

Report of the Advisory Committee on Francophone Affairs to the Government of Saskatchewan

January 2025

Health

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Letter of transmittal

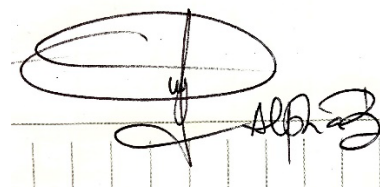
The Honourable Alana Ross
Minister of Parks, Culture and Sport

It is my pleasure to submit this report for your review, following the February 15, 2024, meeting of the Advisory Committee on Francophone Affairs.

On that occasion, we met with representatives from the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority. We also met with representatives of the Fransaskois organizations active in the health sector, as well as representatives of postsecondary institutions, to learn about the situation of bilingual training programs in the health field. Our discussions enabled us to better understand and identify the needs and challenges of francophones in the healthcare sector.

On behalf of the Advisory Committee, I am pleased to present this report. The recommendations are intended to advise the government on improving the provision of health care services in French.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alpha Barry', is written over a series of vertical lines. The signature is stylized and includes a large, loopy initial 'A'.

Alpha Barry
Chair
Advisory Committee on Francophone Affairs

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Introduction

With more than 52,000 French speakers in Saskatchewan,¹ including a high proportion of seniors, and an influx of newcomers whose first official language is French, the provision of French-language health services is essential and is one of the priority sectors for the Fransaskois community. With the ultimate goal of advocating for better access to French-speaking healthcare professionals, the Advisory Committee on Francophone Affairs held a meeting on February 15, 2024 to discuss the issue. Saskatchewan's healthcare system offers a range of health programs and services through the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA). While Committee members recognize the progress made by the Ministry and SHA, they believe there is still much to be done to better serve Fransaskois in terms of health services.

Before formulating its recommendations, the Committee met with the Assemblée communautaire fransaskoise, the community's representative body, as well as with two other Fransaskois organizations active in the health field (Réseau Santé en français de la Saskatchewan - RSFS and Vitalité 55+). The Committee then met with representatives of post-secondary institutions to inquire about the status of bilingual training programs in the health sector. Finally, Committee members met with representatives of the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority. The Committee would like to thank all participants for their contributions.

The Committee made the following recommendations. They aim to build on the work accomplished and suggest avenues to explore in order to improve the health services offered to the Fransaskois community.

Recommendations:

1. (a) That the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority put in place mechanisms to ensure active offers are made by asking health professionals identified as bilingual to come forward and offer services in French.
(b) That the Saskatchewan Health Authority commit to continuing to update data on health professionals able to offer services in French.
(c) That the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority take action on the four recommendations related to improving services for seniors, contained in the Committee's report published in November 2021.
2. (a) That the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority formalize their relationship with the RSFS to better support healthcare professionals who wish to improve their language skills and offer services in French.
(b) That the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority invest in French-language capacity building and fund French-language training for healthcare system employees.
3. (a) That the Ministries of Health and Advanced Education work together to secure the provincial match to maintain Health Canada funding for post-secondary healthcare training.
(b) That the Ministries of Health and Advanced Education work together to encourage post-secondary institutions to introduce French-language modules in healthcare training programs, and reserve a certain percentage of places for bilingual students.

¹ Statistics Canada, 2021 Census of Population.

(c) That the Ministry of Advanced Education act on the two *Vision 2030* recommendations made in the Committee's report on post-secondary education, published in November 2021.

4. That the Saskatchewan government follow Alberta's lead and make a concrete commitment to include a specific investment in French-language health services in future bilateral health agreements.

The Situation

Language barriers in general can have significant effects on people's health. Therefore, the provision of healthcare in French is very important and indispensable for citizens whose first official language is French. When it is impossible or difficult for a patient to communicate with their healthcare professional in their own language, the quality of care can be compromised, with potentially fatal consequences. For a patient, language is the primary means of maintaining and restoring health. Being able to communicate in the language of one's choice makes it easier to ask for help, to explain one's condition and situation, to express one's needs and preferences, and consequently to receive appropriate care and assistance.

In Saskatchewan, the health sector covers a wide range of fields, such as mental health, palliative care, home care for the elderly. According to the information provided by the representatives of the community organizations we met, the Fransaskois community faces many challenges in terms of healthcare services. The challenges are mainly related to the lack of access to French-speaking health professionals and the lack of French-language health services in healthcare facilities across the province.

These needs and challenges are increasingly felt in an aging and immigrant community. On the one hand, more and more newcomers to the Fransaskois community have difficulty expressing themselves in English. On the other hand, Saskatchewan's Francophone population is older than Saskatchewan's overall population, and seniors whose mother tongue is French would like to have access to healthcare services in that language.

