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Recruiting service providers with French proficiency: Tips and strategies



Knowledge Institute
on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions

Kids | Enfants
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At a glance

Why was this report developed?

This report is designed as a resource to support the [Kids Come First Health Team](#) in developing a strategy for recruiting, retaining and training human resources in Ontario's Champlain health region. The report has been prepared by the [Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions](#) (the Knowledge Institute).



The Knowledge Institute builds connections, shares knowledge and draws on expertise to enhance the skills of direct service providers and agencies across Ontario. The Knowledge Institute passionately promotes and shares the benefits of organizational learning and evidence-informed practice. Together with partners, we are working to strengthen Ontario's mental health programs and services for all children, young people, families and caregivers.



The Kids Come First Health Team includes over 60 organizations, nearly 1,100 physicians, and youth, family and caregiver partners delivering services in ways that matter to children, youth, and families. Its mission is to provide easy access to the right care, at the right time, and in the right place for children and youth in Eastern Ontario.

What did we want to know?

We wanted to discover what organizations are doing – particularly organizations in the health sector – to recruit service providers with French proficiency. We also wanted to learn about evidence-based practices for recruitment from the literature.

“Service providers with French proficiency” are those who communicate in French for the purposes of their work according to their organization's standards.

In this report, we use the term “service provider(s)” to refer to direct service providers and professionals working in the mental health and addictions sector, the physical health sector and across both sectors.

“Bilingual and French-language minority contexts” refer to communities that are bilingual or where French is not the predominant language.

This resource:

- Explains why it is challenging to recruit service providers with French proficiency.
- Summarizes promising and evidence-based strategies for recruitment, including general strategies as well as those specific to recruiting candidates with French proficiency.
- Lists resources that can support organizations looking to recruit service providers with French proficiency in Canada’s bilingual and French-language minority contexts.

The strategies and guiding principles provided in this resource were derived from an environmental scan that included a rapid, non-systematic literature review. As well, we consulted with key stakeholders and leaders in the field who have direct experience with recruiting service providers with French proficiency.

What did we learn?

It is challenging to recruit service providers, particularly those with French proficiency.

Labour shortages and difficulty finding skilled employees are the leading obstacles experienced by businesses in Canada. These obstacles are expected to remain in the long term. The child and youth mental health and addictions and health sectors are particularly strained by these recruitment challenges, as the demand for services is increasing.

Employers wanting to recruit service providers with French proficiency are faced with a limited pool of qualified candidates in a very competitive environment. The pool is limited because candidates must have advanced and specialized professional qualifications as well as French proficiency.

Various strategies can be used to recruit service providers with French proficiency.

Employers can work toward developing a stronger reputation for providing services in French. Non-Francophone organizations can implement strategies to create an equitable work environment for service

providers with French proficiency and address barriers faced in providing services in French.

Organizations can use a combination of general recruitment strategies that apply to service providers regardless of the languages in which they are proficient, in tandem with strategies tailored to attract service providers with French proficiency.

Here are some general recruitment strategies:

- Create job postings that are highly visible.
- Offer competitive incentives to new recruits as well as to current staff who refer successful candidates.
- Create supportive working conditions.
- Collaborate with staff, volunteers and community members to develop recruitment strategies.
- Hire former clients.
- Support staff members who move for work to integrate into the broader community.

Here are some recruitment strategies tailored to service providers with French proficiency:

- Post jobs that will attract service providers with French proficiency. For example, use bilingual or French-only job postings.
- Provide compensation for bilingualism and French proficiency.
- Recruit students.
- Use underfill appointments. In this approach, candidates with the capacity to perform the duties of the position are hired and receive training. This allows candidates who may not be fully qualified to work towards meeting the qualifications of the position.
- Build an organizational culture for French language.
- Provide access to French language training.
- Ensure equitable working conditions.

How did we learn this?

