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• (1535)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 92 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, January 29, 2024, the committee is resuming its study of the language obligations related to the process of staffing or making appointments to key positions.

I'm not going to read all the instructions for testifying by videoconference that have been in effect since the COVID-19 pandemic, since the Canadian Parliament is now an expert in the field. However, I would like to remind everyone in the room to ensure that their earpieces are not located near the microphone when they are speaking, to avoid feedback. In addition, in accordance with our housekeeping motion, I wish to inform the committee that all witnesses participating in the meeting by videoconference have completed the required sound and connection tests prior to the meeting.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses. Today, we have Justine Hendricks, president and CEO of Farm Credit Canada, and Angela Cassie, president of the Société de la francophonie manitobaine. Good afternoon, ladies.

Today there's a solar eclipse, and I'd like to say that it's happening on a very special day—the birthday of our favourite analyst, who just turned 31. So I'd like to wish Ms. Lecomte, who does an incredible job for the committee, a very happy birthday.

Voices: Hear, hear!

Ms. Lucie Lecomte (Analyst): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: As you all know, I am very strict when it comes to speaking time. My colleagues sometimes give me happy or displeased looks, depending on how much time I allow. Look at the clock on your cell phone: if you have the floor for 6 minutes and you ask a question at 5 minutes 58 seconds, there won't be enough time for an answer. The reason I'm as strict as I am is that it allows us to do two rounds of questions. It's because of this that we can hear different questions and different points of view.

As usual, each witness will have five minutes to make their opening remarks. If a witness is unable to complete their statement

in the five minutes allowed, they will have the opportunity to return to it by answering questions from the members.

Ms. Hendricks, the floor is yours for a maximum of five minutes.

Ms. Justine Hendricks (President and Chief Executive Officer, Farm Credit Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to join you today. My name is Justine Hendricks and I'm the president and CEO of Farm Credit Canada, or FCC.

FCC is a Crown corporation headquartered in Regina. We've been serving Canada's agriculture and agri-food industry for more than 65 years. With a loan portfolio of over \$50 billion, we support 103,000 customers with more than 2,500 employees and 103 offices across Canada. In 2023-24, our customer service centres received more than 42,500 calls, of which 4,134 were in French.

I was appointed president and CEO just over a year ago, and I'm happy to talk to you about this organization. This afternoon, I'd like to discuss bilingualism and FCC's hiring process as it relates to the Official Languages Act, provide an overview of our progress, and outline our future direction.

FCC is committed to promoting bilingualism and official languages. As a Crown corporation, it has a duty to demonstrate leadership in this regard. Within the organization, we use the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages' Official Languages Maturity Model as a guide. In 2021, FCC conducted an organizational assessment based on this maturity model, resulting in a three-year strategy to increase bilingualism throughout the organization. The pillars of this strategy are attracting and developing bilingual talent, embedding bilingualism in the workplace, and leading by example. As part of this strategy, FCC has made several process improvements to refine its hiring practices for bilingual positions.

The hybrid work environment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has encouraged nationwide job searches, enabling us to find the right talent, with the right experience, to fill bilingual positions. Hiring bilingual candidates remains a challenge, however, hence the importance of having a robust in-house training program.

[English]

Today, 14% of the positions at FCC are designated bilingual. FCC uses the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages' "Tool for the linguistic identification of positions" to guide language designation of key positions. Currently, 80% of the positions in our executive management team are designated bilingual. Of those, 75% meet bilingual requirements and another 12.5% are taking second language training. Among our employees who serve the public, 38% are bilingual.

[Translation]

Since 2021, the number of employees enrolled in French-language training has quadrupled, and I'm happy to report that FCC's English-speaking senior management is increasingly interested in this training. Forty-seven per cent of employees taking French-language training are in management positions. Of these, 58% are at a beginner level, demonstrating the renewed interest in learning the French language.

This year in particular, we've observed a noticeable change throughout the organization. I also hold the title of FCC official languages champion, and prioritize the use of both official languages in meetings and communications. So our translation team has been very busy.

[English]

We had the pleasure of sharing some of FCC's initiatives at the official languages best practices forum in Ottawa this year, including FCC's bilingual meeting strategy and bilingual circle coaching initiative.

