



**SENIORS
ACTION
QUEBEC**

Seniors Action Quebec Presentation on Study Matters Relating to
Minority-Language Health Services

SUBMITTED TO STANDING SENATE COMMITTEE ON OFFICIAL
LANGUAGES

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Mr. Chairman, senators, we thank you for this opportunity to speak with you on this important subject. My name is Walter Duszara, president of Seniors Action Quebec and I am accompanied by Katia Toimil-Bramhall, Executive Director of Seniors Action Quebec.

Seniors Action Quebec (SAQ) is a provincial not-for-profit organization that advocates for the needs of English-speaking seniors throughout Quebec. We collaborate with, support and bring together English-language community organizations working to maintain and enhance the vitality, well-being and health of English-speaking Quebec seniors. We work in partnership and harmony with community groups, institutions and government agencies to identify needs, gaps and shortcomings in service offerings for English-speaking seniors. We develop and propose solutions and policy alternatives, in collaboration with our partners, that address these needs. We monitor the impact of legislation, policy and program initiatives on English-speaking seniors. We work with all levels of government to identify and address challenges and strategic issues faced by English-speaking seniors.

We believe that every effort, action or gesture that identifies, addresses and responds to the particular needs of Quebec's English-speaking seniors contributes positively not only to the vitality of our own communities but to all communities in Quebec.

The recent pandemic came without warning and wreaked death and hardship indiscriminately upon human beings of all ages around the globe. Probably no one in this room has been unaffected or untraumatized to some degree by the ravages of this recent pandemic.

Government arguments lauding their responses as being superior to those of other states are cold comfort to those who have lost family members and friends, and to the many who continue to cope with the effects of the disease.

Seniors bore the brunt of the devastating effects of COVID. Seniors were the ones who suffered the greatest indignities and injustices as the pandemic ran its course. Public and private seniors' homes, nursing homes, long term care facilities and hospital emergency rooms exposed their shortcomings and their abject state of preparedness at the start of the pandemic and in the months that followed. This must never be forgotten.

The pandemic brought into stark relief the fragility, value and importance of every human life and of the dignity and justice every life deserves. We all deplored the examples of neglect and dereliction of responsibility we witnessed. We all shared in the pain of families who could not visit or comfort their aged loved ones. We all grieved with friends and families who could not participate in funerals. We all agreed that this was not right! We all were reminded that disease and illness strike individual human beings randomly and without regard to age, status, origin or language. This was, will be and is the case today.

The Quebec health care system, though not perfect, offers care and services that were unimaginable a generation ago. Most Quebec citizens can access a wide range of medical, social and associated care services throughout the vast territory of the province. Most Quebec citizens

have access to a support network of community-based services at the level of their municipality. Most Quebec citizens experience little difficulty in receiving information about available services. Most Quebec citizens are able to express their needs to staff within the various institutions providing health services. Most Quebec citizens feel at ease and welcome in their various institutions. But not all. Language is often the greatest barrier to access and source of distress.

Access to health care and associated support services for English-speaking Quebecers is often difficult, particularly, but not exclusively, away from the greater Montreal region. Unilingual French professional and support staff, French language information services, information resources on healthcare and forms are insurmountable obstacles for many. English-speaking seniors are most vulnerable in this respect as they are often least capable in French.

Consequently, we recommend that new mechanisms, procedures and perspectives be developed and adopted by Canada, its provinces and territories to improve access to and the provision of healthcare and social services for minority language seniors that would engage seniors directly, as well as those working on their behalf, and that would respect the principles of dignity and justice.

Furthermore, we recommend that these perspectives align with the 1946 Constitution of the World Health Organization which envisaged “...the highest attainable standard of health as a fundamental right of every human being.”

Acknowledging health as a human right would recognize a legal obligation on the state to ensure access to timely, acceptable, and affordable health care.

It would affirm the state's obligation to support the right to health – including through the allocation of “maximum available resources” to progressively realize this goal.

It would require that health policy and programs prioritize the needs of those furthest behind first, to ensure greater equity.

It would emphasize that the right to health must be enjoyed without discrimination on the grounds of race, age, ethnicity, language or any other factor. Non-discrimination and equality require the state to take steps to redress any discriminatory law, practice or policy.

It would reiterate that a rights-based approach requires meaningful participation. Participation means ensuring that national stakeholders – including non-state actors such as community organizations – are meaningfully involved in all phases of programming: assessment, analysis, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

We would be pleased to engage with you and others to jointly pursue a deeper consideration of these recommendations.

Thank you.