We conducted a non-systematic review of grey and empirical literature to identify the evidence on recruitment and talent acquisition practices. Our focus was service providers with French proficiency in bilingual and French language minority contexts in Canada. We used the following search terms: recruit, recruitment, hiring, retention, retain, development, language training, health, French and Canada. Data was collected using the Omni search platform.

Limited literature was found. We planned to analyze examples of recruitment strategies sourced from Google searches and organizations, but findings were limited.

In addition to the non-systematic review, we consulted with six key stakeholders in Ontario who have experience and expertise recruiting French-speaking service providers. These stakeholders came forward as a result of an extensive campaign to identify individuals with this specific recruitment knowledge.

- We reached out to 51 people from 41 organizations including those from community-based mental health and addictions organizations; hospitals; school boards; and Francophone health networks.
- We used the Knowledge Institute's social media accounts – [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#) – to invite people to participate. These posts were viewed by more than 680 people.
- We provided information packages to our partners who are doing work in this area to share with their networks – [the Kids Come First Health Team](#), the Kids Come First Francophone Committee and [Société Santé en français](#).

Why is recruitment challenging?

In general, it is challenging to recruit in Canada

Labour shortages and difficulty finding skilled employees are the leading obstacles experienced by businesses in Canada. These are expected to remain long-term challenges (Fair et al., 2022; Statistics Canada, 2022a).

- More than a third of businesses in Canada experienced labour shortages and recruitment challenges in 2022 (Fair et al., 2022).
- There are currently record-low unemployment rates and record-high levels of workforce participation (Fair et al., 2022).
- The number of vacant jobs across Canada is increasing (Fair et al., 2022). In fact, job vacancies in 2021 were 80% higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2022a).
- Canada's working age population is the oldest it has ever been, with more than 20% of working-age Canadians getting close to the age of retirement (Statistics Canada, 2022b).

It is challenging to recruit in Canada's health sector

- Over 70% of organizations in the Canadian health sector report that it is more challenging to recruit staff than it was a year ago (Fair et al., 2022).
- Job vacancies in the health sector increased by nearly 92% between September and December 2021 compared to the same period pre-pandemic (Canadian Medical Association & Deloitte, 2022).
- There is already a shortage of qualified mental health service providers in Canada (Government of Canada, 2022; Ontario Psychiatric Association, 2018). Many of those currently working in the sector are planning to retire in the next few years (Statistics Canada, 2022b).

The COVID pandemic has adversely affected the provision of mental health and health services

- The demand for health services is increasing (Broomfield et al., 2021; Canadian Medical Association & Deloitte, 2022).
- Before the pandemic, one in five people in Canada were living with a mental illness each year (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2016).

- During the pandemic, almost one in three Canadians experienced declines in their mental health (Statistics Canada, 2022c). Nearly one in three Canadian adults needing mental or physical health services reported that they delayed seeking health care (Statistics Canada, 2022d).
- This demand has resulted in decreased preventive care, later diagnoses, delayed or inadequate treatment, and an increase in the number of clients with advanced complex conditions (Statistics Canada, 2022d).
- As we emerge from the pandemic, the mental health sector is experiencing higher volumes of people seeking services and serving clients with more acute and complex concerns (Bowden et al., 2022; Broomfield et al., 2021).

This unprecedented labour demand is contributing to the growing number of job vacancies in the health sector (Statistics Canada, 2022b). Potential candidates know that, due to labour shortages, current staff at most organizations are working extra hours to compensate (Fair et al., 2022), and that they may be asked or required to do the same. Many service providers are planning to leave their job or change jobs in the next few years, mostly due to job stress or burnout, concerns for their own mental health and a lack of job satisfaction (Statistics Canada, 2022b).