In 2023-24, with the intention of finding practical tools that encourage bilingualism, we added a new technology called Kudo to allow simultaneous interpretation in Microsoft Teams. As a result, our official languages team supported over 40 bilingual meetings, including three all-employee town halls. Multilingual teams participating together make an important contribution to our diversity and inclusion.

We also saw 13 leaders participate in bilingual coaching circles accompanied by a language coach and a bilingual HR business partner. These circles exist to increase oral fluency and linguistic security in on-the-job second language use.

[Translation]

As a result of this change in visibility, we're seeing increased awareness and a desire for engagement, and we're seeing French-speaking employees feeling more comfortable communicating in their first language. We've also observed that English-speaking employees are increasingly venturing to communicate in French. They use it more often and make presentations in their second language. It's a process, and there's more to come. Also, as a francophone, this journey is of personal importance to me, and I'm pleased with FCC's efforts over the past three years to increase bilingualism within the organization.

Thank you for the time you've given me this afternoon, and I look forward to answering your questions.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hendricks.

Ms. Cassie, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Angela Cassie (President, Société de la francophonie manitobaine): Good afternoon. I would first like to thank the committee for inviting me to appear today.

My name is Angela Cassie and I am the president of the Société de la francophonie manitobaine, the SFM. I'm also a former federal public servant.

As you know, the SFM is the voice of Manitoba's French-speaking community, in all its diversity.

I'd like to present a few ideas today on two major themes, namely the impact of unilingual senior public servants on official language minority communities, OLMCs, and finding structural solutions to foster official bilingualism.

The issue at hand is of paramount importance to our community. The bilingual capacity of senior public servants is not just a matter of spoken language, but also of understanding the unique challenges our communities face on a daily basis. This has a real impact on decision-making, including the funding of organizations that support our OLMCs, as well as the provision of vital public services, among others.

All too often, unconscious prejudices trample the rights and interests of francophones. Taken together, these prejudices create a culture of laxity and indifference to our needs. We see this with the RCMP, among others, which fails to meet its bilingual obligations, despite the essential service it provides.

We also find it very worrying that managers can make decisions about the language requirements of a position without asking for, or simply ignoring, the advice of specialist official languages staff. Our community and our francophone communities deserve robust processes to ensure representativeness of the Canadian population, as well as fair and equitable treatment.

It goes without saying that the SFM supports the recommendations put forward by the Commissioner of Official Languages, which address the sources of the problem. This includes structural investments in our French education continuum to strengthen francophone labour pools. It also includes training for managers, aimed at clarifying the intent of Section 91 of the Official Languages Act, as Official Languages Commissioner Théberge emphasized in his address to this committee a few weeks ago.

In 2024, the approach based on mere compliance must be a practice of the past. What we need now is a values-based approach and a public service that is proud of and able to offer service of equal quality in both of the country's official languages. Managers who capture and embody these values will, we believe, find ways to attract, recruit and develop more bilingual senior public servants.

So I'll stop here. Thank you for your attention and for the opportunity to present our perspective today. I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cassie.

For the first round of questions, each political party will have six minutes for questions and answers.

The Conservative Party always starts first. So it's up to Mr. Dalton, who hails from western Canada, to speak for six minutes.

Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for their comments and statements.

Ms. Hendricks, how are the senior officials of your organization, Farm Credit Canada, distributed across the country? Are they concentrated in Ontario? Are they spread across the country? Do they live in Alberta and Saskatchewan, or elsewhere in Canada? Are they originally from these places?

● (1545)

Ms. Justine Hendricks: Thank you for your question.

You ask how FCC managers and employees are distributed. We have 103 branches across the country, concentrated by region. About half of our 2,500 employees are in Regina, and the rest are spread across Canada. These employees include managers. We've noticed in the past that the strength of employees spread across Canada is mainly in customer service positions. Employees often remain in their communities. You may also be aware that, because FCC focuses on the agriculture and agri-food industry, our branches are often located in rural communities. That's where we find our people.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic also gave us a better understanding of hybrid work. As a result, FCC has been fortunate to offer management positions outside our head office, not just in Regina. In the past, most management positions, beyond those that would have been in the regions, were in Regina. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, the trend has changed a little. It's allowed us to attract bilingual employees, because finding bilingual employees locally had become a challenge.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you.

Is it Treasury Board that gives the directives for language training for public servants? Where do the directives come from?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: We have certain policies at FCC. We also rely on policies from the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages to guide us, so we know how to develop internal processes, organize courses, and evaluate positions. We use the tools provided by the Office of the Commissioner to help us determine whether a position should be bilingual or not.

