

## ICU Bridge Program: Working with staff towards no family members feeling like "the elephant in the room"

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## ICU BRIDGE PROGRAM: WORKING WITH STAFF TOWARDS NO FAMILY MEMBERS FEELING LIKE "THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM"

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The intensive care unit (ICU) provides specialized care to critically ill patients. Given the traumatic nature of critical illness and its treatments, up to 75% of family members of ICU decedents and survivors experience long-term psychological consequences, termed post-intensive care syndrome family (PICS-F). Anxiety, PTSD, and depression are common manifestations that significantly impact families' quality of life and the recovery of those dependent on their caregiving. Although PICS-F can be mitigated by engagement with ICU staff, critical care workers are at risk of burnout and requesting closer liaisons with families is unfeasible. Bridging visitors and the ICU health care team would ensure that family members never feel like "the elephant in the room".

The ICU Bridge Program (ICUBP) is a unique volunteering and shadowing initiative designed and run by university students. Bridge Program volunteers are assigned to hospital ICUs in Montreal to be the first point of contact for visitors. This program addresses PICS-F by humanizing the ICU experience through compassionate human contact, continuous support, and an open line of communication. The diverse applicants are carefully selected and trained to maximize soft skills, such as emotional intelligence and active listening, which ensures that families feel welcome and understood in this tense environment. Furthermore,

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the ICUBP's self-sufficient structure off-loads administrative responsibilities from resource-constrained hospitals and makes its implementation feasible and cost-efficient. By continuously monitoring its effect on patients, families, and staff, the ICUBP aims to improve and expand its contribution to whole-person care in the ICU.■