

Trottier Family Foundation gift empowers Montreal's most affected communities to fight COVID-19

By Tara Simonetta Mann

We are not all equal in the eyes of the virus.

This is a realization that has come to the forefront over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the virus does not discriminate, systemic issues disadvantage some groups more than others. Recent Montreal migrants and refugees are particularly hard hit.

"Those who are undocumented are in survival mode. They have to accept any kind of work to survive and feed their families," says Dr. Cécile Rousseau, professor of psychiatry at McGill University who specializes in working with refugees. "This means essential, front-line work."

Thanks to a recent \$1.4 million gift from the Trottier Family Foundation to the McGill University Health Centre (MUHC) Foundation, a team of three top researchers will tackle the inequities that the coronavirus has made more evident.

During the first wave of the pandemic, many believed that migrants and refugees lacked access to information about how to stay safe from COVID-19. We now know that this was not the main problem.

"It was not that they didn't know about social distancing," says Dr. Rousseau. "They could not afford to respect it because they had to work, they had to take public transportation, and they did not have access to masks and other protective equipment."

To address this issue and level the playing field for Montreal's most affected residents, Dr. Rousseau teamed up with Dr. Alexandra de Pokomandy, family physician and researcher at the Research Institute of the MUHC (RI-MUHC) with expertise studying infectious diseases in marginalised communities, and Dr. Sarah Gallagher, an astronomer and the departmental science advisor to the Canadian Space Agency, who co-founded CanCOVID, the pan-Canadian COVID-19 research network. The team was inspired to create CoVivre, an outreach initiative aimed at helping vulnerable communities access health and support resources during the global pandemic. Community organizations will lead the partnership to determine priorities, and then CoVivre will work with them to deliver appropriate support.

How did such an eclectic group of researchers come together?

"Over the early months of the pandemic response, I could see from the activity on the CanCOVID platform that coming up with long-term strategies for living with COVID was a gap that needed to be filled, and effective communications needed to be a key part of that strategy," says Dr. Gallagher.

"Don Sheppard, Director of the McGill Interdisciplinary Initiative in Infection and Immunity (MI4), connected the three of us. We were perfect strangers, but we got to work and it turns out we make a great team," adds Dr. de Pokomandy.

Over the course of mere days, the newly formed team created the CoVivre project. The project has three pillars: outreach and advocacy, communications and liaising with the health care system.

The outreach and advocacy pillar, overseen by Dr. Rousseau, will provide psychosocial support to families within minority communities to help them cope with the stress of the pandemic, inform them of their workers' rights and available community resources.

"The pandemic is stressful for all of us, but of course, if you are in a more precarious situation, you may be more stressed. We are making sure people who



(Left to right) Dr. Alexandra de Pokomandy, Dr. Cécile Rousseau and Dr. Sarah Gallagher are leading CoVivre, a program to level the playing field for Montreal residents disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

are marginalized have access to psychological first aid and health services," says Dr. Rousseau.

Communications will be overseen by Dr. Gallagher. Though an astronomer by training, her work in science communications makes her an ideal candidate to run a large-scale educational campaign. The campaign will focus on reducing stigma and discrimination related to the pandemic. Many underrepresented communities have experienced discrimination in the wake of the coronavirus, and CoVivre's communication campaign aims to rectify this problem and create a sense of solidarity among communities.

The third pillar, overseen by Dr. de Pokomandy, is to facilitate the links between refugees and immigrants and the health care they need. For the newcomer population, including undocumented individuals, accessing health care can be incredibly difficult. The shortage of family doctors, language barriers and, in some cases, lack of provincial health coverage can make accessing much-needed health care nearly impossible.

"COVID adds a layer of complexity to accessing health care because you can't get screened at your regular clinic if you have COVID-like symptoms," says Dr. de Pokomandy. "People don't know where to go. We are working to open or improve corridors for those who face barriers to health care."

Together, the three collaborators will work with their partner organizations to improve the lives of Montreal's refugee and immigrant communities.

CoVivre is a project born from CanCOVID, a Canadian collaboration that brings together experts from across the country to facilitate research to fight COVID-19. The consortium has over 2,000 members and 4,000 volunteers who have come together in this time of crisis to help their fellow Canadians.

"It is wonderful to see the academic community work hand in hand during this crisis," says Dr. Rousseau.

"It is about keeping our community safe, and it is about solidarity. I think that is very important."

Other projects under the CanCOVID umbrella include ensuring that public health and government decision making is based on scientific evidence by putting the latest data into the right hands, and creating a centralized database through which COVID-19 information and research results can be shared. Recently, CanCOVID received funding from the Government of Canada to further its work.

CoVivre would not be possible without the support of the Trottier Family Foundation. Their generous donation to the MUHC Foundation is enabling the project to launch its anti-discrimination campaign and hire the personnel to provide outreach and education services.

"Our mission is to advance science, education, and health, so we enthusiastically support the new CanCOVID platform, particularly its efforts to support marginalized communities—those hardest hit by the coronavirus," says Eric St-Pierre, Executive Director of the Trottier Family Foundation. "It is our hope that our donation will inspire others to partner with CanCOVID, MI4 and the MUHC to drive research forward."

In addition to their funding for CoVivre, the Trottier Family Foundation's gift includes support for CanCOVID as it seeks volunteers to assist with research efforts.

What started as three strangers thrown together to solve an inequity has become a large-scale endeavor to help Montrealers in overcoming this global crisis.

"This is one positive thing to come out of COVID-19," says Dr. de Pokomandy. "People are jumping in, ready to help and collaborate. We are working with people we never would have before."

To learn how you can support the fight against COVID-19, please visit muhcfoundation.com.