



Exercising your language rights in Ontario, no matter how, when or where you learned French

BY THE OFFICE OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE SERVICES COMMISSIONER OF ONTARIO

Ontario is home to approximately 1.5 million people who can speak French – the largest French-speaking population in the country outside of Québec.

As you probably already know, Ontario is home to many immersion school programs that enrich students' lives through learning French. But did you know that in Ontario, all French speakers – whether Francophone by birth, graduates of French immersion or because it's the Canadian official language they are most comfortable using – have the right to Ontario government services in French?

In 1986, Ontario's Legislative Assembly unanimously adopted the French Language Services Act (FLSA), a law protecting a person's right to communicate in French with, and to receive certain services in French from the provincial government.

According to Statistics Canada, Ontario is home to approximately 1.5 million people who can speak French – the largest French-speaking population in the country outside of Québec. Ontario's French speakers have diverse backgrounds and come from all over the world. Some learned French as a first language; others as a second, third or even fourth. But regardless of how or when you learned the language, anyone who speaks French has the right to receive government services covered by the *French Language Services Act* in French if they wish. Those services should be equivalent to those available in English, actively offered and immediately available.

In fact, as of April 1, 2023, there must be an “active offer” of service in French, which should be communicated to anyone seeking a provincial government service from their first point of contact. “Active offer” also means that the onus is on the service provider – the government – to ensure that services in French are offered. The goal is to make it clear that anyone who speaks French has the right to obtain services in French from the Ontario government, its agencies, third parties or from institutions of the legislature.

But how can you be confident that the services in French you seek will be available, accessible and of good quality? That is where the Ontario Ombudsman and its French Language Services Unit can play a key role. The role of the unit, led by French Language Services Commissioner Carl Bouchard, is to ensure compliance with the FLSA, by reviewing complaints from the public, conducting investigations and making recommendations to improve the delivery of government services in French.

The Commissioner plays an important role in supporting Ontario's Francophone community and promoting French language rights in the province. Reporting to the Ombudsman, the Commissioner and the FLSU proactively promote French language rights in Ontario, engage in outreach to the Francophone community, and monitor the implementation of their recommendations. The Ombudsman and Commissioner are completely independent of government, political parties, individuals and interest groups.

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Now, you might be thinking, “I speak English, why should I complain? How will it do any good?” Complaints are a crucial part of the evidence that the Commissioner and his team need to properly analyze the issues and formulate adequate and meaningful recommendations that will ultimately improve the Ontario government services in French.

The lived experiences of anyone who speaks French in Ontario, whether they identify as Francophone or not, are important and relevant, no matter if the issue is big or small. Contacting the French Language Services Unit is easy – and your call could help improve services that will benefit you and thousands of other French speakers.

Improving services in French and protecting language rights is a collaborative effort. We all play a role in preserving the diverse cultural heritage of Ontario's French-speaking population, so it is worthwhile to speak up and speak often. No matter when, where or why you speak French, your voice matters. ■