Mr. Marc Dalton: That's good. I see you seem to be making a great effort.

It's easy to lose your French language skills. Do you offer language training on an ongoing basis? Do you require public servants to take it? How does it work?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: It depends on whether a position is designated as bilingual or not. In terms of training programs offered to employees, we will give priority to those in bilingual positions, especially if the manager in that position needs to improve his or her knowledge of spoken or written French. We can offer courses. It can be an online course. We have dedicated teachers. We also have concentrated training courses in which a person could go and experience French immersion for a few months to accelerate their learning of the language.

We'll then apply various methods, but first and foremost, we start by looking at positions whose incumbents are in contact with customers, especially French-speaking customers. For the past two years, we've been evaluating each position to determine whether or not it should be bilingual. It is at that point that we decide on the recruitment process and the criteria we will consider when taking different candidates into account.

Mr. Marc Dalton: What resources do you use? Are they resources you create yourself or resources you take from the government? Where do you get these resources?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: If I understand correctly, you are talking about resources to support employees.

Mr. Marc Dalton: I'm talking about resources to support employees and for teaching.

Ms. Justine Hendricks: We have a combination of resources. We have some in-house teachers. If we do an immersion program, for example, we have a partnership with external resources. Because FCC is a Crown corporation, we don't use the services of the public service of Canada. We're independent in that respect. We have online resources, in-house teachers, as well as external partnerships, depending on candidates' needs. We also mentioned our participation in the Best Practices Forum on Official Languages. For example, for an employee who suffers from dyslexia, we will instead retain private sector services to support and help them learn the language.

Mr. Marc Dalton: Thank you very much.

Ms. Cassie, is the francophone community in Manitoba growing or has it shrunk over time? How is it doing? I know there's a linguistic heritage in St. Boniface, Beauséjour and all the places where there are francophones. Are we winning the battle?

● (1550)

Ms. Angela Cassie: Thank you for the question.

It's always a battle, but we work very hard to ensure the sustainability of our community. Today's growth is more due to immigration. So that's a very important element for us. We have several bilingual municipalities, as well as a francophone school division, not to mention the Université de Saint-Boniface. So, it's not just a historical community, it's a very vibrant and dynamic community...

The Chair: Please conclude quickly.

Ms. Angela Cassie: ... and I'd like to add that there are a lot of people who are enrolled in immersion programs, which contributes to the vitality of the community.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Koutrakis, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being with us this afternoon. Welcome.

Ms. Hendricks, you mentioned that 75% of your employees were bilingual, if I understood correctly, and that 12.5% were taking second-language courses. What about the remaining 12.5%?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: Thank you for the question.

What I indicated was that 80% of our senior managers are in designated bilingual positions, and of those, 75% meet the bilingual criteria and 12.5% are currently taking courses. These are not all Farm Credit Canada employees. Fourteen per cent of all our positions are designated bilingual.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: What is your organization's plan to give others the opportunity to become bilingual?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: As I mentioned a little earlier, we have an annual budget and we offer several options to employees who wish to learn French as a second language. However, we give priority to incumbents in designated bilingual positions to ensure that we meet these criteria. So, when there's a choice to be made, depending on our organization's capacity, that's what we focus on.

On the other hand, employees can access online resources and have other opportunities to work on their French. We try to inspire employees to improve their language skills. I mentioned the KUDO application earlier. When we hold meetings with the whole organization, we automatically use this app, which allows teams, whether they're made up of bilingual or unilingual participants, to hold the meeting together, at the same time, and get the information in the language they understand best.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Ms. Hendricks and Ms. Cassie, how should the government manage language skills needs in regions where services are primarily received by the linguistic majority? For example, should the same obligations apply in all provinces and regions to the same extent, or should it depend on the needs of each region?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: As you know, my role is not necessarily to offer a perspective or opinion on this. However, I can tell you that, when the organization makes investments and shows an effort, we see an interest on the part of unilingual English-speaking employees to learn French. That's the approach FCC is taking to meet these demands. First and foremost, however, we must ensure that we serve French-speaking communities in all Canadian provinces.

