

On the Map

A History of the
North Shore Community Association



On the Map: A History of the North Shore Community Association is part of the Regional Development Network “Organizational Histories” series of publications. Looking back helps understand organizations as they were when they were founded, provides a sense of context for current missions and mandates, and projects identities and approaches into the future. Regional community development associations serving the English-language minority population often serve outlying areas and dispersed populations, they operate in numerous sectors, and they mobilize small communities ultimately to ensure equity and access across the province. Their history is also the history of Quebec.





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Investing in community

RDN member organizations play a leading role in supporting and strengthening English-speaking minority communities in Quebec. Their essential work contributes to cultural vitality, community resilience, and access to services that support their development and long-term sustainability. Thank you for your unwavering commitment to this mission!



THE HONORABLE
Marc Miller



Canadian
Heritage

Patrimoine
canadien

Shaped by commitment

Quebec English-language community organizations have a rich history, shaped by commitment and resilience, and in the spirit of dialogue. This booklet is a testament to their important contribution to Quebec society. The Government of Quebec is proud to support these efforts to honour the past, and commends these communities for their dedication.

**Secrétariat aux relations
avec les Québécois
d'expression anglaise**

Québec



Christopher
Skeete

MINISTER RESPONSIBLE
FOR RELATIONS WITH
ENGLISH-SPEAKING
QUEBECERS

The English presence

The English presence in Quebec is a patchwork quilt, an island in the archipelago that is Quebec in North America. For years, for decades, and even for centuries, scattered groups of English speakers have worked to grow thriving communities—places where we help each other, where we look to our elders and look out for our little ones, where we fight for our rights and for what's right. Across the province, we have worked to build places that feel like home.

The work to build, to represent, and to grow has been a labour of love by so many community members. That community has also been supported by a number of agencies and institutions, some of which are named in these pages. In the early days, the Secretary of State offered funding; in later years, the Government of Canada has been seminal to the community's stability, including through Department of Canadian Heritage programs for official language minority communities and funding from Health Canada. More recently, the provincial Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise has also contributed. In every region, various municipal and regional bodies find ways to help. Many hands make light work.

The nineteen community development organizations that make up the membership of the Regional Development Network represent towns, MRCs, and regions across the province. The oldest among them was founded over fifty years ago; the youngest is only seven years old. These regional groups have a wide spectrum of programming, including health and social services, culture and heritage, activities for seniors, youth, and children, education, employment, social enterprise... After all, in a village, everyone is something of a jack of all trades. That expertise also comes from listening—to what community members have to say, to what's needed, and to opportunities as they arise.

in Quebec

In more recent years, we have worked to put our communities on the map. The English-speaking population of Quebec has undergone extraordinary changes, and we are more diverse than ever. But whether home is nestled in the north, perched in the Appalachians, or staring out to sea, we share the same concerns, and the same ties that bind. And as we stitch together our communities, as we drift away and back, as we carve out a space for ourselves and our children, we take a moment to pause, to look around; we take a moment to both celebrate our roots and welcome the future.



The North Shore Community Association (NSCA) represents English-speaking communities along the north shore of the St. Lawrence River, east of the Saguenay estuary to Havre-Saint-Pierre, and up to northern localities in the region.

The NSCA was founded at the turn of the millennium, during a transitional time in community development. There was a need to support and improve access to services, and Anglophones in the region wanted to have a hand in their own destiny. From humble roots, the organization has grown into a sprawling organization that serves over five thousand English speakers dispersed across one of the largest regions in the province's network.



Foundations

The landscape north of the St. Lawrence River is rugged and dramatic, marked by rocky coastlines, deep bays, boreal forests, and powerful rivers flowing from the Canadian Shield. Inland, the terrain rises into low mountains and vast wilderness, sparsely populated and shaped by a harsh climate and strong maritime influences. Beyond the coast, the hinterland extends into an immense, remote stretch of taiga, lakes, and wetlands, with minimal infrastructure and long distances between communities.