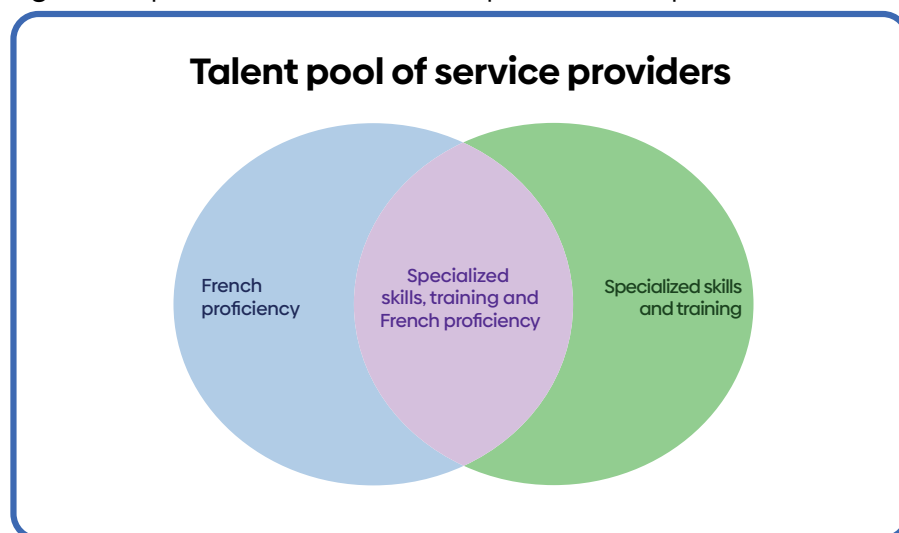
It is especially challenging to recruit service providers with French proficiency in Canada's bilingual and French-language minority contexts

It is within this complex and challenging environment that organizations are struggling to recruit service providers with French proficiency. Recruiting service providers with French proficiency brings unique considerations and challenges (Réseau franco-santé du Sud de l'Ontario, 2022; Société santé en français, 2006)

There is a very limited talent pool of qualified candidates (OZi, 2021; Réseau franco-santé du Sud de l'Ontario, 2018) and many organizations across multiple sectors are competing for candidates. The pool of specialized providers with French proficiency is limited because providers must have advanced and specialized professional qualifications as well as French proficiency (OZi, 2021; Réseau franco-santé du Sud de l'Ontario, 2018).

The proportion of candidates with French-language skills is declining across the mental health and addictions and health sectors (Statistics Canada, 2021). Young service providers entering the workforce have lower rates of French proficiency (Statistics Canada, 2021) and many service providers currently employed in language minority contexts are close to the age of retirement (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Figure 1: Depiction of the limited talent pool of service providers in Canada.



Note. The figure is intended for illustrative purposes only. It does not represent actual proportions.

Organizations may not have a good reputation when it comes to French proficiency

From conversations with leaders from the sector, we discovered that an employer's reputation can also contribute to recruitment challenges. For service providers with French proficiency, the reputation of organizations as they relate to equity and inclusion for staff and clients with French proficiency (including Francophones) can be particularly important.

Perhaps surprisingly, many bilingual organizations seeking to recruit service providers with French proficiency do not have a reputation for offering services in French, so potential candidates do not consider these organizations when looking for work. For example, in our conversations with bilingual community mental health agencies, some explained that their social media is exclusively or predominantly in English, so the public is not aware the organization provides services in French or that it recruits staff with French proficiency.

Organizations may have working conditions that are inequitable for service providers with French proficiency

In bilingual organizations, service providers with French proficiency tend to have an additional workload compared to their colleagues who work only in English. The same inequity occurs with their counterparts working in Francophone organizations (Engstrom et al., 2009; Savard et al., 2017). For example, we have heard that bilingual service providers may have a larger caseload than staff working in one language, especially when there is a limited number of bilingual service providers at an organization (Engstrom et al., 2009). Staff may also be required to translate or interpret for their colleagues, adding additional work and responsibilities to their role (Engstrom et al., 2009; Savard et al., 2017).

