



Annual Report of the French Language Services Commissioner 2022–2023

December 7, 2023

Opening Remarks – Commissioner Carl Bouchard

Hello everyone,

Thank you very much for being here today.

I would like to begin by recognizing that we are on the traditional Indigenous territories of the province we now call Ontario, and we are thankful to be able to work and live on this land. Toronto is the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples, and is now home to many First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

We believe it is important to offer a land acknowledgement as a way to recognize, respect and honour this territory, the treaties, the original occupants, their ancestors, and the historic connection they still have with this territory.

Thank you.

As you know, on December 4, Ontario Ombudsman Paul Dubé announced he had appointed me as the permanent French Language Services Commissioner.

Since I started in the position, first as interim and now permanently, I wanted to be accessible, proactive, hands-on, to continuously ensure that Franco-Ontarians can access the French-language services that they are entitled to, and that the institutions of the Legislature, the Government of Ontario, its agencies and its third parties act in compliance with their obligations.

Therefore, I am very proud to present this Annual Report, which is full of examples of how we have succeeded in promoting and protecting French-language services in Ontario. These accomplishments were made possible through the dedicated work of the French Language Services Unit and with the steadfast support of the Ombudsman and the entire Office.

Since March 2023, I have prioritized meeting with Franco-Ontarians to raise awareness of our services and listen to their concerns. I met with more than 60 organizations and hundreds of Francophones. The Report contains a summary of these meetings.

I would like to put the *French Language Services Act* into perspective. The Act is the foundation of a social project. Ontario got on board with this project in 1986 by recognizing the rights of Francophones, and thereby, their place in the province. In 2022, the modernization of the *French Language Services Act* reiterated this commitment. These are your rights—our rights—and you should exercise them.

The message I wanted to send to Francophones is the same one I want to continue to send: “You have the right to receive French-language services from the Government of Ontario. Do not hesitate to contact me, to contact us, if you do not receive these services or if you do not have a positive experience.”

My call seems to have been heard. This year, we received our highest number of cases since the Ombudsman became responsible for monitoring the administration of the *French Language Services Act*. We received 386 cases—nearly 40% more than last year.

And so, I would like to speak directly to those who reached out to us this year to share their stories. Thank you. Thank you for trusting us and allowing us to help you. Thanks to you, we were able to examine important issues, bring them to the government’s attention and find solutions, most of which will benefit a great many other Francophones.

In July, I also launched an investigation into the provincial government’s outdoor advertising, which we see in places like electronic panels, bus shelters, buses, and so on.

The investigation will allow us to determine whether the *French Language Services Act* is being adhered to and to make recommendations to the government on how to improve its provision of French-language services. That, in turn, will improve government communications with Franco-Ontarians.

I am confident that our observations and recommendations will continue to be welcomed. To date, the Government of Ontario and government agencies have accepted our recommendations in their entirety.

Since 2020, we have made 30 recommendations contained in three Annual Reports and one investigation report on Laurentian University’s cuts to French-language programming during restructuring.

The Government of Ontario has made major progress in implementing all of our recommendations.

Among the many advances, I noted that:

- Each ministry now plans its French-language service offering systematically and in a standardized way.

- The Ministry of Francophone Affairs encourages ministries to use the FLSC Compass to develop performance measures.
- The public service updated the Ontario Public Service Employment Policy to require all external job announcements intended for the general public to be posted on its Careers website in English and in French, with the transition starting in 2024.
- And, the Ministry of Francophone Affairs has formulated a plan to update the list of agencies designated under the *FLSA* in Regulation 398/93. Some updates have already been made.

And with regard to our investigation on Laurentian University, entitled *Strengthening the Designation: A Collaborative Effort*, I have observed that:

- Collaboration has increased between three parties: the Ministry of Francophone Affairs, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and Laurentian University
- Decision-making processes have been reviewed and improved.
- The university has hired an associate vice-president of Francophone affairs and new academic program development.
- And, new automated communication tools and regular compliance assessments have been introduced for all designated agencies.

I am very proud of the work that has been accomplished.

Now, what will we be working on this coming year?

I am focusing on two issues:

- How the government communicates with Francophones on social media
- And, employee training for those who are in direct contact with the Francophone population.

These two issues have emerged as recurring themes in the cases we handled, the work that has been done on implementing our recommendations, and the new tools available to us. I am referring, of course, to the modernized *French Language Services Act* and the regulation on the active offer of services that came into force in April of this year.

Regarding social media, I recommend that, within the next 12 months, the Ministry of Francophone Affairs develop and communicate guidelines for all government agencies and institutions of the Legislative Assembly to ensure that all of their social media accounts comply with the active offer regulation, and provide me with a copy of these guidelines.

We have realized that agencies are not systematically publishing bilingual content, the content available in French is not always equivalent, and some posts include photos or videos in English only.

We observed this in the cases submitted to us, as well as through our anecdotal review of the accounts of more than 50 agencies on 5 social networks, including Instagram, Facebook, X (twitter.com), LinkedIn and YouTube.

The active offer regulation requires that communications on the social media of the government, agencies, third parties and institutions of the Legislature be equivalent in both languages.

In my view, guidelines would educate all agencies that are subject to the Act and would require them to comply with the Act and its regulations.

The second issue I examined is the training of frontline staff. We have realized that even when service in French was available, staff members were not always aware of the policies, practices and tools that exist for the provision of French-language services.

The Report presents the example of a Francophone woman who was in a car crash in the Ottawa area. She received a bill from the Ministry of Transportation's Highway Incident Claims Unit. She called the Unit and asked to speak to a bilingual employee, but was unable to receive services in French. The Unit told us that the unilingual Anglophone employee who took the call was new and was not very familiar with the procedures.

This was a missed opportunity. Although service was available in French, the employee's lack of knowledge led to a lack of French-language services. This is an easy problem to solve. All it takes is ensuring that all employees—whether or not they speak French, whether or not they offer services in French—know the policies and procedures used to guide Francophones through their department.

Therefore, I recommend:

- That Treasury Board direct every government ministry and agency within its mandate to provide regular training and reminders to all frontline staff where an obligation exists to provide services in French.
- That, as part of the directions, Treasury Board require these government ministries and agencies to attest annually that they are compliant.
- That, within the next 12 months, Treasury Board provide the Commissioner with a copy of the directions, and confirmation of their implementation.

I am confident that by making these changes, the government will significantly improve its French-language service offering.

I encourage you to read our Report and learn about everything we are doing to ensure compliance with the *French Language Services Act* and improve the Government of Ontario's provision of French-language services.

I am now ready to take your questions.

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