The North Shore has a long history of human habitation, and of cohabitation with a wilderness that is generous but formidable. The Innu and Naskapi were the first to live on and with Nitassinan—the land—and remain a strong presence in the area, including in the first-official-language-English northern community of Kawawachikamach. Europeans initially passed through the region to fish, and groups from Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and New England settled parts of the region in the early twentieth century, gathering around industries including pulp and paper and later mining. The major North Shore towns of Baie-Comeau and Sept-Îles quickly grew into major centres for a range of services and institutions.

In the early days of its industrial settlement, the region had a numerous English-speaking population, and strong ties to American industry. However, by the end of the twentieth century, as elsewhere in Quebec, that population had dwindled and was struggling, especially with regard to accessing services and resources in English.

In the early 1980s, two chapters of the Anglophone lobby group Alliance Québec were organized on the North Shore, one representing Baie-Comeau, and the other Sept-Îles and Port-Cartier.





Unfortunately, as the English-speaking population decreased, it became increasingly difficult to fulfill the constitutional requirements for chapter status.

When the Education Act was amended in 1997 and the Provisional Council set out to create linguistic school boards, discussions to organize the east of the province were held between a North Shore Steering Committee and the Committee for Anglophone Social Action. In 1999, four community animators were hired to conduct a needs assessment in the North Shore. There were four towns in the region with English-speaking populations—Baie-Comeau, Port-Cartier, Sept-Îles, and Fermont—each one with varying situations and needs. CASA compiled the findings into a formal report, which laid the groundwork for the organization's future direction. These results were presented at a founding meeting in Port-Cartier. Representatives from the various communities attended, including participants who travelled together on a school bus from Baie-Comeau. Founding community member and longtime organizational partner Stephen Kohner remembers the crowd: "It was really a who's who of the North Shore!"

That meeting held on September 23, 2000, at the Le Q'Artier hotel, marked the first formal gathering of what would become the North Shore Community Association, and served as a pivotal moment in defining its identity.

One proposal, executive director Jody Lessard says, was to create a new regional chapter of Alliance Québec, which was then still operating, or of CASA. But, although they were grateful for CASA's leadership and expertise, Lessard recalls, "people started saying, do we really want the Gaspé to lead the North Shore? So that option was turned down: the members from the different communities said no, we want to be our own organization."

"We didn't even have a name yet."

But the NSCA was already very much itself: strong-willed, determined, and forward-looking, and with a good foundation based in a solid partnership.

*It was really a
who's who of the
North Shore!*

People & Partnerships

Jody Lessard is originally from Saint-Augustin, a small community up the coast. “Coming from the Lower North Shore, where it’s really English everywhere, I was looking for the English-speaking community,” she says, when she moved to Baie-Comeau in 1996. “And I couldn’t really find it. But there was an English church. We had an English school.” That association was typical, with many newcomers to the area seeking their linguistic community in educational or religious institutions.

Lessard has been with the NSCA since the beginning. When the first board was elected, Lessard took on the role of regional director for Baie-Comeau, before becoming president in 2002. In those early days, she remembers, “a lot of it was on volunteer basis.” Then, after a tumultuous few months, Lessard stepped in as staff, in the position that eventually expanded and was restructured as executive director. She has been at the helm of the NSCA ever since.

Stephen Kohner was also at that founding meeting in Port-Cartier. Kohner is a retired history teacher and erstwhile principal at Baie-Comeau High School, and is the lay incumbent at St. Andrew and St. George Church. His



Jody Lessard

LONG-TIME NSCA
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

*There are three cultures on
the coast—Francophone,
Anglophone, and Indigenous.
And the English-speaking
community has to be there at
the table too.*

partnerships with the NSCA have taken many forms over the years, from holding heritage and tourism exhibits at the church, to educational collaborations, to currently renting out the church basement to the organization. For two decades, Kohner edited the NSCA newsletter. (He's now also partaking of the programming through the local 50+ Club!) Working together was second nature, he says, especially in a small community: "I was always of the mindset that if something was going on at the NSCA, it may have been organized by the NSCA, but it also belonged to the whole community. What was the role of the school? The role of the church? How could we help?"

Cathy Larivière is another founding member, and remembers those heady early days: "How excited were we to represent the English-speaking people in our communities!" Larivière, who represented the northern sector of the region over the many years she lived in Fermont, volunteered in just about every role with the NSCA, from making spaghetti sauce for community suppers to chairing the board. She recently moved to slightly warmer climes (in Pohénégamook!), but remains a cheerleader for the organization—"a wonderful association that is true to its mission!"

