

# Portrait of French-language health services in Ontario

Submitted to the

Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages

By the

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# Introduction

The Government of Ontario is pleased to submit this brief to the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages (the Committee).

The document, "Context of the Study on Minority-Language Health Services," outlines the Committee's desire to understand the Minister of Health's perspectives on enhancing Ontarians' ability to access healthcare in their preferred official language.

The Committee also seeks insights on how the federal government can more effectively assist provinces and territories in achieving this goal. The Government of Ontario is pleased to provide some context around French Language Services (FLS), information about the legislative framework supporting FLS in Ontario; accountability mechanisms; the FLS strategic plan; challenges faced in providing FLS, and detailed responses regarding several of the specific areas identified by the Committee as being of particular interest, such as:

1. Inclusion of language clauses in federal health transfers;
2. Long-term care and home care in one's own language;
3. How to grow the supply official language minority health care professionals; and
4. Telemedicine and the use of new technologies in the health sector, including the associated language challenges.

For clarity, references in the Study Context document to "official language minority", "minority-language", "in one's own language", "official language minority communities" and "in the language of one's choice" are interpreted as referring to Francophones and the French language in Ontario.

## Background – Francophones in Ontario

- There are **652,540 Francophones** in Ontario, representing **4.6%** of Ontario's population. **16.4%** of Francophones in Ontario were born outside Canada.
- The Francophone **population is expected to grow by 5.9%** between the 2016 and the 2028 census.
- **27** areas are designated under the French Language Services Act (FLSA) for government services in French. The most recent designated area is Sarnia (granted in Dec. 2021 – coming into force in 2024). **80%** of Franco-Ontarians live in these areas.
- Based on data from the Ministry of Francophone Affairs (MFA), approximately **39.5%** of Francophones have limited access to essential French Language Health Services.

# Context

## Legislative framework

The Ministry of Health's and the Ministry of Long-Term Care's obligations regarding French Language Health Services (FLHS) can be found in:

- **The French Language Services Act (FLSA)**

The French Language Services Act, R.S.O. 1990 (FLSA) establishes the right to receive services in French from central Government of Ontario offices and agencies as well as government and agency offices in designated areas.

There are five regulations under the FLSA:

- O. Reg. 544/22 Active Offer of Services in French – Prescribed Measures
- O. Reg. 284/11 Provision of French Language Services On Behalf of Government Agencies
- O. Reg. 407/94 Designation of Additional Areas
- O. Reg. 398/93 Designation of Public Service Agencies
- O. Reg. 671/92 Exemptions

- **The Connecting Care Act**

The Connecting Care Act, 2019 includes obligations regarding French Language Services (FLS) and includes O. Reg. 211/21: Engagement with Francophone Community Under Section 44 of the Act.

- **The People's Health Care Act**

The People's Health Care Act (PHCA), 2019, recognizes the role of French speaking populations in Ontario and respects the requirements of the FLSA in the planning, design, delivery, and evaluation of health care services for Ontario's French speaking communities.

- **The Fixing Long-Term Care Act**

The Ministry of Long-Term Care's Fixing Long-Term Care Act, 2021 (FLTCA) and Ontario Regulation 246/22 (Regulation) set out requirements to guide the operation of LTC homes.

## Accountability for FLS

Several entities and processes help the Ministry of Health to ensure accountability for FLS, including:

**Ontario Health:** Ontario Health is responsible for administering and overseeing Ontario's health system, including FLS.

**French Language Health Planning Entities** ("The Entities"): The Entities engage with Francophone communities to understand their needs and provide advice to Ontario Health on ways to improve access to FLHS.

**French Language Services Office (FLSO):** The Ministry of Health's FLSSO provides support and advice to teams within the Ministry to help them understand and meet their obligations under the FLSA and other legislation.

**French Language Health Services Database (FLHSD):** Health service providers funded by Ontario Health report annually on FLHS through the FLHSD.

**FLS reporting:** Government of Ontario ministries and agencies that provide services on their behalf report on FLS to the Ministry of Francophone Affairs every year.

**Reporting on designation:** Every three years, organisations designated under the FLSA also report to the Ministry of Francophone Affairs on their continued compliance with designation requirements.

**Stakeholder feedback:** The Ministry of Health engages with stakeholders regularly, including community organisations, the Ministry's French Language Services Advisory Council, and the French Language Services (FLS) Commissioner. The FLS Commissioner and L'Assemblée de la francophonie de l'Ontario (AFO) publish annual and special reports which may include recommendations on FLS for the Ministry of Health.

