



Building Belonging: Community Connectors at Hamilton Public Library



Hamilton
Public
Library

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Truth and Reconciliation Land Acknowledgement

The City of Hamilton is situated upon the traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Mississaugas. This land is covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, which was an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek to share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. We further acknowledge that this land is covered by the Between the Lakes Purchase, 1792, between the Crown and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Today, the City of Hamilton is home to many Indigenous peoples from across Turtle Island (North America) and we recognize that we must do more to learn about the rich history of this land, so that we can better understand our roles as residents, neighbours, partners and caretakers.

Recommended Citation:

A. Tuck, Z. Hayes, L. Hines, and S. Gauthier. 2026. Building Belonging: Community Connectors at Hamilton Public Library. Hamilton Public Library, Ontario.

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Introduction

Public libraries offer numerous services, including access to trusted information, engaging programs, and digital technologies. In addition to service, the public library offers space for all citizens, but the needs of the community are growing, and libraries often struggle to meet the demands of everyone in library spaces. This use of space includes studying or reading, accessing free Wi-Fi and communication technologies, finding a place out of the weather or sitting to catch up with a friend. While libraries offer much for everyone, they are on the front lines of broader societal issues such as homelessness, the opioid crisis and growing mental health issues.¹⁻⁶

Library staff care about their communities; however, they increasingly find themselves in situations that are not typical of library work. As the lack of funding for social programs widens⁷, they are often in circumstances where they support people who are in crisis or struggling and have few other places to turn to. This can cause disruption and be challenging to manage while attending to their other duties. At times, people's behaviour can escalate, become disruptive or be non-conductive to the space.¹⁻⁵ The level and rate of incivility increased during the COVID-19 pandemic^{3,7} and has continued to worsen.^{2-5,7} At the same time, the opioid crisis and other rising social issues that impacted libraries before the pandemic^{6,8} are *now compounding* the issues. This, combined with growing incivility, has led libraries to become more creative in their responses to the needs of their surrounding communities. Libraries are expanding life-saving training, adding or increasing non-traditional library staff (e.g., Social Workers, Peer Support Workers), and in some severe situations, closing their doors for short periods.⁹⁻¹³

The Hamilton Public Library (HPL) sought to add another element of support for the Central Library. This search led to the creation of **Community Connector positions**. The successful candidates began at Central on February 2, 2026. This role builds on existing systems and works collaboratively with community partners. The positions draw inspiration from Toronto Public Library's Safety Specialist role and Kitchener Public Library's Wellbeing Community Connections Team.¹⁴ The work in both positions is similar to the role of HPL's Community Connector. All three positions suggest the skills needed for library work are changing in the landscape of public libraries in Ontario, particularly in urban settings. The position is new and *will evolve*; we will continue to examine and explore the scope of skills needed for our Community Connectors adapting to the changes of the Hamilton community.

What is a Community Connector?

Community Connectors work with their HPL colleagues to foster and maintain a welcoming environment for all Library Members by frequently moving through Library spaces and connecting with Members. Community Connectors are not tied to a service point, such as an Information Desk; this was intentional to allow free movement throughout the Library to meet Members where they are. This position supports relationships with services already in place at Central Library, including other Library Staff, Social Workers, Peer Support Workers, and Community Partner Desk partners. Community Connectors proactively work to engage and connect Members to both Library and community resources. They provide customer service while helping with boundary-setting and de-escalation to promote safe, welcoming access to HPL's spaces.

How does the Community Connector role differ from other Staff?

HPL's Community Connectors have different training and experience from traditional Library Staff roles. A social services background, including experience working with vulnerable populations, is required for this role in terms of experience and education. Community Connectors need to be able to quickly assess, build rapport, and apply strategies to support individuals with a variety of complex needs. This position requires individuals who utilize de-escalation techniques with a focus on harm reduction and a trauma-informed approach. Community Connectors are first responders at HPL, providing first aid in emergency situations (including administering Naloxone) and assisting security, police and emergency medical services (EMS).

Community Connectors need to be comfortable with de-escalation because it is a regular part of the position. De-escalation is the use of a combination of strategies, techniques and tools with the intent of reducing a person's agitation and/or aggression.¹⁵⁻¹⁶ De-escalation uses numerous interwoven components, including communication, self-regulation, assessment, actions and safety maintenance.¹⁶ Effective de-escalation is about establishing rapport with the person, appearing calm and self-aware in the face of a difficult situation, and being flexible to shift to other techniques.¹⁵ De-escalation training, when used by confident and knowledgeable people, can help to alleviate violent or aggressive situations.¹⁷

Using a trauma-informed approach means individuals (1) realize that trauma exists for many people in many forms, (2) recognize that trauma can affect everyone and know the signs and symptoms, and (3) develop a response in practice and policy that does not re-traumatize individuals.¹⁹ Trauma-informed approaches are successful when they ensure safety and trust, are transparent, empower people involved, collaborate and involve peers and consider cultural, gender and historical issues of trauma.¹⁸ Interactions that align the principles of trauma-informed approaches with service delivery can improve the experiences and outcomes of people involved in the interactions.¹⁹

