

Report of June 2020 Community Engagements and Progress to Date



Experience of Northern Ontario Francophones during COVID-19 Pandemic



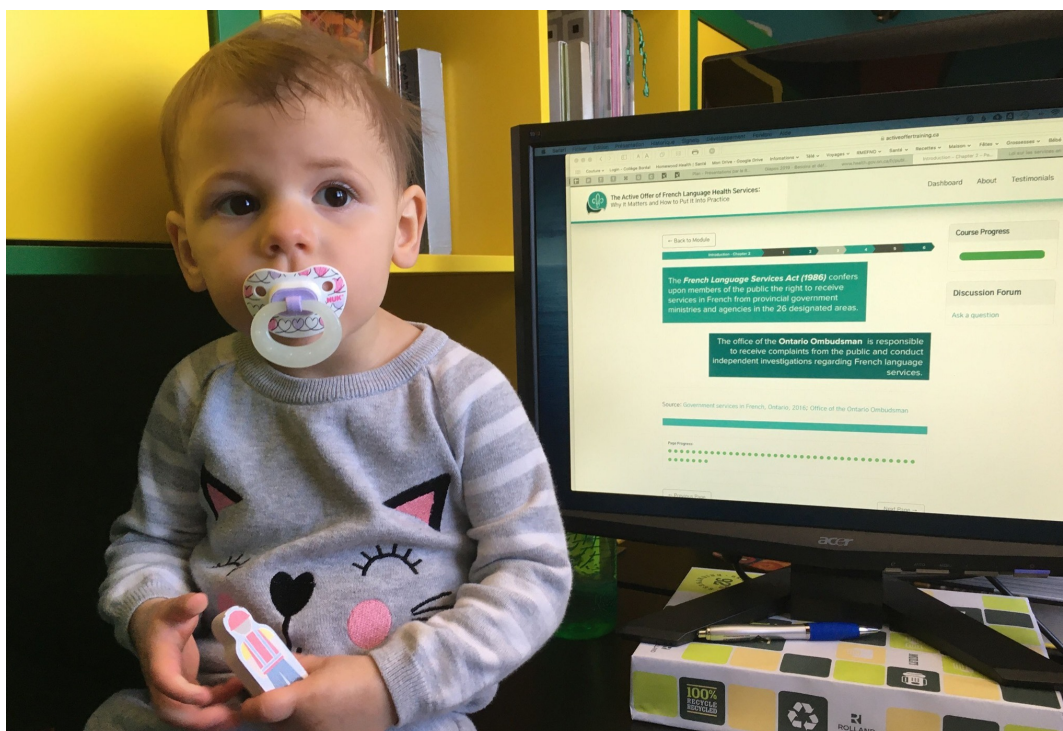
LE RÉSEAU DU MIEUX-ÊTRE
FRANCOPHONE
DU NORD DE L'ONTARIO

Preamble

In June 2020, the Réseau du mieux-être francophone du Nord de l'Ontario held engagement sessions with Francophones in its planning area to learn more about their experiences during the pandemic. The information gathered allowed us to identify gaps and best practices and to make recommendations to ensure better health system planning and enhance access to health care services in French.

More than 60 people participated in the sessions or responded to an online survey. We wish to thank everyone who took the time to share their experiences relating to French language services during this pandemic.

In this report, we tried to highlight themes that were shared with us or that we noted through our work with our partners. We hope to have captured the essence of the reality of the Francophone experience, as well as to offer avenues for action to ensure better planning of French language services. We are also sharing with you an overview of the system improvements/changes that have taken place since our engagement sessions in early summer.



Themes Raised by the Participants

Access to Information and Clarity of the Information in French

Access to information on COVID-19 in French was very limited at the beginning and progressively improved in the months following the declaration of the pandemic.

However, the availability of information in French is not the same everywhere. The delay caused by translation result in information in French often available a few days after the English information and is often of poorer quality.

