

To: Members of the Task Force on Franco Americans

From: Doris Belisle-Bonneau, Coordinator of Maine French Heritage Language Program in Lewiston/Auburn and Chelsea Ray, Coordinator of the MFHLP in Augusta

Re: Reflections and recommendations

Date: October 16, 2012

We would like to thank the task force members again for their willingness to serve and for the invitation to present on our program last month. We were grateful for this opportunity to share our work with you and hope that we can collaborate on this initiative in the future. Our new program needs support in order to survive and thrive, and we hope that you will keep us in mind as you build the mission of the task force.

We learned a great deal from the important studies that the commission has undertaken. First, the State of Maine is the home of a coherent Franco American Community that is diverse within its unity. Second is that those with Quebecois lineage connect the French language and culture. Third, many young Franco-Americans between the ages of 18-25 are disconnected from their heritage and have low aspirations. Fourth, a vacuum of leadership continues to exist among the Francos. This data is valuable for the state, but is also essential for existing Franco agencies.

Our hope is for communities to come together to foster unity in Franco Heritage by examining the data locally and by interpreting the messages for their location. For example, community discussions could foster local engagement and be an opportunity for leveraging the local Franco presence by linking existing economic agencies with Franco Cultural Resources to address low aspirations and a vacuum in leadership. Stakeholders could examine the data, identify targeted populations, and create action plans and partnerships. I suggest that the commission recommend that seed grants be made available to support local action planning.

Secondly, our hope is that the information will be used to support already existing organizations whose mission is to ensure the Franco American Heritage. The Franco Center in Orono, the Franco-American Center in Lewiston, the Franco Collection at the University of Maine in LA are a few existing agencies that strive to serve the mission of the task force. Unfortunately, fiscal resources are at a premium. Every organization could do more, but none has the capacity. Our second suggestion is that the task force recommends the creation of a Franco Foundation that would be integrated into an already existing state agency. The Foundation would seek grants and or gifts and would funnel its funds to existing entities to help them build capacity to do the work and provide support for efforts that already exist in Maine. For example, community action plans generated by the planning grants could seek support from the Foundation.

Unless there is a vision for connecting money to ideas, the recommendations of any task force will remain on the shelf. "Le plus que ça change, le plus que c'est la même chose." The last commission report is an example of an unfunded mandate that has had limited impact.

Again we thank you for the opportunity to present at the September 25th meeting. As influential Franco-American citizens of the state, please continue to keep the Maine Heritage French Language Program on your radar screen by informing us of opportunities to support this vital programming that ensures the next generation of children will have access to both the French language and knowledge of Franco-American heritage. It is our hope that we are educating the leaders of tomorrow in our program, who will continue to highlight the important contributions of Franco-Americans to the state. We extend a special thank you to Severin Beliveau, Brian Bolduc, Yvon Labbe, Juliana J. L'Heureux, Ray Lagueux, and Susan Pinette, as well as others who have already been a resource to us.