## FLS Challenges

Key Ontario stakeholders, including AFO, Ontario Health, and the FLS Commissioner, have highlighted similar challenges in their reports regarding the provision of FLHS in Ontario. These challenges include:

- **Lack of data on Francophones:** The Ministry of Health currently does not have enough data on Francophones and the demand for French language services in the health system. The lack of this data makes evidence-based decision-making challenging.
- **Uneven distribution of French-speaking health professionals:** There is a limited number of French-speaking healthcare professionals in some communities, which can make it difficult for Francophones to access care in French. Further, French-

speaking health care professionals are not evenly distributed across Ontario, making it more challenging to provide FLS in some areas of the province than others. In some areas, all Ontarians face challenges in accessing the care they need, close to home.

- **Communications:** Some Francophones may not be aware of the health care services available to them in French or face barriers in accessing information about these services. The lack of communications in French from Local Public Health Agencies (LPHAs) during the pandemic was noted by the FLS Commissioner as an example of gaps in French-language communications.
- **Referrals and system navigation:** Service providers who are not able to offer services in French are not referring patients often enough to other nearby providers that offer services in French. Some service providers may not be aware of the availability of FLHS nearby and in some cases, there might not be a service provider with FLS capacity, nearby.

Online resources like Ontario's Health811 service can make it easier for clients to find services nearby in their language. Health811 offers search features to help clients find health professionals or services. Health811 also makes it possible for users to chat or speak with a nurse who speaks French, in real-time.

## French Language Services (FLS) Strategy

The Ministry of Health has developed a 5-year Strategic Plan to support the provision of FLHS and mitigate the challenges involved in delivering FLHS across Ontario.

The Strategic Plan is based on three strategic directions:

1. **Improved access across the continuum of care:**
  - Increase HHR capacity to establish a sustainable French-speaking workforce.
  - Expand the FLS translation network to Local Public Health Agencies and Ontario Health Teams.
  - Apply a Francophone lens to the expansion of virtual care and Health811 online services.
2. **Enhanced decision-making enabled by better data:**
  - Enable collection of data on Francophones through the Health811 platform.
  - Enhance the functionality and utility of the French Language Health Services Database (FLHSD) for Health Service Providers, Ontario Health, the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Long-Term Care, and other system partners.
  - Expand FLHS reporting to agencies that do not currently report on FLHS via the FLHSD.

- Collect data on the preferred official language of health service users to facilitate better planning of FLHS, through a Health Card Linguistic Identifier Awareness Project.
3. **Strengthened francophone voices through better engagement:**
- Hire more French-speaking civil servants within the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Long-Term Care.

## **The Committee's specific areas of interest**

The Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages mentioned specific areas of interest in the study context document. The following is more detailed information on these areas of interest.

### **Inclusion of language clauses in federal health transfers**

Language clauses in federal health transfers help Ontario to align its priorities for FLHS with those of the federal government.

Language clauses are used in agreements with service providers for Health Canada Programs aimed at improving access to health services for official language minority communities.

Ontario's Francophone community would welcome additional requirements for socio-demographic data collection to better monitor access and effectiveness of French language services.

# Long-Term Care and Home Care

## Long-Term Care (LTC)<sup>1</sup>

### Challenges

Third party reports and sector stakeholders have raised the following concerns related to access to French language services in LTC:

- Difficulty recruiting French-speaking LTC staff.
- Increasing resident diversity within French identified or designated homes which may dilute French language care and services provided.
- There is limited, unstandardized data (e.g., sociodemographic data for LTC residents/ staff; resident experience, etc.) to effectively inform system planning and identify inequities.

### Opportunities

- Ontario has established legislation to support the linguistic needs of residents in LTC. The *Fixing Long-Term Care Act, 2021* (FLTCA) and Ontario Regulation 246/22 (Regulation) set out requirements to guide the operation of LTC homes to ensure residents receive safe, high-quality care, and have the supports and services they need for their health and well-being. Among other requirements, the FLTCA and Regulation requires:
  - placement coordinators to consider a person's religious, ethnic and linguistic origin in the placement process, and that,
  - homes have strategies to meet the needs of residents who cannot communicate in language(s) used in the home.
- Ontario has a multi-year plan to fix long-term care, so that every resident experiences the best possible quality of life, supported by safe, quality care. Embedded in the plan, are efforts to improve the sector's capacity to respond to the needs of Francophone Ontarians including:
  - **Increasing access to FLS in LTC**
    - Supporting education sessions, program materials, resources, signage, etc., in French and translation tools across LTC homes.
    - Working with homes to self-identify as providing some services in French and to work towards becoming designated under the *French Languages Services Act, 1990*.
    - Providing access to French language supports to people waiting in the community for LTC.

