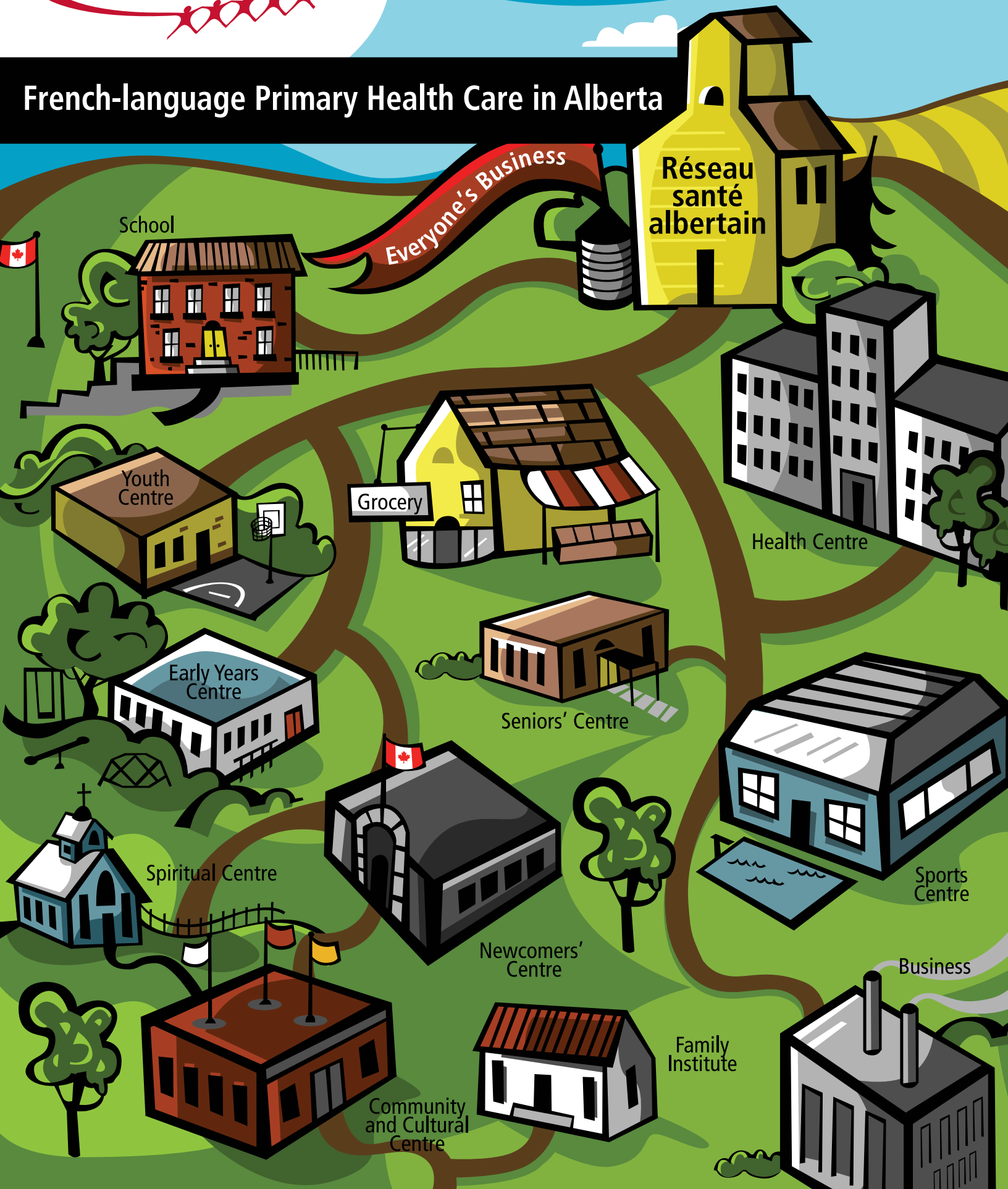


French-language Primary Health Care in Alberta



School

Everyone's Business

Réseau
santé
albertain

Youth
Centre

Grocery

Health Centre

Early Years
Centre

Seniors' Centre

Spiritual Centre

Newcomers'
Centre

Sports
Centre

Community
and Cultural
Centre

Family
Institute

Business

Community
and Cultural
Centre

Table of Contents

	Page
Foreword	2
Access to French-language Health Services: Together We Can Make It Happen	3
Brief 1 – Overview of Alberta’s French-speaking Population	4
Brief 2 – Language and Health	6
Brief 3 – Overview of Alberta’s French-language Health Services	8
Recommendations and Proposed Plan of Action	12
Conclusion	19

