

French speakers seek visibility in Waterloo Region

News Apr 02, 2019 by [Jeff Outhit](/waterlooregion-author/jeff-outhit/CB820047-326C-44D3-9B62-2098CF76324A/) 
<mailto:jouthit@therecord.com>) Waterloo Region Record

WATERLOO REGION — Suzette Hafner rarely goes looking for other French speakers as she goes about her day.

But it pleases her to find one, while shopping or being served. Though strangers, they will share a few words and bond like a secret club.

"Many, many people don't even know there are francophones in this region," said Hafner, a former president of the [Association des Francophones de Kitchener-Waterloo](https://afkw.org/en/home/) (<https://afkw.org/en/home/>). "We are not that visible."

Hafner has embraced a new role to make the community more aware of French, joining a roundtable created in part to welcome bilingual professionals to this region, Guelph and Wellington County.

The first goal is to find ways to better connect francophones to medical care in French. Too often this happens randomly, or not at all.

The roundtable may also promote French in other ways, reaching out, for example, to French-speaking immigrants. "The more we are active, the more we'll be known to the community," Hafner said.

The roundtable launched last month at Kitchener City Hall. It brings together 19 organizations interested in promoting French.

"We have quite a few members of our community who speak only French. For them to get particularly medical services in French is very difficult," said Louise Kruithof, treasurer of the [Centre Communautaire Francophone de Cambridge](http://centrefrancaiscambridge.com/en/) (<http://centrefrancaiscambridge.com/en/>).

Kruithof is a retired engineer who joined the roundtable in part to advocate for francophone seniors.

"We have a common goal and if we can get together, then there's a better chance of achieving what we're looking for," she said.

In this region, 98 per cent of the population speaks English, while just seven per cent know French, census findings reveal.

Ten foreign languages are more commonly spoken at home than French. They include Mandarin, German, Persian and Vietnamese.

Francophones say it's difficult if not impossible to live here speaking only Canada's other official language.

That's not because people are hostile to French, but rather because they seem indifferent to it.

"It's not easy. However, I think we have a responsibility to communicate that we are francophone," said Suzanne Dansereau, president of the francophone association in Kitchener-Waterloo.

"We want people to know we exist. We need visibility."

Dansereau helped promote a campaign to encourage local businesses to offer bilingual services. It's called [Bonjour Welcome](https://bonjourwelcome.ca/en) (<https://bonjourwelcome.ca/en>).

The association she leads held a successful French film festival in March. It has expanded its website and social media presence.

Dansereau is now promoting a French Toastmasters club to encourage public speaking and leadership, something she has already done in English.

She's often on the lookout for French speakers as she goes about her day. "More and more, I say 'bonjour' when I go in places," she said.

"I'm not shy and I always find someone who responds to me in French. Which is great. I think the English community, they want to speak French also ...

"They always say, 'Oh, my French is not really good,' and we always say, 'No, your French is great,' because we want them to practise and be able to speak French."

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