Furthermore, access to information in French on the Public Health Units' Websites, an important resource for many during the pandemic, is a concern. The way information in French is shared is very inconsistent across the province; it is either very obvious, difficult to find or simply nonexistent.

// Most Francophone seniors watch the news in French, a lot of people were confused, frustrated, and did not understand the differences between the two provinces given that their only way of getting information was through French language media."

It was often difficult to distinguish pandemic-related information and news between Ontario and Quebec radio and television stations. The instructions on lifting the lockdown restrictions shared in Quebec were very different from those in Ontario, which caused a lot of confusion.

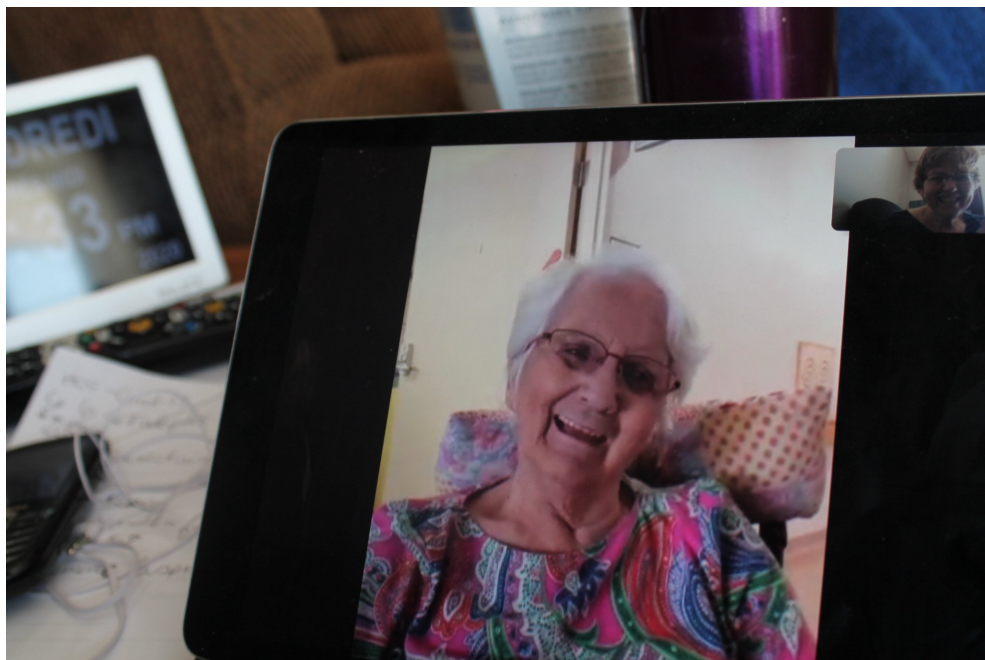
Access to Data on Francophones

Information on the person's mother tongue is not collected during the COVID testing. This hinders the process of collecting data on the needs of Francophones and on planning for services during the pandemic.

Long-Term Care

The pandemic brought to light the significant issues that existed in long-term care homes, such as the lack of human resources, physical resources, personal protective equipment and a standardized approach to quickly respond to the needs of a vulnerable population. Francophones living in long-term care homes were hit twice as hard. The closures of long-term care facilities to all visitors meant that families and caregivers could no longer be in contact with their loved ones to reassure them or to ensure the continuity of French language services.

“It is not a way to live for these seniors, isolated in their rooms, not knowing what's happening outside, not hearing birds chirping; it is heartbreaking [to see our loved ones living this way].”



Mental Health, Substance Abuse and Isolation



The pandemic brought about many fears, worries and doubts for many. The lockdown measures affected people's well-being and mental health.

The pandemic affects everyone, whether it be low-income immigrant women, the homeless, the elderly or women and children victims of violence. It is in this regard that we must keep a strong focus on our most vulnerable populations.

The isolation of seniors who live alone at home is very troublesome as many of them worry about accessing

services for fear of contracting the virus or of not respecting the guidelines. It remains difficult to ensure the well-being of the elderly and to make sure they receive correct COVID-related information.