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Réseau santé albertain

Tel.: 780-466-9816

E-mail: info@reseausantealbertain.ca

Website: www.reseausantealbertain.ca



Health
Canada

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Canada

Foreword

“Access to health care in one’s own language yields benefits that go well beyond simple respect for the user’s culture. It is an essential part of improving the individual’s state of health and empowering a population to take charge of its own health. And the importance of language is greater still when the service being provided is relational rather than technical in nature.

In Canada, governments that provide health care services can [...] view this issue as a profitable investment in a population’s health rather than just one more expenditure in the health budget.”

Report to the Federal Minister of Health
Consultative Committee for French-speaking Minority Communities
September 2001

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“Language has been described as medicine’s most essential technology—its principal instrument for conducting its work (Jackson, 1998). It has been observed that without language, the work of a physician and veterinarian would be nearly identical.” (M. M. Clark, 1983).

Sarah Bowen, B.A., M.Sc.
Language Barriers in Access to Health Care
Health Canada, November 2001

Access to French-language Health Services: Together We Can Make It Happen

The health of Alberta's French-speaking population is everyone's business.

It is most certainly the business of all French-speaking Albertans—individuals, families, and organizations in all sectors of activity. Because when it comes to health care, nothing can equal being cared for in one's own language.

It is also the business of:

- *Elected representatives and government officials* at the provincial and regional levels who, by virtue of their positions, can adopt policies and measures designed to promote the delivery of French-language health services.
- *Decision-makers at health care facilities*, who can improve service delivery and facilitate greater access to French-language services at all levels of the health care system.
- *Decision-makers at secondary and post-secondary teaching institutions*, who can give Alberta access to a pool of qualified health professionals equipped to provide care in the French language.
- *Health care professionals*, who, in order to properly diagnose and treat effectively, need to understand and to be understood by French-speaking patients.

Because health is everyone's business, *Réseau santé albertain* has prepared this booklet. In it, you will find three briefs—Overview of Alberta's French-speaking Population, Language and Health and, Overview of French-language Health Services. These briefs are followed by a series of recommendations and a proposed plan of action.

This booklet is your invitation to find out more about the health of Alberta's French-speaking population. As you read through it, you will be able to determine what you can do, as an individual or working with a group of people, to ensure better access to French-language health services.

After all, we share a common vision in health care that includes ***everyone: healthy Albertans in a healthy Alberta***. The time has come for us to get together and make it happen.

Brief 1 – Overview of Alberta’s French-speaking Population

A Growing Population

Thanks to immigration and inter-provincial migration, Alberta’s French-speaking population is the fastest growing language community in the province. Buoyed by exceptional economic prosperity, Alberta is attracting a large influx of population from Québec and the Maritimes, as well as other regions. This westward migration has swelled the ranks of the French-speaking population in Alberta.

- 65,995 Albertans whose mother tongue is French (*source: 2001 census*)
- 204,000 persons who speak French (*source: 2001 census*)
- 13% increase since 1996

Origin and Distribution

Alberta’s French-speaking population is geographically highly diversified:

- 10% of French-speaking Albertans are immigrants;
- 53% of French-speaking Canadians in Alberta are from outside the province;
- 60% of French-speaking Albertans live in Edmonton and Calgary; the rest are scattered around the province with high concentrations in the North.

Distribution of the French-Speaking Population by Regional Health Authority

	Population	French-speaking	Growth 1996-2001
Chinook	130,211	1,480	7%
Palliser	98,074	2,050	20%
Calgary	980,680	19,275	22%
David Thompson	232,220	3,265	25%
East Central	79,595	1,000	20%
Capital Health	932,597	23,175	12%
Aspen	179,885	8,420	11%
Peace Country	106,155	5,955	-2%
Northern Lights	81,305	1,390	1%

Priority Health Needs

Health needs tend to vary according to whether the population is rural or urban, Canadian born or immigrant, women or men, children or teenagers, adult or elderly.