HPL Staff can participate in de-escalation training offered by experienced leader and trainer, Ryan Dowd.²⁰ HPL's Community Connectors engage in this training, taking advantage of this valuable resource. This training provides Staff with knowledge, understanding and tools to support in a variety of different situations.²⁰ HPL Members are diverse and their situations vary. So, the knowledge one needs to support them encompasses a variety of topics, including but not limited to an awareness of trauma, mental health, homelessness, crisis situations, and special populations. The tools and strategies employed will differ depending on the situation and the possible vulnerable population.

Community Connectors do not have a service point, such as an Information Desk. Their role is to rove the floors and meet Library Members where they are. They collaborate with fellow Library Staff and respond to requests for assistance with Members. This allows time to assist Members who might need extra attention or more complex needs, such as assistance with government forms, planning their next moves, or referrals to other social services available at HPL or within the surrounding community.

Typical Day

HPL Community Connectors' daily experiences may differ from those of other Staff, but they have regular routines. They spend their time moving about the floors of HPL's Central Library, connecting with other Staff, Library Members and community agencies. Community Connectors rove the spaces, visiting all areas to ensure needs are met and providing wellness checks for individuals who may be struggling or presenting as unwell. This is often paired with conversations about access to community resources, connecting individuals to organizations and programs that can assist them with unmet needs. They engage Members in conversations to help with navigation throughout the Library, finding Library and/or community resources, directing them to the Community Partner Desk, Peer Support Workers, and/or Social Workers at HPL.

The Community Connectors discuss and relate to HPL Staff and Security Staff daily about possible unwelcome behaviours and issues that arise. They help to keep the Library free of potential hazards. They offer support, tips, and resources to other Staff (including management) who are navigating situations. They work with security to de-escalate and problem-solve heightened interactions, ongoing issues with Members and follow up afterward. They also provide support and make appropriate referrals to Members who need medical attention.

The following are some examples where Community Connectors assist HPL Members and visitors daily:

- Informal conversations with Members seeking various types of social assistance – Community Connectors speak with Members who might be unwell/not having a great day, need help understanding or accessing information, or figuring out next-steps to help meet a need or overcome an obstacle (such as reviewing clubs of interest and how to join or register, connecting seniors with community programs, assistance with various applications).
- Access information about and contact local shelters about beds, housing, wound care, food banks, addiction counseling, and warm meal locations.
- Assist individuals in contacting case workers and other community supports to address gaps in information and provide their workers with the required documentation.
- Assist Members to interpret complex information requiring their action – this may include why they received a letter in the mail and determining their required next steps. Other examples include, but are not limited to, assistance with the completion of forms and applications such as Disabled and Regional Transit System (DARTS) applications, Hamilton Street Railway (HSR) Fare Assist, and Ontario Works.
- Identify and connect with Newcomer supports and agencies available in the community, resources to culturally-specific agencies and how to access them – for example, Hamilton Region Indian Centre (HRIC), Hamilton Urban Core Community Health Centre (HUCCHC), ABRAR Trauma & Mental Health Services.
- Connect with mental health resources including CMHA (Canadian Mental Health Association), in partnership with HPL, to access Peer Support Workers, mental

health counselling, addictions counselling, resources for single parents and support for victims of violence.

Early Results

The Community Connector position is very new at HPL. In the first two months (49 days), Community Connectors participated in 1,817 interactions, averaging 37 per day.

- De-escalation interactions = 90
 - Community Connectors have successfully established a gentle approach to redirect undesirable behaviours by connecting in a unique way. They offer a person-centred approach to those who are struggling and offer aids such as supportive listening, recommending possible solutions that are within reach so that Members can continue to remain in the Library space.

- Filling out Forms = 23
 - Community Connectors assist with Employment Insurance (EI), Ontario Disability (ODSP) and passport applications, and tax forms.

- Informal conversations = 448
 - Community Connectors carry out regular check-ins, inquiring about how someone's day is going, conversations with Members about policy, behaviours and negotiations regarding the use of Library spaces.

- Library Services supports = 187
 - Community Connectors support Members using computers, Print on the Go (POTG) service, referrals to Makerspace and other programming (e.g., Conversation Circles), and finding other Library resources.

- Referrals to other organizations = 81
 - Community Connectors provide Members with referrals to other organizations such as PATH employment, YMCA men's residence, Shelter Health Network clinics, Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), Hamilton Family Health Team and Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) street nurses.

- Reinstatement/Suspension process = 23
 - Community Connectors take time to calmly discuss with Members what it means to be under suspension from the Library, how HPL's reinstatement process works and help de-escalate conversations around these situations.