Another long-time board member and volunteer was **Marc Deslauriers**. As well as acting as a school board commissioner, he served as the chair of the NSCA board from 2004 onward until he passed



Stephen Kohner

LAY INCUMBENT,
CHURCH OF
ST. ANDREW & ST. GEORGE

Community is an essential component of any person's journey—whether it's a spiritual journey, or their physical journey, or part of growing up.



Nancy Bilodeau

FORMER CORPORATE AFFAIRS
ADVISOR, CISSS DE LA CÔTE-NORD

As part of my role at the CISSS de la Côte-Nord, I had the opportunity to work closely with the NSCA. They play a vital role in defending the rights of English-speaking users in the region and making a tangible contribution to their well-being.

away suddenly in 2012. The community remembered him as “a man of action and vision,” as Lessard wrote at the time; his contributions are honoured through the Outstanding Community Involvement Award given annually in his name.

The sheer size of the region, the driving distances, and often the weather conditions, can seem unimaginable to policymakers in Quebec City. The NSCA quickly realized it needed a permanent presence in Sept-Îles to properly serve the local community. Driving from Baie-Comeau to Sept-Îles and back takes about six hours, Lessard points out. “I can’t have an activity in one place, especially in the winter, and go back and forth. It makes no sense to have someone sitting in their car for a full workday just to go attend or run an activity.”

To adequately meet the needs of the English-speaking population spread out over such a large area, partnerships are essential. Because of the inevitable focus on health and social services, collaborations on initiatives in that field have always been a priority. Partnership development is not only about translation and dissemination, though that is certainly a part of it; for the NSCA as



for other organizations serving minority communities around the province, the best partnerships empower other organizations to better meet their mandates by ensuring the inclusion of English speakers. As Nancy Bilodeau, who recently retired from the CISSS de la Côte-Nord, and who worked alongside the NSCA for years, notes, “it’s essential to consult and work collaboratively to improve access to health and social services for English-speaking users.” Working with the NSCA, she says, “provides us with a direct link to English-speaking users, allows us to better understand their real needs and adapt our services accordingly.”

With funding from **Community Health and Social Services Network**, the association opened a Networking and Partnership Initiative satellite office in 2012, though it took a few moves to find the right setup. At first, the office was just a small corner desk in an adult-education space. It later moved into a building that hosted several community organizations, but the office there was tiny and not very practical. Eventually, relocating to Boulevard Laure made a big difference. The office became more visible, funding increased, and the organization was able to expand into a larger space with a dedicated community area. Now, Lessard says, “the office in Sept-Îles is bigger than the Baie-Comeau office. And it’s always busy!” Community events regularly fill the space, showing just how strong the local demand is.



Edith O'Brien
CURRENT NSCA BOARD CHAIR

There is a lot of caring and compassion shown to seniors and those in need.



Cathy Larivière
**FORMER RESIDENT OF
FERMONT, NSCA FOUNDING
MEMBER, PAST CHAIR,
AND LONG-TIME VOLUNTEER**

Today there is much more visibility, community programs, and projects with the English-speaking population, young and old!

Projects & Progress

CULTURE AND HERITAGE

The work of the NSCA is vital to preserving, celebrating, and transmitting the region's rich cultural legacy, particularly the voices of the English-speaking community. Several recent projects stand out...

The "In Search of Yesterday" heritage exhibit stands as a powerful intergenerational initiative that marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of Baie-Comeau while honouring the history of its English-speaking population. Created collaboratively by community members, teachers, volunteers, and students, the project involved recording, documenting, and interpreting local heritage from within the community itself. Drawing on archival documents, historical photographs, and first-hand testimonials, the twelve-panel exhibit presents a compelling narrative shaped by lived experience.

A heritage project, titled "A Thousand Words," used narrated visuals to capture and preserve North Shore history in an engaging and accessible format. These heritage capsules feature personal anecdotes, collective memories, and regional stories from towns across the North Shore. Each capsule brings history to life, offering insight into everyday experiences, local traditions, and the enduring spirit of solidarity that defines the region. Together, they form a living archive that speaks meaningfully to both residents and visitors, ensuring that local heritage is not only remembered but actively shared.