Our findings indicate that health needs are greatest in early childhood and among the elderly population.

Through the French-language education system, we are in a position not only to detect and assess the health needs of the student population, but also to respond more effectively to those needs.

Older Francophones have very specific and pressing health needs. In Edmonton for instance, the community is building an assisted living centre. This “aging-in-place” and community health centre will cater to the frail elderly and the general French-speaking population. This initiative is in direct response to an urgent and growing need within the Francophone aging population for affordable housing and health care services.

On the immigration front, French-language centres have been established in both Calgary and Edmonton, and health care services are among those services which are most often requested by French-speaking immigrants.

Needs in the area of health protection and promotion as well as health care for common illnesses are evident in all segments of the French-speaking population, both young and old, and cut across all sectors of activity at home, school and work.

Brief 2 – Language and Health

Language and health are inseparable. The Sarah Bowen report prepared for Health Canada in November 2001 drives the point home:

“Language has been described as medicine’s most essential technology—its principal instrument for conducting its work (Jackson, 1998). It has been observed that without language, the work of a physician and veterinarian would be nearly identical (Clark, 1983).”

Unlike other medical technologies, little or no health care investment has gone into the French language, even though it is the most essential “technology” in providing care to the French-speaking population. The lack of investment has serious consequences for Alberta’s French-speaking patients, our health care system, the government, and taxpayers:

- Limited access to prevention and mental health services;
- Increased number of diagnostic tests;
- Increased diagnostic errors;
- Cases of misunderstood diagnosis or treatment;
- Lack of follow-up on treatments;
- Dissatisfaction on the part of health care professionals as well as patients;
- Higher health care costs.

Research shows that language barriers are at the root cause of the variance often observed between the state of health of the majority population and that of the linguistic minority population.

The Numbers Speak for Themselves:

- 82% of French-speaking Albertans have little or no access to French-language health care services (source: 2001 study by the *Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada*);
- 82% of respondents to a 2005 survey conducted by *Réseau santé albertain* believe that the lack of French-language services caused problems:
 - 34% say they were not understood
 - 23% say they had difficulty understanding the information they received
 - 22% say they had difficulty understanding the diagnosis
 - 18% say they suffered other consequences
 - 3% say they were not referred to the right specialist.
- 79% believe it is important to have access to French-language services.

The importance of communication between the health professional and the patient cannot be overstated.

It is recognized that good communication between the physician and patient, including description of the medical history and symptoms reported by the patient, as well as the information and intervention plan provided by the health professional, has an effect on the patient's health. In fact, the quality of communication has a positive impact on emotional health, problem solving, physiological and functional status, as well as control of pain. (Source: A. Levesque, Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface, *Langue et santé : la situation des francophones en milieu minoritaire*, July 2005)



Brief 3 – Overview of Alberta’s French-language Health Services

Réseau santé albertain

The French-speaking community has mandated *Réseau santé albertain*, Alberta’s French-language health network, to develop the provision of French-language health care services in the province. Our vision? Every French-speaking individual is healthy through individual and collective empowerment.

In its leadership capacity, *Réseau santé albertain* influences decisions affecting the personal as well as collective health and well-being of French-speaking Albertans. Working together with 16 other network members of *Société Santé en français*, *Réseau santé albertain* focuses its efforts in three key areas:

- *Strengthening* ties between major stakeholders in the health care system to improve planning, coordination, delivery, and evaluation of French-language primary health care services.
- *Building capacity*, in particular the knowledge and skills of Francophone volunteer health groups, organizations and institutions as well as French-speaking health care professionals in order to help individuals and communities take charge of their health.
- *Developing and strengthening French-language primary health care infrastructure*, meaning all the service components / mechanisms / resources needed to ensure access to services as well as the stability and continuity of health care in the French language.

Réseau santé albertain is governed by a board of directors comprising 10 members, or two representatives from each of the following sectors: the French-speaking community, health care professionals, administrators of health care facilities, teaching and training institutions, as well as elected officials.