During the meeting with post-secondary representatives, the latter told the Committee about their underfunding, mainly due to the absence of a contribution from the provincial government and their inability to increase the promotion of health-related programs in Fransaskois schools and immersion schools. The training programs currently available are very limited and therefore far from meeting the need for bilingual healthcare professionals.

While these needs and challenges exist, the Committee recognizes the progress made and the good relationship between the Réseau Santé en français de la Saskatchewan and the Saskatchewan Health Authority. RSFS is the Fransaskois organization working in the health field, and relies on funding from Health Canada for its activities.

Introduce the active offer and keep the list of registered bilingual professionals up to date

The Committee and the Fransaskois community are grateful for the progress made by the government, particularly in the identification of bilingual personnel by the Saskatchewan Health Authority during 2022-2023. Indeed, almost 1,000 employees have been identified as French-speaking, around two thirds of whom work in direct clinical care, as nurses, medical technicians

and orderlies, etc. This initiative is a response to one of the Committee's recommendations in its May 2021 report, which stressed the importance of identifying employees with French language skills.

Committee members welcome this achievement and would like to know more about the upcoming steps after this identification phase. The Committee believes that, while the number of bilingual professionals identified is encouraging, it remains limited. Consequently, Committee members would like the government to put in place a strategic approach and mechanisms to ensure that these bilingual professionals are accessible to, and identifiable by, patients. It is essential to draw up a plan for gradually implementing the active offer. Furthermore, with new hires, departures or changes in workplace location, the Committee would like the Saskatchewan Health Authority to continue the work of identifying professionals with French language skills by regularly updating the data currently available.

During the meeting, Vitalité 55+, the Francophone organization working with Fransaskois seniors, shared with the Committee the challenges faced by Francophone seniors and the importance of offering health services to elderly residents in their mother tongue. In addition, a meeting specifically on the subject of the elderly was held in February 2021. Following that meeting, the Committee made several recommendations, four of which concern the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority (see Appendix). Three years on, the Committee remains concerned that not a single recommendation has yet been implemented.

Recommendation 1

- a) That the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority put in place mechanisms to ensure the provision of active offer by asking health professionals identified as bilingual to come forward and offer services in French.
- b) That the Saskatchewan Health Authority commit to continuing to update data on health professionals able to offer services in French.
- c) That the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority take action on the four recommendations related to improving services for seniors, contained in the Committee's report published in November 2021.

Formalize relations with RSFS and invest in language capacity building

The Committee applauds the good collaboration between the Réseau Santé en français de la Saskatchewan and the Saskatchewan Health Authority in advancing certain projects. However, the Committee members feel that the lack of formal links between the RSFS and the provincial government is an obstacle to the active offer and delivery of healthcare and services in French. The 1,000 or so healthcare sector employees listed as speaking French should serve as a springboard to start implementing the active offer. The Committee members believe that the government should take concrete steps to encourage and motivate bilingual staff to come forward and offer services in French.

Of the healthcare professionals identified as being able to express themselves in French, around 300 expressed a need for training to strengthen their language skills and counter language insecurity. Given the lack of language training opportunities to enable the active offer and the development of services in French, the Committee believes that the government should consider involving the Fransaskois community, by consulting the RSFS, the organization responsible for the

health sector, for ideas and suggestions. Formalizing the role of the RSFS with the Ministry of Health and the SHA would provide better support to healthcare professionals who wish to improve their French language skills in order to offer services to the province's French-speaking citizens. The Committee once again stresses the importance of active offer in the health sector for the Fransaskois community, and hopes that the government will take action by implementing the province's French-language Services Policy, adopted over 20 years ago.

Recommendation 2

- a) That the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority formalize their relationship with the RSFS to better support healthcare professionals who wish to improve their language skills and offer services in French.
- b) That the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority invest in French-language capacity building and fund French-language training for healthcare system employees.

Increase the number of bilingual professionals through post-secondary training programs

One way to increase the number of professionals who can provide healthcare services in French is to offer bilingual post-secondary training programs. It was in this context that the Committee met with representatives of post-secondary institutions at this meeting. The latter shared the challenges they face in developing and offering French-language or bilingual training programs in the healthcare field. The few French-language or bilingual programs currently on offer are financed by federal funds. Such is the case with the bilingual Licensed Practical Nursing program offered by Collège Mathieu and funded by Health Canada through the Consortium national de formation en santé. During this meeting, the Committee learned that these programs are threatened by the lack of matching funds from the provincial government and the fact that they are not self-financing.