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario's Ministry of Long-term Care is a separate ministry. The Ministry of Long-term Care provided content for the Long-term Care section of this document.



- **Increasing the supply and recruitment of French-speaking health care professionals in LTC**
  - Targeted outreach with Francophone networks resulting in the recruitment of French-speaking inspections staff and health care professionals in LTC.
  - Supporting post-secondary institutions to offer French-language instruction to train new personal support workers (PSWs) and educate PSWs and Registered Practical Nurses (RPNs) to bridge to careers as RPNs and Registered Nurses (respectively).
  - Expanding the [Learn and Earn program](#) to be delivered in French to support existing French-speaking LTC staff to ladder up to a PSW credential.
  - Working to enable more internationally educated nurses that speak French to become licensed to work within the LTC sector.
- **Improving Francophone-specific data to support policy and planning activities.**
  - Working with key partners to improve existing data quality and collection to capture, report on and assess French language services in LTC (e.g., staffing, placement, resident experience).

## **Federal Support**

- The federal government could better support the provision of LTC services in French by funding the development of LTC homes to increase capacity in Ontario and funding increased staffing to deliver LTC services in French.

## **Home Care**

### **Challenges**

- Challenges providing home care are largely related to lack of French-language health human resources capacity within the home and community care sector within certain communities. When healthcare services are provided at home, delivering them in French can be more challenging because French-speaking providers might need to travel longer distances to reach clients in geographically dispersed locations, increasing travel time and limiting the number of clients they can serve in one shift. This issue is particularly pronounced outside of communities with a high concentration of French speakers. In contrast, in hospital settings for example, a smaller number of French-speaking staff can support patients from a wider geographic area.
- Care coordination services for home care, primarily managed by Home and Community Care Support Services (HCCSS), present an opportunity to utilize

centralized French-language support systems. HCCSS employs about 5,000 care coordinators (FTEs), facilitating the provision of services such as intake, referral, assessment, and care planning in French, according to the client's preference. Although some assessments are conducted in the home, they can also be performed virtually when necessary.

- The Ontario Caregiver Organization (OCO), funded by the Ministry, provides resources and supports for informal caregivers (families and friends).
  - OCO has heard from francophone caregivers that they face barriers in accessing services and supports in the community in French. OCO works closely with francophone organizations to raise awareness about local and provincial resources that are available.
  - OCO notes that one of the biggest barriers is staffing for French language programs. OCO has some French speaking team members but has faced difficulties filling vacancies and leaves with qualified individuals at manageable salaries.
  - OCO notes the need for more resources and dedicated programming in collaboration with Francophones and Franco-Ontarian organizations.

## **Current Initiatives**

- HCCSS are seeking ongoing opportunities in which they would be able to partner with other regions or communities with a higher French-speaking human resource population to share tools and resources to support ongoing increased proficiency for those regions that have lower ratios of French speaking staff. These tools and resources include, lunch and learn French only discussions, and linkages to French community organizations.
- The Ontario government is taking steps to better coordinate and connect people to home care by merging 14 HCCSS organizations into a single organisation, Ontario Health atHome.
  - The government has passed the *Convenient Care at Home Act, 2023*, which, when proclaimed into effect, will establish Ontario Health atHome. This is anticipated for this summer. Ontario Health atHome will take on responsibility for providing home care services across the province and supporting Ontario Health Teams as they start taking on responsibility for home care services starting in 2025.
  - Ontario Health atHome will have the same obligations as the HCCSS organizations for offering home care services in French under the FLSA.
- OCO is working to address both these gaps through its French Language quality improvement process and continues to adapt offerings accordingly (e.g., providing

dedicated French language webinars instead of translating all English language webinars in French).

### **Opportunities**

- Continued investment in French-language education and training programs and continued support for equitable compensation in the home and community care sector is important to attracting and retaining sufficient French-speaking staff.
- As part of the ministry's continued work to advance equitable access to home and community care, one option being considered is the strengthening of referral networks across home care providers in order to maximize the use of available French-language supports in communities.