Other Available French-language Health Care Resources

Apart from *Réseau santé albertain*, the French-speaking population of Alberta has access to very limited resources in French for its health care needs, namely:

- A *French-language health care services coordinator* who works within the Peace Country regional health authority, financed in equal parts by the Alberta government Francophone Secretariat and the regional health authority;

- A *school adaptation network* that offers evaluation, consultation and training services for children with exceptional needs;
- A *directory listing more than 1200 French-speaking health care professionals* working in the province, published by *Réseau santé albertain*;
- A *regional coordination position within the Official Languages Program* for Health Canada, Alberta region, created in 2004 to support French-speaking communities and inform them about federal programs.

Added to this short list are a few isolated community initiatives undertaken in response to growing or pressing needs, all noteworthy for their precarious funding:

- *Société de bien-être du Centre-est*, an organization with no guarantee of funding, led by volunteers from the communities of Saint-Paul, Bonnyville, Cold Lake, Lac Labiche and Plamondon, and whose mission is to improve French-language health care services in the region;
- *Centre de santé communautaire Saint-Thomas* slated to open in the fall of 2006, which is supported by *Réseau santé albertain* and the *Capital Health* regional authority, and funded by the Health Canada Primary Health Care Transition Fund (PHCTF).
- The "*Francophones aux couches*" initiative, which seeks to build awareness of the link between health and education among families of the Saint-Paul, Plamondon, Lethbridge, Wainwright, Grande Prairie, Bonnyville, Cold Lake, Fort McMurray, Jasper, and Canmore regions;
- A "*lunchbox*" activity, whose objective is to promote healthy eating habits among students at French-language schools;
- *Mental health workshops* in Fort McMurray run by the *Association canadienne-française de l'Alberta* (Wood-Buffalo), in conjunction with the Canadian Mental Health Association;
- Numerous *translated documents* on various health and health care topics, which are available from *Réseau santé albertain*.

Initiative to Improve Access to French-Language Primary Health Care

Réseau santé albertain also works closely with *Société Santé en français* as part of a nationwide initiative called *Setting the Stage*.

Funded by Health Canada through the PHCTF, the initiative is designed to support planning of French-language primary health care in all regions of Canada in conjunction with government agencies responsible for health care delivery.

Cooperation

Within this framework, Francophone volunteer health groups, organizations and institutions are encouraged to work together on health care issues. The common goal is to formulate plans of action to set up primary health care delivery models for the benefit of the French-speaking minority population.

Consultation

Réseau santé albertain has already conducted various consultations, including a survey of 640 French-speaking respondents. In addition, meetings were held with 33 Francophone volunteer health groups, community organizations and institutions in the province. Survey results were validated at a public forum heavily attended by concerned citizens.

Planning

To ensure delivery of French-language primary health care services in an integrated fashion, within the existing provincial health care system, *Réseau santé albertain* is seeking to establish a multi-sector collaboration between:

- Representatives of the nine regional health care authorities in Alberta;
- Non-government or community partners working in the field of health care;
- Alberta Health and Wellness, which is already backing the initiative;
- All French-language organizations in the province, especially those involved in health care, as well as the French-speaking population itself.

Other Current Projects

As the official voice of Alberta's French-speaking population, dedicated to expanding French-language health care services, *Réseau santé albertain* seeks to promote dialogue and cooperation at relevant levels of the health care system and with the public.

In the fall of 2006, *Réseau santé albertain* therefore plans to launch a Website intended for the general public, health care professionals, community organizations and French- and English-language institutions. It will offer information, highlight achievements as well as best practices in the area of health care, in addition to providing quick access to a directory of French-speaking health care professionals working in Alberta.



Recommendations and Proposed Plan of Action

“Access becomes even more critical when the goal is to help a population plagued by a greater number of health problems. Studies on several health determinants show that, in Canada, French-speaking minority populations are generally in worse health than their fellow citizens in the same provinces.”

