

Annual Report of the French Language Services Commissioner
2019-2020 – December 10, 2020
Opening Remarks – Commissioner Kelly Burke

What a pleasure it is for me to present the French Language Services Commissioner's Annual Report for 2019-2020.

This is a historic report. It is the very first Annual Report of the French Language Services Commissioner presented by the Office of the Ombudsman of Ontario.

I joined the Office of the Ombudsman on January 13 of this year: Only eight months after the government expanded the Ombudsman's mandate to include oversight of the application of the *French Language Services Act*, on May 1, 2019. And two months before Ontario declared a state of emergency on March 17.

First, I would like to congratulate and thank the Ontario Ombudsman, Paul Dubé, and our entire Office for their work and dedication.

Prior to my arrival, the Office hosted the conference of the International Association of Language Commissioners and worked on many files. The Office also developed an extensive plan that positioned us to apply the expertise and practices of Ombudsman's Office to oversight of the application of the *French Language Services Act*.

We are already seeing concrete results stemming from our efforts:

- We have improved and fortified our complaint handling processes and our customer service.
- We have standardized our information systems and administrative processes.
- We have reviewed the organization of the French Language Services Unit, assessed its human resources needs, and we are recruiting.
- We are promoting the value and importance of French language services planning to the government.

I wish to thank the Premier of Ontario, the Minister of Francophone Affairs, elected officials and party leaders for their engagement. I also wish to express my appreciation to all of the deputy ministers for their availability and cooperation, as well as the Secretary of the Cabinet, Steven Davidson.

We liaise with other language commissioners across the country and around the world to share best practices. And our work continues.

I would also like to thank François Boileau. Through his work, Mr. Boileau has left a wealth of knowledge and references regarding the needs and concerns of Francophones.

Since I took office, despite the pandemic, I have met hundreds of Francophones, elected officials and civil servants. I have heard and communicated the importance of offering equivalent service in French, without delay.

This is one of the foundations for ensuring that the cultural heritage of the French-speaking population is safeguarded for future generations.

Whether the Act applies or not, I encourage each and every one of us to work together, to support each other to make the right choices, to take the right actions in striving for excellence – and not for the minimum.

We are partners in preserving our Francophonie. Without equivalent service delivered without delay, the public's confidence in the quality of French language services is eroded.

We present this first report in an historic period: In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since May 1, 2019, we have dealt with 431 cases and resolved the majority of them. The complaints we have received show the critical role of providing French language communications and equivalent services without delay, especially in times of crisis.

Most of the complaints we dealt with could have been resolved if adequate planning had been done for the provision of services in French.

The recurring themes in the complaints are:

- Lack of human resources;
- Lack of procedures and policies;
- Lack of knowledge of existing policies and procedures; and

- Lack of material resources such as templates in both languages, translation and interpretation services, and information on how to access services in French.

The pandemic has exacerbated these issues and has highlighted the need for the government to assess how planning for the provision of French language services is being carried out.

So, we looked at how French language services are planned within government.

The *French Language Services Act* provides that each deputy minister is accountable to Executive Council for the implementation of the Act and the quality of French language services within his or her Ministry.

Our research shows that there is currently no formalized process for deputy ministers to meet their obligations.

I have therefore made eight recommendations to support the government in establishing a formal planning process for the provision of equivalent French language services delivered without delay.

These recommendations arise from the complaints we have dealt with, and the results we have achieved or are working towards.

I recommend to the government that each deputy minister table a plan with Executive Council to report annually on the implementation of the *French Language Services Act*, and the quality of French language services for his or her ministry.

The *French Language Services Act* also provides that the Minister of Francophone Affairs shall table an annual report to the Lieutenant Governor in Council and the Assembly to account for the work accomplished by the Ministry of Francophone Affairs.

I also recommend that the Minister report annually, beginning April 1, 2022, on the plans tabled by the deputy ministers and on their implementation.

The remaining six recommendations focus on elements to be included in the ministries' plans to make them more effective. For example:

- Plan for sufficient human resources;
- Plan regular checks on the capacity of staff to deliver services in French, and regular updates on policies and procedures;

- Plan strategies for the simultaneous provision of information in both languages, including more regular use of simultaneous translation for press briefings.

To support the government in implementing these recommendations, we researched what is being done in other jurisdictions across the country, for example, in the federal government and in Manitoba.

With this report, we wished to identify opportunities for the government to improve and bolster the offer of services in French.

We also wanted to establish a dialogue between our Office and the government, to work together in order to ensure that Ontarians have access to French language services of equivalent quality delivered without delay.

I remain committed, ready to work with the government, Ontario's Francophones and all the people who have an interest in protecting and preserving our province's Francophonie.

And so I encourage you: Bring a complaint to us and give us the opportunity to help you and improve the offer of French language services in the province.

Now, I will be happy to take your questions.