Approximately 60% of service providers with French proficiency in Canada's bilingual and French-language minority contexts do not use French at work (Statistics Canada, 2021). For example, although service providers with French proficiency may use French to serve clients accessing services in French, they may have to use English with their colleagues and supervisors, and for reporting purposes (Savard et al., 2017).

Some service providers with French proficiency perceive they may have fewer opportunities for advancement because of the shortage of bilingual direct service providers – even if they want to advance or move to a different role within their own organization (Engstrom et al., 2009; Savard et al., 2017). In small community mental health agencies, opportunities for advancement may be particularly limited, given the size of the organization and limited funding.

Organizations may face barriers to providing services in French

As there is a lack of program materials in French (Savard et al., 2017), bilingual service providers are often required to translate materials and provide programs that have been developed in English only. Where program materials are translated into French, there may be concerns regarding the quality of the materials. For example:

- Materials may be out of date.
- Materials have been unofficially or poorly translated.
- Materials and programming may not be culturally appropriate.
- There is little to no evidence on the validation of the translated program.

Service providers with French proficiency may not want to live in French-language minority contexts

Quality of life considerations can factor into recruiting service providers with French proficiency. Many organizations try to recruit service providers with French proficiency from other provinces and territories (Statistics Canada, 2021), especially from New Brunswick – Canada’s only officially bilingual province – and Quebec, Canada’s only province where French is the majority language. However, efforts to recruit from other provinces and territories tend to be unsuccessful: nearly two out of three unemployed Canadians would not accept jobs offered in another province or elsewhere in their home province, for family or social reasons (Morissette, 2017). From our conversations with community-based mental health agencies, we learned that service providers with French proficiency are even less willing to move for work because they do not wish to leave their linguistic community and live in a bilingual or French-language minority context.

When organizations do manage to recruit service providers with French proficiency from other provinces and territories, it tends to be a short-lived success. The retention rate is low. Many of these service providers struggle to integrate into the community in bilingual and French-language minority contexts, often leaving the job within a couple of years to return to their former community.

What strategies can organizations use?

Organizations can use a combination of general recruitment strategies that apply to service providers regardless of the languages in which they are proficient, in tandem with recruitment strategies more tailored to service providers with French proficiency.

It is strongly recommended that organizations plan, monitor and evaluate their recruitment efforts to determine which strategies are most effective.

The information below is informed by grey and empirical literature, as well as through consultations with key stakeholders in Ontario who have experience and expertise recruiting French-speaking service providers in bilingual and French-language minority contexts in Canada.

General recruitment strategies

Create postings that are highly visible

- Use common job titles and language appropriate for the field to ensure the job posting is easily found in popular job search engines.
- Post jobs to a variety of websites and job boards, such as Indeed, Monster, LinkedIn and social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok.
- Post jobs on multiple platforms and multiple times (Beaulieu, 2010) for a minimum of 30 days (Canada Research Chairs, 2021).

Offer competitive incentives for new recruits

- Offer competitive salaries and incentives, such as benefits packages, paid leave, funds for professional development and payments of annual professional membership fees (Witter et al., 2020).
- Tailor hiring packages to the candidates. For example, younger nurses in Canada are more likely to value full-time employment compared to older nurses (O'Brien-Pallas et al., 2007).

Offer incentives to current staff who refer successful candidates

- Offer incentives to current staff to encourage them to refer their professional contacts to apply for available positions in your organization – in other words, an employee referral program. If the referred candidate is hired, the staff member receives recognition or reward.

Create supportive working conditions

- Foster autonomy within your organization. Autonomy means giving service providers the freedom to work in their preferred method within their positions. This could include setting their own deadlines, controlling their workflow, deciding when to work or having authority to make decisions about patient care.
- Promote flexible working conditions – “flextime” work hours and models, for example.
- Establish supportive leadership. Make deliberate efforts to ensure everyone on the team has the necessary skills, tools and resources to complete their job and tasks or find success in a long-term project. This approach involves regular check-ins, open communication, and positive and trusting relationships with colleagues.
- Provide opportunities for advancement within the organization.
- Offer stable employment with full-time and permanent positions (Witter et al., 2020).