Report to the Federal Minister of Health
Consultative Committee for French-speaking Minority Communities
September 2001

While the initiatives highlighted in the previous section are all aimed at improving access to French-language health services, they are woefully inadequate to meet the ever growing needs, especially in the area of primary health care. It is therefore necessary to take action. Alberta needs to develop a regional and provincial capacity for the delivery of French-language primary health care services, to integrate these services into the existing system, and to make them more readily accessible to its French-speaking population.

Alberta Health and Wellness defines primary health care as promoting health, preventing disease and injury as well as caring for common illnesses. With this in mind, we put forward the following three recommendations:

1. Invest greater efforts in health promotion.
2. Improve access to health care for common illnesses.
3. Improve access to primary health care on an ongoing basis.

Recommendation 1: Invest Greater Efforts in Health Promotion

Objective: Encourage Alberta's French-speaking population to take charge of its own health through French-language health promotion programs.

Strategy: Support and facilitate health promotion efforts for the population, by the population and with the population.

- Enable *Réseau santé albertain* to provide French-speaking individuals, Francophone volunteer health groups, community organizations and institutions in Alberta with the capacity (knowledge and skills) they need to carry out health promotion initiatives.
- Entrust to *Réseau santé albertain* the responsibility of coordinating involvement by stakeholders in various French-language sectors in order to pool and consolidate health promotion knowledge and skills province-wide.
- Under the leadership of *Réseau santé albertain*, encourage the search for public and private English-language partners as well as collaboration between Francophone volunteer health groups and these same partners in order to set up French-language health promotion programs.
- Via *Réseau santé albertain*, encourage French-speaking health care professionals to collaborate with Francophone organizations and institutions as well as groups with special needs, such as newborns, children, adolescents, students, women and the elderly, in setting up health promotion programs.
- Under the leadership of *Réseau santé albertain*, foster the creation of French-language volunteer groups to boost public awareness of chronic diseases such as diabetes and Alzheimer's disease, to do on-site prevention among high risk groups, and to help those affected to manage their condition.

Strategy:

Ensure information dissemination and sharing of best practices in order to improve access to French-language health services across the province.

- Give *Réseau santé albertain* a mandate to establish a partnership with the *Institut Guy-Lacombe de la famille*, an organization dedicated to supporting families, so that health information can be disseminated in various forms through that institute's 17 regional centres.
- Promote the *Réseau santé albertain* website, which provides access to reliable and up-to-date health information, the directory of Alberta's French-speaking health care professionals and best practices, as well as information on basic and continuing education.



Recommendation 2: Improve Access to Health Care for Common Illnesses

Objective: Facilitate access to care for common illnesses

Strategy: Develop and implement a French-language health information line.

- Provide the population with an effective and sustainable resource that encourages people to take charge of their health, research having shown that a telephone health service (*Health Link* in Alberta) is effective and can also help relieve emergency room congestion.

Strategy: Improve access to health care services through French-language community health centres.

- For Calgary, consider implementing a model similar to the first bilingual community centre slated to open in Edmonton in 2006, which receives support from the regional health authority, *Capital Health*. Key model features: integrated into the health authority, bilingual, and geared toward community involvement.

For consideration: the Edmonton Centre could serve the north of the province, while the Calgary centre would cover the south using new technologies such as videoconferencing, telemedicine, and mobile services.

- Commission *Réseau santé albertain*, in conjunction with a Primary Care Network (PCN), to conduct a complementary study on the capacity of PCNs to deal with French-speaking patients and provide information in French. These networks of physicians, supported by an inter-disciplinary team, could actually improve the quality of services provided to French-speaking patients.

Strategy: Encourage the delivery of pharmaceutical products and services in French.

- Make it part of the *Réseau santé albertain's* mandate to inform pharmacies and pharmacy chains of the importance of delivering drugs and providing information in the French language. Most of these companies are also based in Québec, where they have to do business in French, and therefore have the capacity to communicate in French.

Recommendation 3: Improve Access to Primary Health Care on an Ongoing Basis

Objective: Influence decisions that affect the personal as well as collective health and well-being of Alberta's French-speaking population

Strategy: Broaden the ties between *Réseau santé albertain* and political decision-makers as well as other key organizations and stakeholders.