Services for victims of violence were forgotten during the pandemic. A number of centres indicated they had not received guidelines from public health as to how to continue delivering services and they did not have access to personal protective equipment, nor did they know how to access it.

Limited Access to Technology

Several communities in the North do not have reliable Internet in order to ensure access to virtual services. This issue was compounded by the pandemic as the majority of people required increased access to the Internet. Unreliable accessibility to the Internet limits people's ability to telemedicine consultations, mental health and addictions and other consultation services. It is equally important that the virtual platforms and virtual programs be available in French, and that there be an active offer of these French language services. Active offer of French language services during virtual consultations much also be assured.

Sharing information about the pandemic is very difficult when individuals have limited knowledge of technology or do not have access to technology in order to receive the information online.

“With this pandemic, many services which were offered in person were changed to virtual services thereby becoming our ‘new normal’; we must ensure that platforms, tools, etc. are available in French and that the active offer is made.”

Limitation of the Support and Interpretation Services

Access to French language services is often limited in primary care and hospital settings. Francophones are often faced with the need for interpretation services or support services to ensure they have clearly understood the diagnosis and their treatment plan. During the pandemic, it was difficult, or almost impossible, for patients to have access to formal and informal interpretation and support services during their appointments.

Recommendations



We heard frequently throughout the consultations about the importance of innovation in order to ensure the continuation of services and the prevention of social isolation. The pandemic has allowed health service providers and community organizations to work collaboratively and to explore alternative options to service delivery.

The pandemic forced key health care system actors to transform at an unprecedented pace. The system had to put in place more efficient ways of working and responding to the needs of individuals and communities.

Considering the information shared with us on the issues related to the pandemic, we are proposing recommendations that serve as a guide to enhance planning and access to French language services during the pandemic. It must be

noted that the development and implementation of strategies to address the recommendations are not only for the *Réseau*, but rather for all key stakeholders capable of influencing the system in order to be more responsive to the needs of Francophones.

Planning

Francophone Lens

The inclusion of the Francophone lens remains an integral component of provincial and regional COVID-19 committees so as to ensure an integrated planning process of French language services as opposed to a reactive one. The French Language Health Planning Entities sit on several local, regional and provincial COVID-19 related committees to ensure the Francophone lens is applied.

Complaint Process

Access to the complaint process regarding the active offer of French language services, either from health service providers and through the French Language Services Unit of Ombudsman Ontario, remains critical to ensure the protection of Francophone linguistic rights.

Availability of Screening Questions in French

COVID-19 screening questions in French must be readily available and used by health service providers.

Sharing of Francophone Human Resources

A collaboration among health service providers must be enhanced in order to promote and share access to Francophone human resources. To help provincial efforts to prevent and control the spread of COVID-19, Ontario has created a [human resources matching portal](#) for the recruitment of available individuals with experience in providing health care or other non-clinical services. Unfortunately, there is no mention if the matching is also available for services in French.

Communication

Access to Information

Access to information in both of Canada's official languages must be equitable at all times. This means that the translation of documents in French is completed and available without delays. It is even more important during a pandemic that information shared with Francophones regarding the guidelines to follow in Ontario be clear, precise and in French in order to avoid any confusion. Since the engagement sessions, the sharing of information in French has greatly improved with the provincial government.

Information on COVID-19 is now available on the [Ontario government website](#) in French and English in real time. Since April 2020, simultaneous interpretation is available during the Ontario Premier's press conferences.

The pandemic has exposed many shortcomings in terms of bilingualism in emergency situations at the Federal level. As outlined in his October 2020 report, the [Commissioner of Official Languages](#) has indicated that the federal government is not respecting its linguistic obligations during the pandemic. The following recommendations were shared with the federal government:

- ❖ Development of a plan, by The Translation Bureau that would include the creation of an accelerated translation service in emergency situations;
- ❖ Within the next 18 months, the formal communication plans and procedures of each federal institution are reviewed to ensure bilingual communications;
- ❖ Collaboration with all levels of government to encourage them to integrate both official languages in communications during emergency situations.