- Sleeping in Library spaces = 552

- Systems Navigations/sit down = 83
 - Community Connectors help Members understand and navigate the complexity of health care, social services, and community supports. They simplify processes and assist Members in communicating and connecting to the appropriate and necessary services.

- Wellness Checks = 330
 - Community Connectors provide wellness checks, which often turn into referrals and systems' navigation or the offer of other resources (e.g., emergency hygiene supplies, clothing, food). Wellness checks are opportunities to connect someone to vital resources and a consistent connection with them to ensure they are doing well.

“The ability to interact with Library Members regularly and build relationships organically has offered opportunities to connect with people in ways that are comfortable for them. This offers a unique sense of choice, autonomy and trust built over time. One of the things that has been very rewarding is being able to connect with seniors living in the community, many of whom are quite isolated. Some of these connections developed quickly, while others took weeks before they were interested in more than a simple daily hello. Some of these seniors are unhoused or living in precarious housing situations; others have struggled with a variety of accessibility and technology needs (e.g. audiobooks). By building relationships over time, we have been able to make referrals to Social Workers, housing workers and other community partners. Additionally, we’ve connected some of these Members to volunteering or recreational programs to reduce isolation. We also just sit and spend time with them in the archives, looking at photos of places they used to frequent in Hamilton.” ~Community Connector Zoe Hayes

“On a busy day, I noticed a Member sitting on the couch by the computers on the first floor. He had his face in his hands and was dozing on and off in a way that may have appeared intoxicated. I approached him and asked if he was all right. He looked up, annoyed, and said yeah. He was responsive, so I went off to check on other Members and decided I’d circle back. When I came back, he was still sitting in the same place and nodding in and out. I sat down beside him, introduced myself and again asked, ‘Is everything all right?’ The Member turned to me in a lot of pain and told me that he had four impacted teeth and was waiting to go back for dinner to the shelter he was staying at. I referred him to emergency dental services at Public Health in Jackson Square and to talk a little bit more about some of the other resources he was looking for. He left with the referral for a Social Worker to talk about applying for a dental plan. I also let him know he could use our phone to contact family or his dentist and referred him to an emergency dental clinic for treatment for his impacted teeth.”

~ Community Connector Zoe Hayes

“One rainy afternoon, Library Makerspace Staff contacted me to support a Member in crisis. I met the Member on the fourth floor, and we sat down to talk. The Member was distressed after being involved in a violent interaction earlier that day and did not feel safe returning to his regular accommodation. He was also hungry and his clothes were soaking wet. I first listened to what he had to say then communicated my suggestions for a plan. Together, we made a list of his next steps to ensure his immediate needs were met before addressing less urgent concerns. I was able to contact shelters for bed availability that evening and was successful with Good Shepherd on Mary Street. I also informed the Member that a hot meal would be available there. Finally, we provided a rain poncho and clean, dry clothing from our Peer Support closet, where donations are kept. I reassured the Member that we will continue working on our list of topics when he returned to the Library the next week. The Member was visibly less stressed and in a much better place as he left for Mary Street.” ~ Community Connector Laura Hines

Staff Testimonials

“Our Community Connectors have been such a great addition to the branch. They really understand how things work in the Library, and they’re amazing at supporting some of our more vulnerable Members. What we appreciate most is how proactive they are. They’re almost always around when we need them.” ~ HPL Staff

“Since the Community Connectors started, I've felt more equipped to assist Members not just experiencing struggle but also Newcomers and folks with language barriers. They've made an overall positive impact on the level of care we can provide to our Members, especially since we are busy on desk sometimes and can't dedicate the time to sit with Members when they have more complex issues. Filling out certain forms, or in-depth support on social services, or things as simple as making a phone call can be really meaningful for our Members.” ~ HPL Staff

“The Community Connectors at Central Library have been a blessing. They tirelessly work to help our neediest Members, who often have nowhere else to turn for support. I'm very happy they're part of our team at Central.” ~ HPL Staff

“We are so grateful for the support, knowledge and experience our HPL Community Connectors have provided to the Red Hill community! Seeing them connect genuinely with Members, linking them to resources in the community, working with a Member on housing options and just being an ear to those looking to chat in our community. Resources are not as easily located in the East End, but the Community Connectors have worked with Staff to create a helpful resource list and branch chat where we can discuss and share information.” ~ HPL Staff

“The Community Connector position is a vital role that I hope to see grow within HPL and continue to support our community within our Library branches.” ~ HPL Staff

Final Thoughts

The Community Connector role is new at HPL; however, we have already seen successes. HPL Community Connectors engage with Members where they are - in respectful, dignified, and meaningful ways. They help with a variety of different Library and social services while de-escalating situations. The addition of this position has been extremely valuable to both Members and other Library Staff. Our Community Connectors have grown professionally and personally through opportunities to learn a wealth of new skills, build important connections and support their community. The roles and skills library staff need today are evolving, yet this has received little attention in the literature. There is a need to better understand these changes and what the future role will entail for library staff.

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