the provincial program swung the social rights pendulum the right way.

"The subsidy we received this year allowed us to double the number of children with a disability welcomed into our programs: 36 in 2004 compared with 15 in 2003."

A permanent municipal program?

The enriching experience Nathaniel and so many other children with disabilities underwent this past summer at one of 32 Montreal-area day camps reminds us that the refrain needs to be reprised.

Municipal participation - statistics tell the tale

Total municipal investment*	Number of additional hours available for companion services	Number of additional children able to attend day camp as a result of municipal support
\$172,517.00	15,000	85

* This amount is calculated as follows:

- \$79,557.00 contributed by the 17 boroughs
- \$94,100.00 contributed by the City of Montreal's Service du développement culturel et de la qualité du milieu de vie, within the framework of the city's new agreement with the Government of Quebec. Of this amount, \$15,683.00 was dedicated to co-ordinating the project (AlterGo).

Companions: The guides to successful social integration

|| *They act as 'bridges' between the children,"* illustrates Nancy Beauchamp, of the Marcel-De La Sablonnière Day Camp in the Plateau-Mont-Royal district.

"They," in this case, are people who serve as companions for children living with a disability. They are mainly students who either have been trained for their role or have pertinent experience that makes them suitable for the task. Gringo was an activity leader for 2 years before becoming a companion at the Saint-Laurent Municipal Day Camp. He explains his new responsibilities as, *"Forging bonds with the kids, helping them to integrate with the group and make progress along with their friends. This is what attracted me to the job."*

For her part, Melon d'eau (aka Watermelon from the Mgr Pigeon Day Camp, in the Southwest borough) tells us that she inherited the job thanks to a quirk of fate. *"I applied for the position of secretary, but when they saw my background they suggested that I perhaps become a companion instead. I saw it as a great opportunity, a chance to experience new things. It's a job that brings us back to basics, to what's really important in life."*

Looking for a few good men and women

But it requires more than a bit of training and some experience in related fields or tasks to become a good companion, reveals Nancy Beauchamp. *"Companions have to show a lot of love toward children living with a disability. This is essential."*

Other qualities are likewise valued. *"We are looking for people who are open-minded and open to others – who can deal with people's differences – and who*

can readily adapt to various situations, whether they involve the children, the games or the activity leaders," explains Ombrelle (aka Umbrella) of the Lachine Municipal Day Camp. You also have to be a good communicator. *"One must be able to explain the same thing in different ways, in order to ensure that*



to differences at a young age, the less important they seem later in life. This is one of the major ways we break down barriers between people," indicates Marie-Lou, of the Marcel-De La Sablonnière Day Camp.

Melon d'eau further adds, *"We are all different in some way. And persons with disabilities are merely part of the human family who happen to have specific needs."*

Now blessed with an adult perspective, Alizée, of the Saint-Laurent Day Camp, confides that her outlook has changed. *"When you work with*



the child fully understands," adds Geneviève Tremblay, of Mgr Pigeon.

But all agree on one point: the key to success for a companion is patience.

Integration...for one and all

We often speak of integrating children living with a disability into their community. But they are not the only ones who benefit from such positive action: youngsters from all walks of life have much to gain through integration. *"Learning and becoming aware of people's differences, and getting used to these differences, is a very positive result of integration. The more we are exposed*

children with a disability, very little surprises you and no challenge daunts you. You learn to accentuate the positive for the child and, very importantly, to love them and appreciate each moment with them."

Marie-Lou reveals another side to the role of companion: *"We are there not just for the child with a disability, but also to answer questions from the other children. You need to take the time to respond to their inquiries, because they want to understand. And on that basis, they can go on to form fast friendships with children who live with a disability. It is not uncommon to find children who want to help these new friends of theirs, and it happens spontaneously."*

Yanika on the road to independence

The Companion Program for Leisure Activity has its fair share of success stories, but the story of Yanika and her experience at the Mgr Pigeon Day Camp is quite particular, says Valérie Leclerc, co-ordinator at the camp.

"Yanika has Down's syndrome and recently attended her fourth year at our camp. The first 3 years, she had the benefit of a companion to help her along. This year, her parents asked if she could attend on her own, given the amazing progress she made over the previous few summers. We decided to give it a try, and the result was a bonafide success! What

an experience for this young, increasingly independent girl. Next summer, we intend to try the same thing with 2 other children."

In short, investing in a Companion Program for Leisure Activity today means that tomorrow, more people who otherwise would not be so will be successfully integrated into their community, able to function without aid while contributing in meaningful ways. This, in turn, results in reduced costs for future caregiving, not to mention a host of better citizens. And in that instance, everyone wins.



At Mgr Pigeon Day Camp, Yanika (second from the right) with her friends.

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Our work goes on



Having access to day camp facilities, just as any child from their neighbourhood would, brought these youngsters with a disability one step closer to what might be termed a "normal" state of affairs, and for their parents, recognition that their children deserve no less. By dedicating the necessary funds that would ensure access to leisure services for children living

with a disability, the 17 boroughs and the City of Montreal's Service du développement culturel et de la qualité du milieu de vie helped foster a pro-active community environment with predictably positive results: children who are open to and accepting of people's differences; children who are different in some way and yet do not feel stigmatized; and sector leaders who are motivated by the fact that one of their initiatives has had such an impact.

It is important to remember that at the recent Sommet de Montréal, we acknowledged the principle of universal accessibility, in order that persons living with a disability be regarded as full-fledged members of society in all respects and in all instances.

Toward this end, we ask for your support in ensuring that the momentum is maintained; that this initiative providing access to day camps for children living with a disability continues and is further developed in the years to come. Montreal has an important task at hand when it comes to the social integration of its citizens with a disability. Let us work together to make our city more human, more accessible, and a place of unlimited potential for all.

Thank you for your efforts.

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