On the other hand, there are tools and approaches we can take. For example, we have two call centres, one in Atlantic Canada and the other in western Canada. We have more French-speaking resources in the Atlantic than in the west, as you can imagine. However, these two centres have joined forces to ensure that all calls from francophones are answered, no matter where in Canada they originate. We therefore adopt such approaches to meet demand and satisfy customer needs.

• (1555)

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Ms. Cassie, do you have something to add?

Ms. Angela Cassie: I would just add that these language rights are fundamental. In our view, no matter where you are, access to federal government services in both official languages is a right. We're working in a very concerted way to count bilingual municipalities and find ways to offer a wider range of services, but this is a question of fundamental rights.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: I imagine the fact that people can now work remotely has helped a lot.

Are you able to share with us some data comparing the situation before the advent of virtual work and now?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: I don't have the exact figures to hand, but we can certainly provide the committee with some data in writing.

I'll provide some context in relation to a situation that everyone has experienced. It used to be a challenge for organizations to see how hybrid working could be as effective as traditional working. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen a new trend: some positions that used to be located only at head office in Regina are now being filled by people who weren't necessarily in Regina. Indeed, today, people who don't necessarily live in Regina can apply and work from another province or city.

Ms. Annie Koutrakis: Thank you very much, Ms. Hendricks.

All the committee members will be happy to see this data, I think.

The Chair: Ms. Hendricks, I would ask you to forward this data to the clerk, who will pass it on to all members of the committee.

Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

I now give the floor for six minutes to Mr. Beaulieu, the Bloc Québécois representative and second vice-chair of the committee.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being here.

Ms. Hendricks, you say that 90% of your senior management positions are bilingual. How many positions are we talking about? Also, how do you define knowledge of French and what level of knowledge do you require?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: I'd like to clarify that it's 80%, not 90%. If I misspoke...

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: No, I misspoke. In fact, it's 80%.

Ms. Justine Hendricks: That is okay.

The senior managers are division heads, and there are nine of them, including myself, as president and CEO.

Could you repeat your second question?

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Being bilingual implies knowledge of French. What level of knowledge do you require? If someone doesn't know French, are you still going to agree to hire them, but ask them to take language training?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: In the last three years, things have changed a bit. Five years ago, the percentage of bilingual people in the senior management team at FCC was much lower.

Accepting a non-bilingual candidate to fill a designated bilingual position would be an exception. At the time of the job offer, we would require or ask the candidate to take French courses. Before granting this exception, however, we would need to have tried to fill the position on at least two occasions. We need to see if the talent really exists outside Regina.

To tie in with your colleague's question, things have changed over the past three years. Previously, these positions were only available in Regina, which sometimes caused several additional challenges.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: You mention Regina because that's where the head office is located, but do you have offices across Canada?

• (1600)

Ms. Justine Hendricks: The FCC head office is located in Regina and has about 1,000 employees—it's probably the largest employer in Regina. The remaining 1,400 employees work in 103 offices across Canada.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I see.

You say that, in general, 14% of positions are bilingual, but 20% of Canada's population is French-speaking. Do you think the number of bilingual positions could be higher?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: As I mentioned, there's still progress to be made. We have a three-year plan.

When I say that 14% of positions are bilingual, I'm talking about designated bilingual positions. These positions are mostly customer service positions.

To give you an idea, Quebec has an 18% market share. In order to have a contingent of employees who can meet the criteria, we have designated positions to ensure that French-speaking customers and stakeholders can access services in French.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: If you really focus your designated bilingual positions on customer service, does that mean the working language is English?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: That's not necessarily the case. As I mentioned, all correspondence from my office is always bilingual, and we use the KUDO application.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It's a kind of software.

Ms. Justine Hendricks: I have a translation team which is very busy.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: It's okay. I know there's software too.

Ms. Justine Hendricks: Yes, my team also uses this software. All communications from senior managers are always in both official languages, and when I organize meetings, they are held in both official languages.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: In Quebec, what is the proportion of bilingual employees?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: I can send the committee the exact figure, but I'd say it's probably over 75%.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Are you talking about positions that require knowledge of English?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: No, I'm talking about knowledge of French.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Great. So 25% of positions are bilingual.

Ms. Justine Hendricks: Yes, but I would like to provide the committee with the exact figures on that.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Would you say that the common language used in your offices in Quebec is French? Representatives of the Public Service Alliance of Canada union told us that, for public servants in Quebec, a lot of work is done in English because there is systemic discrimination that means that everything is done in English first.