Engage others in developing recruitment strategies

- Solicit recruitment strategies from staff, volunteers, students and the community (Francophone Affairs Secretariat, 2021). This might involve inviting others to share ideas by emailing your human resources department, commenting on social media posts or leaving feedback on the careers page of your organization’s website.
- Conduct focus group discussions with post-secondary students with French proficiency.

Hire former clients

- If your organization provides employment-related services, consider whether it would be appropriate to hire former clients.

Help staff who move for work to integrate

- Create peer support groups to help staff who move for the job settle into the workplace and the larger community.

Recruitment strategies specific to service providers with French proficiency

The talent pool of French service providers is small. Creating an equitable, diverse and inclusive workforce can help ensure that skilled candidates are not overlooked.

Post jobs designed to attract service providers with French proficiency

- Post jobs in both French and English. If your bilingual job postings receive responses from service providers who do not have French proficiency, consider posting jobs in French only.
- Include “French is an asset” in all job postings (Francophone Affairs Secretariat, 2021).
- Assess the needs of your organization and the level of qualifications required for the position. Revise and develop job requirements as appropriate.
 - For example, if your organization is struggling to hire a psychologist with French proficiency, you could assess the needs of your clients and organization to determine whether another type of health professional – like a social worker – with French proficiency could meet these needs.
- Include in job postings the qualifications and skills necessary for the position and use language that focuses more on abilities than experiences (Canada Research Chairs, 2021).

Provide compensation for bilingualism

- Offer more money for bilingualism. In an American study, 75% of bilingual social workers reported that it is a reasonable expectation for language skills to be financially compensated, especially given the additional workload that is often placed on bilingual staff (Engstrom et al., 2009).

Recruit students with French proficiency

- Conduct outreach in high schools and post-secondary institutions to promote health careers and possible career pathways. Emphasize the importance of French proficiency in health careers.
- Collaborate with secondary schools and post-secondary institutions to offer placements for students with French proficiency in your organization (Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada, 2013). For example, you can connect with high schools offering a [Specialist High Skills Major](#) in health and wellness.
 - Be mindful that not all students with French proficiency will be in Francophone or bilingual high schools and post-secondary institutions, programs or jurisdictions.
 - Consider working with post-secondary institutions to find ways to identify students with French proficiency.

- Hire students with French proficiency who successfully completed placements at your organization (Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada, 2013).
 - If your organization implements this strategy, you may wish to monitor the percentage of students who are hired and use this information in marketing for future student placements.
- Post jobs to job boards at post-secondary institutions, including institutions that may be specific to individuals with French proficiency (Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada, 2013).
- Offer bursaries for students with French proficiency who are completing health programs.
 - Consider giving preference to French health programs and programs for services where there are currently shortages of service providers (Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada, 2013).

Use underfill appointments

- Explore whether it is possible and appropriate to recruit certain professionals on an underfill basis. Underfill allows a candidate to be hired who has capacity and potential but who may not be fully qualified to perform all the functions of the position. This strategy would require the candidate to be assessed to determine if they can meet the position requirements through training within a specified amount of time.
 - Provide conditional employment offers to candidates who do not have the required level of French language proficiency (Savard et al., 2017). This involves hiring staff who are not yet bilingual with the condition that they attain bilingualism to obtain permanent employment status.
 - Provide a training or development plan for candidates with French language proficiency who require additional experience or certification to meet the requirements of the position.
- Develop policies and procedures for underfill appointments.