*Each capsule offers
insight into the spirit
of solidarity that
defines the region.*

North Shore Memoirs I and II further deepen this legacy through the voices of seniors who shared their life stories during months of recorded interviews, transcription, and careful editing. Two books, published in 2010 and 2013, featured stories collected from community members along with photographs selected from the extensive Société historique de la Côte-Nord archives. The project sought to preserve Anglophone heritage, engage seniors, strengthen intergenerational connections, and cultivate community pride, transforming personal memories into a lasting historical record for future generations.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Improving access to health and social services is one of the major *raison d'être* of the NSCA and that mandate is part of almost every aspect of what the organization does and every age group it serves, from early childhood activities to seniors' wellness—two of the cornerstones of the NSCA's programming.

Health and social services programming notably includes video conferences and presentations led by health specialists, the Travel 4 Health online toolkit for anyone who has to travel out of region for health services, and the Health Passport appointment assistance program.

Among the most significant annual activities in health and social services development in their region, the Community Network Bursaries for youth studying in health and social services, have been offered since 2014 in partnership with McGill University.

NEWCOMERS

Given the recent increase in population, and the diversifying English speaking community across the region, the NSCA has developed a range of tools and services to support integration in the region, including a new community directory. Life in the north can seem isolating, but the NSCA, by reaching out and connecting with new community members, increases awareness of existing services, and makes them feel that much more at home.

Growing together



Changes & Challenges

The region served by the NSCA is the largest in Quebec, stretching over twelve hundred square kilometres, and includes five MRCs in administrative region 9: Caniapiscau, La Haute Côte-Nord, Minganie, Sept-Rivières, and Manicouagan.

The English-speaking population, which accounts for approximately three percent of the region's population, is concentrated in the three coastal towns of Baie-Comeau, Port-Cartier, and Sept-Îles. The three towns have English schools, and the Cégep de Sept-Îles has a dedicated bilingual program. However, Sept-Îles also traditionally has a higher number of seniors, with all the needs that aging brings, and with a lower level of bilingualism; many of these have moved to the city from the Lower North Shore, often to be closer to family or to be closer to health services. The NSCA runs three seniors' wellness centres, Jody Lessard explains. "We've set up programs to break the isolation and to deliver services to seniors. They're a vulnerable population."

Fermont, where a fabled windscreen known as the Wall offers residential, commercial, and educational facilities, also has an English-speaking community, and its proximity to the provincial border and to Labrador City, just twenty-eight kilometres away, means that its residents tend to cleave to Labrador for services and culture.

Finally, while there are roads between most towns, transportation to Schefferville from the rest of the region is available only by train or by plane.

English speakers throughout the region include members of the Naskapi Nation, whose first colonial language is usually English, as well as newcomers to the region, who may speak another language than French or English but tend to either align themselves with the English-speaking community or prefer to interact in English. Lessard, who is Inuit herself, would like to build a stronger relationship with the ᑭᓐᓴᓐᓴᓐᓴᓐ (Kawawachikamach) First Nation: “It’s hard because of the distance, and because they’re very independent.”

The demographics vary significantly from one locality to another within the region, as do each community's needs, challenges, and opportunities. These communities included people born and raised locally, families who arrived throughout the early- and mid-twentieth century, attracted by industrial employment, English speakers from the Lower North Shore, and new Canadians. Despite this diversity, the leadership and board have remained committed to maintaining a single, unified organization. "We didn't want to have separate identities," Lessard notes; "we are one organization."

*We didn't
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identities.
We are one
organization.*

From a logistical standpoint, the NSCA's two offices and seven staff members manage to do a great deal, both given the wide geographic area and across many sectors. That variety is what Jody Lessard loves about the work she does: "No two days are ever quite the same. Yesterday, I was in a meeting for a couple of hours around attraction and retention for newcomers, talking about employability. This morning I was talking about health and social services with CHSSN. Tomorrow I could be talking about tourism, then seniors, and next week it's going to be children and families. It keeps my mind active! Sometimes it gets crazy, but it's stimulating."