- Strengthen the ties between *Réseau santé albertain* and Alberta Health and Wellness as well as regional health authorities, so that French-language health care services may be developed in conjunction with the existing health care system and integrated into it.
- Obtain official Ministry recognition of the *Réseau santé albertain's* status and role in the area of French-language health care, as well as consultation channels with the Ministry to facilitate information sharing regarding the needs of French-speaking Albertans and Ministry orientations.
- Make *Réseau santé albertain* a part of the nomination process by inviting it to submit the names of French-speaking or Francophile representatives to sit on the Board of Directors of each regional health authority.
- Include *Réseau santé albertain* in regular meetings with key committees of the Health Boards of Alberta, the association of regional health authorities, in order to facilitate dialogue and information sharing.

Strategy: Strengthen the *Réseau santé albertain's* commitment to its partners.

- Make its resources available to its partners, namely:
 - its expertise in French-language primary health care;
 - access to its French-language resources;
 - the possibility of obtaining additional funding from various provincial and federal sources.

- Strategy:** Ensure effective province-wide coordination.
- Because the French-speaking population is scattered across the province, set up four regional coordination agencies under the direction of *Réseau santé albertain*, in conjunction with regional health authorities and allied health care organizations.
- Coordinated efforts would give the French-speaking population better access to French-language health care services and make it possible to integrate these services into the regional health authorities' strategic plans.
- Strategy:** Obtain quantitative data in order to properly identify and assess needs in the area of French-language primary health care.
- In the interest of better planning care and services, gather epidemiological data on Alberta's French-speaking population.
 - Introduce a measure identifying the patients' preferred language of service.
 - Develop a community research capacity to help keep up with the population's changing health needs.
- Strategy:** Expand French-speaking human resources.
- Implement the health care human resources development strategy proposed by *Société Santé en français*, and supported by *Réseau santé albertain*, in order to increase the number of French-speaking health care professionals in Alberta and help regional health authorities recruit competent health care providers who can work in French.
 - Set up networking mechanisms for the benefit of health care professionals to help them overcome their isolation, to encourage mutual support and the exchange of knowledge and skills, as well as referral of French-speaking patients to French-speaking resources.
 - For consideration: encourage health care professionals to indicate what language(s) they speak when registering with their professional college and when hired, a measure that would help with the enumeration of bilingual health professionals in the province.

- Encourage the involvement of key organizations and stakeholders in this strategy, such as *Campus Saint-Jean* (University of Alberta), a member of the *Consortium national de formation en santé*, *Bibliothèque Saint-Jean*, French-language and French immersion schools, and any other appropriate organizations, especially for the dissemination of language tools, such as specialized dictionaries or glossaries for health care professionals.



The need to act in order to develop better access to French-language primary health care services is overwhelmingly clear:

- Alberta's French-speaking population is the fastest growing language community in the province due to immigration and inter-provincial migration;
- The population's needs in the area of primary health care are great, pressing, and continue to grow across all age groups;
- Unlike other medical technologies, little or no investment has been made in the French language, even though it is the most indispensable "technology" in providing medical care to the French-speaking population;
- Alberta's French-speaking population has very limited French-language health care resources at its disposal.

The point is not to add yet another expenditure to Alberta's health care budget, but rather to make an investment that will benefit all of Alberta. Every dollar invested in primary health care, promoting health and preventing disease, will mean gains for the province in different ways:

- Better access to prevention and mental health services;
- Fewer diagnostic tests;
- Fewer diagnostic errors;
- Better understanding of the diagnosis or treatment;
- Improved monitoring of treatments and patient compliance;
- Greater satisfaction on the part of health care professionals as well as patients;
- Reduced costs.

What's more, our recommendations and the plan of action proposed in this booklet are in line with the Government of Alberta's vision of health and well-being. In a speech delivered on March 30, 2006 to the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, Minister Iris Evans stated:

"Albertans simply must have better access to services when they need them.

We are also committed to meeting the changing needs of our population – an active population that is demanding more health care options so they don't have to wait in pain.

Albertans want access and choice within a system that ensures care for all."

This applies equally to Alberta's growing French-speaking population. The time has come for us all to take action. Working together, we can initiate a dialogue between decision-makers, administrators, providers and users of health care and start making strides toward improving access to French-language health care in the province.