Ms. Justine Hendricks: I can tell you that since I've been in this position, which is about a year now, our meetings with clients in offices in Quebec are held in both official languages. I took my board of directors to a meeting in Quebec, with about 100 clients in attendance. Most of the meetings and exchanges take place in French.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Okay.

What about language of work?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: When I work with them—

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I'm not talking about the language used with clients, but the language used between employees.

Ms. Justine Hendricks: We work a lot with clients, and I would say that oral communications are mostly in French. In addition, employees are able to work by communicating in writing in French or English. The common language is French when we're in Quebec.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's good, I hope. I'll wait for your data on that. In any case, it's certainly better than CN or Air Canada, from what I can see.

Do you offer bilingualism bonuses?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: FCC doesn't offer bilingualism bonuses.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Okay.

For the officials—

The Chair: Mr. Beaulieu, I'm sorry to interrupt you.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: My time is up.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Beaulieu.

I was generous with you, Mr. Beaulieu, because I gave Mr. Dalton a little more time. In the interest of fairness, I gave you a little extra time as well.

I now give the floor to Ms. Ashton, from the NDP.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses very much for being here today.

Ms. Cassie, from the Société de la francophonie manitobaine, I'm particularly pleased to see you. Your organization does such important work in Manitoba.

You mentioned that Manitoba's francophone community is growing and that this growth is the result of francophone newcomers from all over the world. As you know, our committee has been heavily involved in studying immigration. It has also been looking at what needs to be brought to the attention of the federal government, federal services, and how we can support French-language services in our communities for everyone, including these newcomers to Canada, who often don't speak English well enough or at all.

Given this context and the particular needs of francophone newcomers to Manitoba, do you think the federal government could do more and invest more to ensure that services are offered in both official languages, whether in housing, health care or employment? I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

• (1605)

Ms. Angela Cassie: First of all, I don't want to celebrate this growth of Manitoba's francophone community too much, because we're still vulnerable, and more and more people are turning to English because of a lack of services in French. This is particularly true for newcomers, who often speak neither English nor French when they arrive. We have an organization, Accueil francophone du Manitoba, which contributes enormously to the reception of francophone immigrants and refugees, as well as all other immigrants. The reception services provided by such francophone organizations help to alert newcomers to the francophone reality here in Manitoba, and many of them end up sending their children to French immersion schools. When newcomers are welcomed in French, it shows them that there are avenues other than English. So we need those services.

There's also a lot of talk about the investments needed in the French-language education continuum to strengthen the francophone labour pool. Francophone day care centres are also extremely important, since workers need access to early childhood services. To truly live in French, it takes investments in arts and culture, justice and health care, among others. It's more than just a transactional exchange at a counter; it's about being able to thrive in French in all facets of our lives.

From time to time, we see that francophone immigrants have trouble getting into certain bilingual positions, or that they don't have enough English to get into positions. As for senior officials, it

takes individuals who understand the language, but who also understand the importance of these programs to help us build these bridges and ensure that these services continue to be offered.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

I'm very glad you raised the issue of the education continuum, which is well known. I've spoken several times about the shortage of francophone education and early childhood workers here in Manitoba. We can't talk about a vision to make our public services more francophone without trying to find solutions so that more young people receive an education in French and become bilingual.

You work with a number of francophone communities outside Winnipeg. Can you tell us what resources the federal government could provide to bilingual municipalities so that they can strengthen their operations in French?

Ms. Angela Cassie: I know that there are a number of programs for bilingual municipalities and that they've expressed their need for services and resources. Again, I'd like to emphasize the importance of investments in education within the departments and public agencies that provide these services.

I applaud Ms. Hendricks's efforts. Models like these, which demonstrate a career-long commitment on the part of a public servant, make it possible to offer more than just customer service and a counter. It ensures that people at all levels of the organization understand not only the language, but also the challenges that communities face. In bilingual municipalities, these challenges can affect a range of services, from those provided by the RCMP to the administration of justice, health care and the post office, just to name a few.

• (1610)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cassie.

We will now move on to the second round of questions.

Mrs. Kusie, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie (Calgary Midnapore, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

My husband is from Manitoba and has Franco-Manitoban roots. He is the grandson of a grandfather from Belgium and a grandmother from France. In addition, our son is enrolled in a French immersion program in Calgary, where we now live, so it's very important for us to preserve the French language in Canada. My mother is francophone.