The challenge in the early days, which is all too familiar to similar organizations, was funding. For many years, the NSCA operated on a shoestring core-funding budget of \$12,500. Lessard remembers the struggle well: “The amount of funding we had right up until 2010, wasn’t much for the territory we covered. It was pocket change.”

The NSCA has kept growing, largely thanks to people—both the people for whom it works, and the people who make it work. Stephen Kohner notes, “one of the most important aspects of the NSCA is the human resources. You have to have the right people in the right place at the right time.”

One of the most important aspects of the NSCA is the human resources.

Now that the organization is on more stable footing, a recurring challenge, which again is common to many community organizations, especially those in regional areas, is staffing. “I’m very fortunate to have staff as dedicated as I am,” Lessard says, but there’s simply a smaller pool of skilled, available people to draw from. As a result, the organization relies heavily on multitasking and sharing responsibilities, which can lead to staff being stretched too thin.”





Even though many remote regions in the province have been losing population overall, the North Shore has seen a noticeable increase in its English-speaking population. Between 2001 and 2021, the number of English speakers grew by about five percent, due to natural population growth and immigration. At the same time, the region has become much more linguistically diverse. Between 2016 and 2021, the share of residents whose first language is neither French, English, nor an Indigenous language jumped by thirty-two percent—a striking pattern that community workers expect will be borne out in the next census.

The Covid-19 pandemic played a big role in bringing new people to the region. Newcomers arrived from elsewhere in Quebec, from other parts of Canada, and from abroad, with recent arrivals coming especially from countries like Mexico, Ukraine, and the Philippines. People move to the North Shore for many reasons, including job opportunities, a better quality of life, or to join family or a partner.

Across the English-speaking minority language community in general, education, employability, and economic achievement are a concern: sixty-three percent of English speakers in the region have high school completion or less, compared to nearly half of French speakers, and the unemployment rate, at eighteen percent in the English-speaking community, is three times as high as that of their Francophone neighbours.

The NSCA has a long track record of senior programming. More recently, they have expanded their services for children and young families, through literacy programs, partnerships, and workshops as part of the provincewide Bright Beginnings early childhood initiative. The next underserved group, the association is concerned about is youth. Teens and young adults consistently fly under the radar in part because they are busy with school or finding work, because they generally have a better command of French, and because their social alignment tends to be informal rather than associative or institutional. Still, with close ties to the English schools, and with a slew of intergenerational activities, the NSCA is making a dent. Neil MacIntosh, the current principal at Baie-Comeau High School, speaks highly of their collaborations: "The NSCA is a big player in helping BCHS

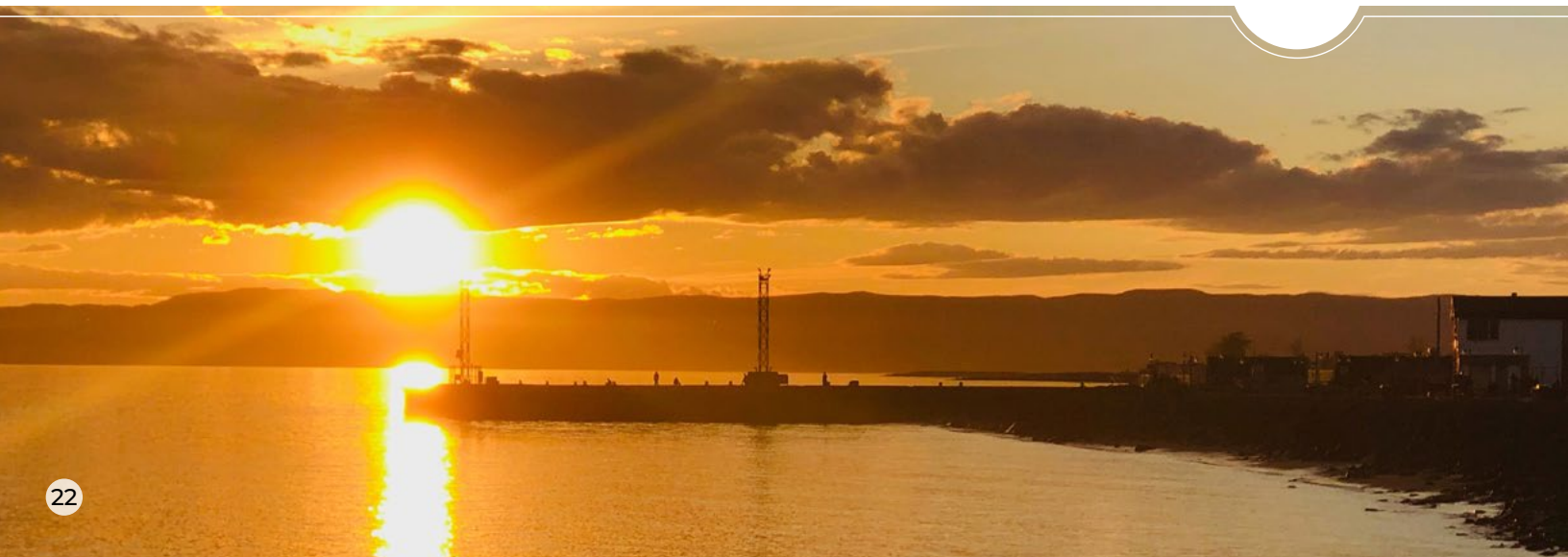
*People move to
the North Shore for
many reasons...*