### **Federal Support**

- Federal funding to help address the rising cost of home care delivery and the cost of post-secondary education and training would enable the Government of Ontario to continue to make investments in French-language education and training in the health system and support investment priorities in health human resources capacity in the home and community sector.

## **How to grow the supply of official language minority health care professionals**

- For 2023-24, the Ministry of Health has set a yearly target of **0.9% growth** in French speaking health human resources (HHR), which aligns with expected Francophone population growth.

### **Challenges**

- Many health professionals with the ability to provide services in French do not provide services in French because their patients do not require it. Ontario's challenge is to **better align the utilization and distribution** of French language HHR to deliver care where and when Francophones need it.

### **Opportunities**

- Growing Ontario's health care workforce and building our HHR capacity are key to the government's Your Health Plan.
  - In 2022, there were approximately 22,600 regulated health professionals (excluding physicians) who could provide services in French, which is 8% of these regulated health professionals. Also in 2022, there were over 4,500 physicians who could provide services in French, which is 13% of all

physicians. By comparison, around 5% of the Ontario population identifies as Francophone.

### **Federal Support**

- Ontario is interested in working with the federal government on strategies to continue to build Ontario's French language HHR capacity, including **taking action to align this capacity** to where Francophones reside in the province, so they can access the care they need in French.

## **Telemedicine and the Use of New Technologies in the Health Sector**

- Telemedicine and other patient-facing technologies are vital tools for delivering healthcare and are available with French language options. However, health service providers serving French-speaking Ontarians must verify that their chosen solutions support French. Additionally, if providers need to add new content to these technologies, they should be aware that translation into French may incur extra costs.

### **Challenges**

- The most significant challenge in providing telemedicine and other technology supported services in French across Ontario is access to French speaking health human resources (HHR) to engage with patients.

### **Current Initiatives**

- In Ontario, Ontario Health verifies patient-to-provider video and secure messaging virtual visit solutions. The provincial Virtual Visits Verification Standard contains a recommended requirement (2.1.17) that solutions will support Canada's official languages of English and French, which includes that clinicians should be able to use (read, write, and edit) information in the chosen language and the solution provider's website (e.g. training materials) can be read in the chosen language.
  - Health service providers can check if solutions on the Verified Solution List attest to meeting the Official Languages requirement (2.1.17) on the details page found by clicking on the solution listing.
- Ontario is currently undertaking a **Remote Care Management** (RCM) project for Francophones with support from Société Santé en français. RCM programs are a form of virtual care where remote monitoring solutions are used to assess a patient's ongoing health status, guide care plan changes, address patient education needs /

deliver self-management supports, and activate interventions to proactively address emerging issues.

- This project will trial a provincial model for delivering RCM programs to patients residing in official language minority communities in urban, rural, and remote areas of the province, mitigating the French language HHR challenge and enabling enhanced access for Francophones.
- Ontario's **Health811** service (online platform) is designed to be fully bilingual, with all service components available in English and French, with translation support offered in other languages. Francophone users can access the service directory, assess their symptoms, use the phone service or web chat and all the other features the service offers in English or French.
  - OH has also committed to continuing to engage Francophones as part of the service development and testing in order to ensure that the service is further optimized to support Franco-Ontarians. This includes:
    - Engaging FLS Community Organizations, patients and caregivers in annual Health811 planning;
    - Ensuring Francophone representation on Health811's Partner Advisory Council;
    - Developing a Translation Working Group (TWG) with specific representation from Francophone communities; and,
    - Engaging Ontario Health Teams (OHTs) regarding the new OHT content feature on Health811, with the intention of identifying gaps in FLS and enhancing the feature.

## Federal Support

- The federal government could provide financial support to enhance the directory of FLHS on Health811. This directory aims to accurately identify accessible FLHS providers in Ontario to help Ontarians access services in French.
- To help reduce gaps in health care for Francophones, Ontario Health is dedicated to augmenting existing services and leveraging data to enhance accessibility of FLS health services.
  - To expedite this work, **federal funding should be considered to support comprehensive data collection**, foster stakeholder engagement, establish standards for service categorization and filtering, and continually evaluate patient experiences in accessing FLHS.
- More broadly, federal **support for translation services** and **increasing French speaking HHR** would also support the provision of telemedicine and other technology-based services in French.