Printing of Posters and Brochures

To provide easier access to information in French, the printing of communications in both official languages in one single document is crucial.

Consistent Approach in Public Health

A consistent approach to sharing information in French on Public Health Units' Websites is necessary. Albeit the instructions from the Ministry of Health to make information on COVID-19 available in French, this information remains difficult to find on a number of Public Health Units' Websites and social media pages.

The *Réseau* followed up with the Public Health Units in Northern Ontario. This same exercise was also repeated by the other French Language Health Planning Entities across the province. A report outlining the Entities' findings was shared with the Ministry of Health. As a result, the Ministry of Health sent a letter to all Public Health Units advising them that all available COVID-19 related materials must be translated and available in both official languages on their website.

We have seen improvement in certain regions, but access to COVID-19 related materials in French on some websites and social media pages remains a concern for several Public Health Units.

Information Dissemination in Media

To avoid confusion, media outlets must clarify the province from which the information originates. A follow-up with Radio-Canada to find solutions as to the question related to the dissemination of the information on COVID-19 between Ontario and Quebec must be established. In July 2020, the *Réseau* followed up with Radio-Canada. A response was received from Radio-Canada in September 2020, stating they were aware of the different challenges in Quebec and Ontario related to the pandemic. Here is an excerpt from their letter:

// We are aware of the ongoing need to articulate clearly which region or which regions of the country we are talking about, especially when reporting on to measures related to public health. We constantly remind our colleagues from across the country and in particular in Quebec to always be as clear as possible when speaking for example, about the Québec Ministry of Health or the Premier of Quebec. This is a particular challenge for radio and television.”

- Pierre Ouellette, Director, Radio-Canada Ontario

Simplified Approach to Reduce the Volume of Information

A simplified approach must be ensured to reduce the volume of COVID-19 related information. People find it exhausting to have to sift through all the information they receive on COVID-19.

Long-Term Care

Updates for Families

Regular and daily updates on long-term care residents must be shared with families and caregivers.

Maintaining Visits

Visits between long-term care residents and family and caregivers must be maintained, whether it be through virtual platforms or in person. All precautions must be taken to facilitate visits in long-term care homes.

Caregivers as Essential



Caregivers must be regarded as essential in order to help the long-term care home staff and to be present for their loved ones. An example of this is found in the [Partners in Care Tool Kit](#). Since June 2020, the provincial government has reviewed the [COVID-19 visiting policies for long term care homes](#). This now allows residents to designate two caregivers as essential to provide physical, psychological and emotional support.

Mental Health and Substance Abuse

Greater Visibility of Services

A greater visibility of mental health and substance abuse services in French, especially as it relates to crisis lines, must be ensured.

Regional Coordination of Services

A coordinated regional or community approach to service delivery must be established. During this pandemic, there are many examples of services that were implemented to reduce social isolation and ensure a person's well-being for examples, check-in phone calls, online activities, distribution of books and puzzles, as well as virtual events. Please find below a few examples of online services for youth, adults and seniors:

- ❖ [Wellness Together Canada](#) – is a free service which provides online resources, tools and applications as well as connects users with trained volunteers and qualified professionals, when necessary;
- ❖ [Bounce Back®](#) – is intended to help adults and youth 15 years of age or older manage their feelings of sadness, their mild to moderate symptoms of depression and anxiety, stress and concerns;
- ❖ [ConnectAînés](#) - a service to help seniors deal with isolation (in French only);
- ❖ [Ontario Caregiver Organization](#) - exists to support Ontario's caregivers; ordinary people who provide physical and emotional support to a family member, partner, friend or neighbour. This program supports caregivers by being their one point of access to information, so they have what they need to be successful in their role;
- ❖ [COVID-19: Support for people](#) - list of support services available during the COVID-19 crisis.

