

The changing face of Laval

BY MARIAN SCOTT, THE GAZETTE NOVEMBER 14, 2011



Employee Niko Sarantopoulos hands out bread outside the storefront community centre in Laval where he has worked for nine years. The daily bread distribution is a long tradition at Agape, a 35-year-old charity serving the growing English-speaking population in the area.

Photograph by: Vincenzo D'Alto, THE GAZETTE

MONTREAL - As Niko Sarantopoulos unloads sacks of bread onto a table outside a storefront community centre on Notre Dame Blvd. in Laval, the lineup swarms forward.

Irina, 34, her 2-year-old daughter bundled up in a stroller, fills her shopping bag with dinner rolls and a baguette.

The Russian immigrant, who shares custody of her four children with her ex-husband, is awaiting her first welfare cheque.

Irina moved to Laval two years ago. She likes the suburb's wide boulevards and leafy streets – but making ends meet here is no easier than it was in Montreal, where the former bicycle mechanic and stable-hand lived for nine years.

"People are nicer – they're less stressed out than in Montreal," she says.

The daily bread distribution is a long tradition at Agape, a 35-year-old charity serving the local English-speaking population.

But loaves and fishes alone do not suffice to meet the needs of Quebec's fastest growing anglophone community.

Laval's English-speaking population grew by 35 per cent from 1996 to 2006 – a notable exception to Quebec as a whole during that period, when the anglophone population dropped by half a percentage point from 1996 to 2001, and rose by a quarter of a per cent from 2001-06.

And many of the suburb's new English-speakers are neither rich, nor Canadian-born, notes Sarantopoulos, 42, who collects and distributes food, clothing and other supplies for needy residents.

"When I came here it was very, very French," says Sarantopoulos, who moved to Laval as a teenager and has worked at the community centre for nine years.

"Now, we're serving so many English people. For our Christmas baskets we've got 1,200 people on our list."

Services for Laval's multicultural English-speaking population have not kept pace with its increasing numbers, says Luigi Morabito, coordinator of the Laval Networking and Partnership Initiative (NPI-Laval), founded to assess the community's needs and stimulate partnerships between government and local groups.

That's why organizers are inviting English-speaking Laval residents to two public meetings to discuss concerns like access to health and social services, housing, education, employment and community life. The goal is to create a portrait of the changing face of the anglophone community and devise ways to address its needs.

The project, sponsored by Quebec's Institut national de santé publique, also receives federal funding through the Community Health and Social Services Network.

"This is a historic event," Morabito says.

"Can we cover all the needs tomorrow? Obviously the answer is no," he notes.

But airing concerns is an essential first step, he says.

Founded in 1965 from the merger of once bucolic villages dotted across Île Jésus, the sprawling city of 368,709 is anything but a white-bread suburb.

From a Sephardic synagogue to corner restaurants featuring everything from Armenian kebabs to curry, many signs attest to the city's increasingly multicultural character.

Immigration has been key in fuelling Laval's growth, particularly from 2001-2006, when the anglophone community – defined as people whose first official language spoken is English – grew by 28 per cent, notes Jean-Pierre Corbeil, chief specialist of language statistics at Statistics Canada.

Of Laval's 68,460 anglophones in 2006, nearly two out of five were immigrants.

While many new residents are transplanted Montrealers, an increasing number are new immigrants who moved directly to Laval without first living in Montreal, he says.

"They are joining communities that are already established," he notes.

While francophones who moved off-island were just as likely to choose the South Shore as Laval, allophones – people whose mother tongue is neither French nor English – overwhelmingly chose Laval, Corbeil says.

The suburb's French-speaking population increased by only 12 per cent from 1996 to 2006.

In 2009, a study by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities tabbed Laval as a top destination for immigrants to Canada.

The growth in residents of Italian, Greek, South Asian and other heritage have boosted the English-speaking presence, says Morabito.

"Over 10 plus years it's been a big shift," Morabito says.

"There's been a heavy migration from Montreal to Laval."

One of the most pressing needs is English-language health and social services, he says.

At Souvenir Elementary School in the Chomedey district, principal Carmela Sacco points to the lack of support services for English-speaking children with learning disabilities and other special needs.

"What happens if a child is diagnosed or needs services?" she asks.

"The services are not here. You've got to have parents who are willing to drive."

Many children whose parents lack time or money to seek treatment in Montreal are left by the wayside, she says.

Services for English-speaking seniors are also sorely lacking, Morabito says.

Two out of five Laval anglophones use Montreal hospitals, he adds.

"I do think it's one of the big complaints that everybody's got to go to Montreal for services in English," says Sarantopoulos.

"I'm perfectly bilingual, but if I want to be serviced in English when I go to a clinic because I'm sick, it's not going to happen."

In contrast to Quebec's anglophone population as a whole – and to francophone Laval residents – Laval's English-speaking residents are younger than average, more likely to be married and less likely to be in a single-parent family or live alone, according to a study last year by the Agence de la santé et des services sociaux de Laval.

Laval anglos were slightly poorer than francophones and had a higher proportion of families living in poverty (17 per cent vs. 15.5 per cent), it found.

"In Montreal, visible minorities are more vulnerable to unemployment," Corbeil notes. Clearly, challenges facing urban immigrants and minorities continue to afflict many who have moved to the suburbs, he says.

In fact, the division between Montreal and its neighbouring suburbs is somewhat artificial, Corbeil notes. "We focus a lot on the island vs. off the island. But we forget that 275,000 workers cross the bridges every day," he says.

For Sarantopoulos, the project raises hopes of busting stereotypes on suburban life, often depicted as idyllic. "All you hear about is the people that do well and that the housing boom is crazy, but nobody thinks about Laval as being poor," he says.

"But it has its spots and we're right dead in the centre of it right here."

The Laval Networking and Partnership Initiative and the Institut National de Santé Publique du Quebec will hold two forums:

Nov. 19, 2011, from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., at Laval Liberty High School, 3200 Souvenir Blvd. W., Chomedey, Laval

Nov. 26, 2011, from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., at Laurier Senior High School, 2323 Daniel Johnson Blvd., Laval.

Themes to be discussed include access to English health and social services, retention of bilingual health professionals, needs of seniors and youth, housing, mental health, community life, religious affiliation, education and employment. Please register by contacting Mary Sicoli at 514-903-3753, Local 221 or email gmainfo@cedec.ca

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