In your opinion, Ms. Cassie, what is the future of the Francophonie in Manitoba?

Ms. Angela Cassie: Thank you for your question.

I'd also like to thank you for telling us about your Franco-Manitoban roots and connections. This shows the richness of our Francophonie. We can see the future there.

We work very closely with the Franco-Métis community. We're building bridges for reconciliation between francophones and Franco-Métis.

We've developed a community strategic plan that explains our vision for the future and touches on everything from education and early childhood, as already mentioned, to access to justice and health care in French, and, of course, arts and culture.

We want to continue to be able to live in French, and not just in the city of Winnipeg, where we're seeing an increase in the number of immersion programs.

For me, this is really an opportunity to build bridges, to ensure that immersion students don't see French only as a mandatory course, but as a way of feeling that they are part of the Francophonie. Ms. Hendricks talked about linguistic security. Other people like you, Mrs. Kusie, have chosen to send their children to immersion programs. I hope that we won't lose these young people after Grade 10, but that they will continue to get involved in the community, that they will see the richness of the French language as I do, and that they will also fight to assert our language rights. I also hope that one day these rights will no longer have to be asserted because they will be recognized and respected.

The French language is an asset not only in the city of Winnipeg, but also in Beauséjour, Thompson, Saint-Malo and Sainte-Anne. There are a number of francophone communities throughout our beautiful province. In 20 or 30 years, we would like them to continue to identify as bilingual municipalities and for their population to be proud and able to live in French.

Mrs. Stephanie Kusie: Thank you very much, Ms. Cassie. I'm really happy to know that, in both Manitoba and Calgary, many parents choose to send their children to francophone environments.

What do you think are the biggest challenges facing your organization now?

• (1615)

Ms. Angela Cassie: One of these challenges is the sustainability of our community organizations. Many of these organizations rely on project-based funding, but it's very difficult to focus on your main mandates when you're always presenting projects and chasing funding.

Labour is another challenge. There's a lot of competition for francophone talent. Like this committee, which now operates in a hybrid format, people from Manitoba can work anywhere. So our community organizations are in competition with many other organizations, particularly when it comes to salaries. So we need to be able to retain our workforce.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cassie.

Next, for the Liberals, we have Marc Serré for five minutes.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Hendricks and Ms. Cassie, thank you very much for your testimony. It will help us to enrich the study.

Ms. Cassie, as you mentioned, the Commissioner of Official Languages has asked us to undertake a study on the bilingualism of senior officials and on measures that could be taken to stop the de-

cline of French and improve the situation in the country. Clearly, we have a long way to go.

Ms. Hendricks, you said that you have been successful over the past two years, but that before that, the situation wasn't so good. Things were difficult when it came to official languages, with bills on the subject and the support of the federal government.

In terms of recruitment and retention, what do you think the federal government could do to help you and better equip you? You said that recruitment is doing a little better now that you're operating in hybrid mode. Is the work at your head office in Regina done in French or only in English? I know that you can recruit people across the country who are prepared to work in a hybrid manner, but what can be done to improve the bilingualism situation among senior managers?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: I would like to clarify one thing: since we are a Crown corporation, we have a certain amount of independence.

In terms of tools, we drew inspiration from the tools of the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages of Canada. So we use tools that have been developed to determine which executive or other positions must be designated bilingual.

In terms of the job offer, we immediately look at whether candidates are bilingual, even before the interview stage. If the position is designated bilingual, but the candidate's language skills aren't high enough, we'll enter into an agreement or require the candidate to take language courses. We'll support the employee using our own budget so that they can improve their French in the workplace.

You asked me whether there were francophone communities in Regina, and the answer is yes. We've recruited bilingual people. In fact, the person at the head of my translation bureau is bilingual and speaks French very well.

Mr. Marc Serré: I have no doubt that there are francophone communities.

Do you provide interpretation services at meetings at your head office? You mentioned that there were a few meetings.

We're going to hold consultations to determine what constitutes a high concentration of francophones. Are there any changes that need to be made? What constitutes a high concentration of francophones, in your opinion?

Ms. Justine Hendricks: I want to be specific. You asked me if we work in French in Regina. The percentage of people who work in French every day is lower in Regina than in Saint-Hyacinthe because of the greater concentration of employees who aren't bilingual in Regina.