with literacy initiatives," he cites as one example. Lessard knows where her organization's strengths lie: "We bring communities together. That's what our slogan is; that's what we do."

It takes a village, and many of the organization's programs have been bolstered by collaborative work, Kohner says. "One thing the NSCA has done right is strive to establish partnerships, and not just within the Anglophone community. There's the CISSS, and plenty of community organizations in Sept-Îles and Baie-Comeau... The NSCA plugs themselves in!" Current president Edith O'Brien, who's been a member of the organization for fourteen years and on the board for nine, concurs: "The NSCA continues to reach out to various organizations."

Of all the NSCA's accomplishments, Lessard is proudest of the association's work to improve health and social services in English: "It's a passion," she says. "We've had a lot of innovative projects." Partnership development has been crucial too—with other community groups, with local health institutions, with the CISSS. "We've built those partnership, to let them know, hey, there's an English-speaking community out there, and we want a seat at the table. We want to contribute." The nature of advocacy has changed over the past twenty-five years, too, as has Lessard's approach. "You can't go in there and say, I'm an English speaker and that's my right. We're not a threat."

For Lessard, it's also about making space for others. "We're always talking about inclusion. Well, we practice what we preach!"



Legacy & Leadership

In the years to come, the NSCA will keep building and expanding programs in all areas, with a strong focus on seniors, youth, and families, to help bring people together and strengthen a shared sense of identity within the English-speaking community. As she begins to look down the road to retirement, Lessard also wants to make the organization more stable through better planning and strong partnerships, so the community continues to be well served and represented. Improving communication will remain a priority, helping community members stay informed, connected, and involved in NSCA activities and initiatives.

As a multi-sector organization, the NSCA has the flexibility to get involved in many different areas as community needs change. This has led to work in areas like employability, with efforts focused on helping English speakers access jobs and build skills. The NSCA is also beginning to explore opportunities in tourism by taking part in regional initiatives that highlight the English-speaking community.

Because the organization covers so many sectors, it doesn't have just one narrow mandate. This keeps the work interesting and varied: priorities shift as new needs and opportunities arise, and no two days ever the same. And, as Lessard knows as well as anyone working in community development, "there's still lots of work to do."

1960s
Quiet Revolution

1969
Official Languages
Act of Canada
Bill 63

1970
October
Crisis

1974
Bill 22

1976
Parti Québécois
victory

1977
Bill 101

1980
Referendum

1982
Founding of
Alliance Québec

1986
Bill 142

1988
Second federal
Official Languages
Act

1995
Referendum
Founding of
QCGN / TALQ



2000
Founding
of NSCA

2000
Founding of
CHSSN

2003
Action Plan
for Official
Languages

2017
Founding
of SRQEA

2019
Founding
of RDN

2022
Law 14
(Bill 96)