Access to Technology and Virtual Services

Access to Virtual Services

Continued access to virtual services in French must be ensured. This type of service allows people to receive services despite the isolation and distance. Virtual consultations and the offer of programs on a virtual platform has become an essential means to ensure the continuation of services. Individuals can continue to participate in their social activities or consult a healthcare professional without having to leave their home. Several health service providers offer technical support services in French to their Francophone clients to facilitate access to unilingual virtual platforms. If the consultation is not available in French, planning needs to take place to ensure the patient has access to an interpretation service.

According to the Canadian Institute of Health Information, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, provincial and territorial governments and medical associations moved rapidly to adapt the physician fee schedules to meet the emerging needs of physicians and their patients during the crisis, especially for virtual care services. This ensures that people can still consult their physician without having to leave their home.

Here are some virtual services options that are also available in French:

- ❖ [Ontario Virtual Care Clinic](#) - a free-to-patient, easy-to-use, safe and secure online service that provides video and audio access to a family doctor to any Ontario resident with a valid OHIP number for simple health requests;
- ❖ [eVisit Primary Care Project](#) - allows patient access to their primary care providers through virtual solutions (i.e. secure messaging, video visits).

Availability of Ontario Telemedicine Network Services

The OTN (Ontario Telemedicine Network) service and other virtual platforms must be available in both official languages.

Improvement of Internet Infrastructure

Partnerships between the different levels of government and the municipalities must be established in order to find solutions and improve the infrastructure of Internet. The pandemic has brought to light the disparities between rural areas and urban centres with respect to Internet access. In November 2020, the [government of Ontario announced an investment](#) of nearly \$1 billion over six years to expand and improve broadband and cellular access across the province.

Distribution of telephones and tablets

Partnerships with government bodies and others must be developed in order to facilitate the distribution of telephones and tablets to allow individuals to have Internet access where the access is possible. This is a common practice with many school boards. Many municipalities also send COVID-19 information by mail in order to reach isolated areas. Since the summer of 2020, the [Fédération des aînées et retraités francophones de l'Ontario \(FARFO\) started a new project](#) aimed at buying and distributing tablets and internet access for seniors who, due to the pandemic, can't participate in regular activities. Registration started in the fall of 2020.

Support and Interpretation Services

Access to Interpretation Services

Bilingual staff available at all points of contact for the Francophone patient must be ensured. If this is not possible, planning for the provision of interpretation services is required. For the North West and Algoma regions, it is possible to access the online interpretation service offered by l'[Accueil francophone de Thunder Bay](#) to ensure a French language service during appointments.

Ongoing Contact with Families

Ongoing contact with the family is essential, especially when a patient does not speak English; this allows sharing of information with regards to changes in medication, procedures, etc. Language is an important factor in providing quality healthcare. Without a good understanding of the language, the health and safety of the patient are compromised.

Access to Data on Francophones

Identification of Access Points for Data Collection

The identification of access points for data collection on Francophones is required. This data is essential to identify service priorities for Francophones. The only data collection that currently exists relating to Francophones is at the time of a follow-up regarding a positive COVID-19 test result.

A Shared Responsibility

This report highlights the recommendations stemming from lived experiences of Francophones in Northern Ontario in the spring of 2020 during the pandemic. Over the course of the past months, the *Réseau* and its partners have been working on the implementation of some of the recommendations. The contents of this report will be shared with our local and regional partners at a systemic level. The implementation of the recommendations of this report remains a shared responsibility of all key partners. Although we have noted some progress, there is still a lot of work to be done. As individuals, communities and organisations, we need to remain vigilant in order to ensure that French language services are offered equitably and in real time. We hope this report will be useful in enhancing equitable access to French language services.

For more information on COVID:

[Government of Ontario: COVID-19 in Ontario](#)

[Government of Canada: Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#)



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Communicate with us if you have any questions:

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