As for our translation services, we have them across the country, but the team is concentrated in Regina. We also have instructors across Canada.

You asked me whether we had interpretation at all meetings. My answer to you is that the possibility is there. The KUDO application is actually quite interesting, because it makes it possible to get interpretation on site when the meeting is held. We already use that app, but we could certainly use it more often. That said, we make sure that employees who wish to discuss and do business in French have access to this application.

• (1620)

Mr. Marc Serré: Ms. Hendricks, thank you for your efforts to improve your organization.

Ms. Cassie, you represent the Société de la francophonie manitobaine, and you strive to promote the vitality of French in the communities. What a wonderful job. Our study doesn't necessarily apply to senior executives in your organization, but do you have any recommendations to improve the situation in federal organizations in Manitoba and to make more room for French there?

Ms. Angela Cassie: We certainly have to continue recruiting to attract bilingual talent. We also need to keep investing in that talent during their public service careers.

I'm going to briefly talk about my own story. I worked in the federal government for 25 years in various capacities. I was able to receive training that helped me grow a great deal in a professional setting.

Very often, people don't seem to be comfortable, because they are linguistically insecure. It would be a good thing to invest to make sure that this training can continue. The Université de Saint-Boniface and the Alliance française du Manitoba offer quality programs that members of the public service could enrol in.

The Chair: That's perfect.

Thank you, Ms. Cassie and Mr. Serré.

Mr. Beaulieu, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Cassie, as we know, French has declined quite significantly. In fact, the percentage of the population who use French as their main language at home has fallen from 4% to 1.3%. In your opinion, does the federal institutional bilingualism system work? Has the system counteracted assimilation?

Ms. Angela Cassie: The reason we wanted to modernize the Official Languages Act was precisely to be better equipped to fight this decline. Now it's time to adopt policies to implement the act. We feel that one of the important things is the federal government should provide services to the community, and that's why we really want to continue talking about these investments.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Would you say that a sufficient number of federal public servants in Manitoba know French?

Ms. Angela Cassie: I don't have the numbers with me.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Can francophones get served in French just about everywhere in Manitoba?

Ms. Angela Cassie: Not everywhere, but it's certainly possible in the departments we work with more frequently. However, people in the Saint-Pierre-Jolys community would say that it's harder to be served in French.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: Often, despite the language requirements for bilingual positions, unilingual anglophones are hired as long as they agree to take French courses. Don't you think we should require knowledge of French before hiring for a position, rather than focusing on training?

The Chair: That's an excellent question, Mr. Beaulieu, but your time is up.

If you want, Ms. Cassie, you can respond in writing to the committee through our clerk.

We now go to Ms. Ashton, with our final questions, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Ms. Cassie, with respect to access to services in French, I'm going to talk a little about the justice system. We know that it's very important that people have access to justice services in French in our province. However, we know that no Manitoba judges are able to hear a case in French, and that's clearly unacceptable. That's not theoretical, it's a reality back home. For us, it's important to address an aspect of Bill C-13 that could better foster bilingualism among judges.

Coming back to Manitoba, we don't have any judges who can hear cases in French. Do you think Franco-Manitobans should have access to adequate legal services in French? Is there a role for the federal government to play in this right now?

• (1625)

Ms. Angela Cassie: Thank you for the question. Yes, absolutely. Access to quality services in French is important, especially for essential services such as justice. We make sure that bilingual lawyers are trained, but we also need bilingual judges, otherwise we could see incredible delays for extremely important cases. Yes, that's something we would need to work on urgently.

The Chair: Ms. Ashton, I'm going to give you a little more time, but before I do, you need to raise the boom on your microphone because it's a little low. I'll give you another 15 seconds.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Regarding incentives to work for the federal government, we heard that increasing bilingualism bonus from \$800 to \$3,000 would play a key role. In your opinion, would a higher bonus help attract and retain candidates in the public service?

The Chair: Thank you for your question, Ms. Ashton. As I told you, time was of the essence.

Ms. Cassie, unfortunately, you have to pay the price.

Ms. Cassie and Ms. Hendricks, I want to thank you. The discussion was excellent and you answered right away. You know your stuff. If there's any other information you wanted to share with us, please feel free to send it to us through our clerk, who will forward it to all our members. Thank you for being part of this. It was really fascinating.

We'll suspend momentarily and go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

The meeting is suspended.

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