Build an organizational culture for French language

- Encourage staff with French proficiency to use French to communicate with clients and colleagues as appropriate to maintain and improve their proficiency (Savard et al., 2017).
- Provide all required materials in French (organization policies, training materials, mental health assessment and screening tools). This might involve sourcing materials in French or having materials translated.
- Ensure that outreach and marketing for the organization is in French – for example, post in French regularly to social media.

- Have a bilingual website.
- Advocate for health equity.
 - Emphasize how hiring service providers with French proficiency can advance health equity and highlight the need for more service providers with French proficiency.
 - Health equity is achieved when everyone can attain their full potential for physical and mental health and well-being (World Health Organization, 2022).
 - People with French proficiency in French language minority contexts in Canada tend to face barriers in mental health, addictions and physical health care, not receive the same quality of service, and experience health disparities (Société santé en français, 2022).
- Increase the visibility of professionals with French capacity within your organization. For example, have email signatures indicating the languages in which the staff person can communicate.
- Create communities of practice for service providers with French proficiency.
- Encourage the use of French at work.
- Celebrate Francophone cultures. This might involve holding special activities during Francophone festivals, serving traditional foods, or posting videos about Francophone cultures to social media (Francophone Affairs Secretariat, 2021).
- Use clear messaging that values French proficiency and Francophone cultures in all relevant communications. For example, feature posters in your workplace that highlight the importance of speaking French. Consistent organizational messaging can help ensure employees feel comfortable communicating in either official language (Savard et al., 2017).

Provide access to French-language training

- Offer free, accessible and flexible French-language training that covers technical terminology in recruitment materials. For example, you can include information about your organization's language training in letters of offer and invitations to interview for positions.
- Provide French-language training within the organization or facilitate access to French-language training for all interested staff – including service providers with French proficiency.
 - Many service providers do not get opportunities to work in French, so training can help them maintain their language skills and increase their confidence (Francophone Affairs Secretariat, 2021).

- Even when staff have opportunities to work in their second language, they may struggle to translate technical and professional terminology (Engstrom et al., 2009). Specialized language training can address this issue.
- Cover some or all the cost of French-language training.
- Encourage service providers to complete French-language training during working hours (Savard et al., 2017).
- Propose language training to existing staff during performance evaluations (Francophone Affairs Secretariat, 2021).

Ensure equitable working conditions

- Acknowledge the higher workload that bilingual staff may face or do face, compared to their colleagues who work in one language.
- Ensure equitable workloads for bilingual staff. This will involve monitoring and comparing the workloads of staff with French proficiency and staff without French proficiency, along with undertaking initiatives to improve equity.
- Use external translation and interpretation services, rather than relying on internal staff.
- Ensure there are opportunities for advancement for service providers with French proficiency. This may involve advocating for more leadership roles in the health sector for those with French proficiency.

What resources can help organizations in their recruitment efforts?

- Réseau franco-santé du Sud de l'Ontario's [Stratégie pour la main-d'œuvre bilingue de la santé 2.0](#) / [Bilingual health workforce strategy 2.0](#). This resource is designed to help health organizations develop a bilingual talent management strategy that will make them stand out during the current shortage of health human resources.
- Réseau franco-santé du Sud de l'Ontario's [Stratégie Ressources humaines en santé](#) / [Health Human Resources Strategy](#). This 9-module online course on health human resource strategies presents concepts and courses of action aiming to increase French-language health services across Canada. It provides a framework of recruitment and retention of bilingual human resources in the context of health services for a minority population. It is available in French and English.
- Réseau franco-santé du Sud de l'Ontario's [Cadre de référence pour le recrutement et la rétention des ressources humaines bilingues en santé](#) / [Framework for recruitment & retention of bilingual human resources in the health sector](#). This resource proposes a framework for the recruitment and retention of bilingual human resources in the context of health services for a minority population.

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 CYMHAOntario

 cymhaon

 cymha_on

695 Industrial Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario K1G 0Z1

 – 1 613 737 2297

EN – cymha.ca

 – 1 613 738 4894

FR – smdej.ca