

French an 'asset' but not the priority in hiring Fredericton police

Description

The Fredericton Police Force is trying to increase French proficiency among officers, but it hasn't been easy and it isn't the priority in hiring.

"I don't want the language competency to drive the hiring process," Deputy Chief Martin Gaudet said. "I want the hard skills, the soft skills, the emotional skills of the individual to drive the hire."

Gaudet briefed city councillors Monday night on the bilingualism capacity of the force.

This comes after two Fredericton police officers pulled over a vehicle on Smythe Street last June, and the driver asked to be served in French, which is her right.

Neither officer could speak French, however, and, after some heated words, a third officer was called.

The incident prompted an investigation by the New Brunswick Police Commission, which found two of the officers didn't comply with the province's Official Languages Act.

"We need to make sure that if someone requests service in French [or] English that we can find an officer who can speak the language in a reasonable amount of time," Gaudet said in an interview Tuesday.

Of 127 staff members in the Fredericton department, 24 — or 26 per cent — are proficient in both French and English, Gaudet said.

Seventeen officers speak French at an intermediate or acceptable level.

The force's "active offer" policy, which allows people to speak in either English or French when dealing with police, is up to date and training is provided during the orientation for new hires, Gaudet said.

Refresher training and fluency inspections are also done.

But calls coming into the police department are not ranked by language needs but by the kind of calls they are, ranked one through four in priority, he said.

Gaudet said both residents and police officers have language rights, he said.

"We can't force an English-speaking officer to speak French if he or she does not speak French."

The hiring process

The ability to speak French is deemed an asset but not a prerequisite for officers applying to the Fredericton Police Force, he said.

If proficiency in French were a prerequisite, the pool of candidates would be far too small across Canada, Gaudet said.

“When we hire people we look at the hard skills of being a police officer and then the soft skills of being part of the community and how we’re going to serve the community.”

Hard skills include training in drug recognition, emergency response and sobriety tests. French-language proficiency is deemed more of a “soft skill,” Gaudet said.

“Being bilingual is absolutely an asset for a police officer, but it is not the guiding principle when we hire individuals.”

He said other languages are also important, because the force serves a community of people whose first language isn’t French or English.

In the past, he said, the department has hired officers who speak English and Filipino, English and Mi’kmaq, English and Maliseet.

“We build a police service that represents the community that we serve,” Gaudet said.

Members of the police force are expected to meet with the City of Fredericton and New Brunswick’s official languages commissioner to discuss language improvements on the force.

“We need to move the needle forward,” he said. “It’s not a suggestion, it’s direction, it’s law. Members of the community in New Brunswick have the right to be served in French and English.”

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/fredericton-police-force-french-bilingual-1.4563760>

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