Post-secondary institution representatives told the Committee that French-language and bilingual training programs at Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions are virtually non-existent. However, the representatives stated that training in the healthcare field is on the rise, and that the number of places in various training programs is increasing. The Committee is concerned that Saskatchewan's post-secondary institutions take no consideration or action to facilitate the admission of bilingual students into these training programs. Faced with this situation, the members of the Committee believe that integrating French-language modules into training programs and allocating a certain percentage of admissions to French-speaking candidates would increase the number of bilingual professionals and the supply of French-language healthcare in the long term. In fact, with the graduates of Fransaskois schools, as well as immersion schools, there is a significant pool of bilingual candidates, if a strategy for post-secondary education in French were put in place.

Committee members are concerned with the silence and lack of action to implement the objectives and clauses of *Vision 2030*, a memorandum of understanding that addresses post-secondary education in general and the healthcare sector in particular. They believe that to support the delivery of health services in French, training program regulations should be modified to encourage the development of bilingual programs and the admission of bilingual students. The Committee would like to see a collaborative effort between the government, post-secondary institutions and the Fransaskois community. The Committee also suggests that the provincial

government consider the recommendations made in its 2021 report in relation to *Vision 2030* (see Appendix).

Recommendation 3

- a) That the Ministries of Health and Advanced Education work together to guarantee the provincial match to maintain Health Canada funding for post-secondary health training.
- b) That the Ministries of Health and Advanced Education work together to encourage post-secondary institutions to include French-language modules in health training programs, and reserve a certain percentage of places for bilingual students.
- c) That the Ministry of Advanced Education act on the two *Vision 2030* recommendations made in the Committee's report on post-secondary education, published in November 2021.

Include a specific investment in French-language services in the bilateral health agreement

Committee members are concerned that the Fransaskois community was neither consulted nor informed during the negotiation of bilateral agreements, which means that the needs of the Fransaskois community were not taken into consideration in these agreements. Committee members would like to ask the Saskatchewan government to make a concrete commitment and include a specific investment in French-language services in future bilateral health agreements. Saskatchewan could take a leaf out of Alberta's book. The new 2023-2028 action plan of the Canada-Alberta Health Agreement provides for an investment of \$5.4 million over three years for initiatives specific to French-language services.

Some of the initiatives that Alberta is planning and that the Saskatchewan government could consider include partnering with Francophone organizations to implement strategies aimed at developing the active offer of the demand for French-language health services, supporting health professionals who wish to improve their French skills through on-the-job language training, and improving access to health and social services by increasing access to health-related training programs. Advisory Committee members believe that such initiatives are fiscally responsible and would improve access to French-language health services in Saskatchewan.

Recommendation 4

That the Saskatchewan government follow Alberta's lead and make a concrete commitment to include a specific investment in French-language health services in future bilateral health agreements.

Conclusion

Committee members recognize the progress made by the Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority, notably the identification in 2023 of French-speaking health professionals. However, the Committee believes there is still much to be done to better serve Fransaskois when it comes to French-language health services. The Committee reiterates the importance of offering health services in French, given that this is an area that affects people's health and lives, and that language barriers can have serious consequences.

The Committee believes that implementing the recommendations contained in this report would strengthen the government's ability to increase the supply of services in French and thus improve the quality of healthcare offered to the province's French-speaking citizens.

Advisory Committee Mandate

In 2003, the Government of Saskatchewan adopted the *French Language Services Policy*. Through this policy, the government is committed to “enhancing the services offered to Saskatchewan’s Francophone community in support of the development and vitality of this community.”²

The Policy focuses on three areas:

1. Communication.
2. Service delivery and development
3. Consultation

The mandate of the Francophone Affairs Advisory Committee is to advise the Minister of Parks, Culture and Sport, responsible for Francophone Affairs, in the review and analysis of programs and policies to guide the implementation of Saskatchewan’s French Language Services Policy.

² [Government of Saskatchewan French-Language Services Policy](#)

Appendix

Recommendations from the report on services for seniors that affect health services.

Rec 3.

The Ministries of Saskatchewan, especially for Health and Social Services, should conduct consultations on programs for seniors, in both official languages.

Rec 4.

The Ministries of Saskatchewan, especially for Health and Social Services, should expand the service offerings for seniors to enable them to remain in their own homes for as long as possible.

Rec 5.

The Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Health Authority should implement a support policy with programs for informal caregivers.

Rec 7.

The Saskatchewan Health Authority should support French-speaking health professionals by offering language training that follows the Café de Paris model and other continuing education programs.

Post-secondary education report recommendations affecting Vision 2030

Rec 1.

That the Ministry of Advanced Education put in place an operational plan to achieve Vision 2030, and that Francophone education be part of its strategic and financial planning.

Rec 3.

- a) That the Ministry of Advanced Education commit to funding Collège Mathieu and Cité universitaire francophone as the two “pivotal” post-secondary institutions in the implementation of the “star network” collaborative model described in Vision 2030.
- b) That provincial funding for these two institutions enable them to offer programs that meet the aspirations of graduates of Francophone schools and immersion programs.