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# Standing Committee on Official Languages

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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





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• (1535)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 10 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages.

The committee is meeting on its study of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the government's ability to deliver information in both official languages.

[Translation]

Madam Clerk, are there any alternates, and which participants are in the room?

**The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Josée Ménard):** There are no alternates today, and no participants are in the room.

**The Chair:** Thank you

I have some information for those participating virtually.

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either floor, English or French.

Before speaking, click on the microphone icon to activate the microphone. When you're done speaking, please put your microphone on mute to minimize any interference.

[English]

All comments by members or witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

Should members need to request the floor outside their designated time for questions, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order.

[Translation]

If a member wishes to intervene on a point of order that has been raised by another member, they should use the "raise hand" function. This will signal to the chair that they want to speak. Their name will then be added to a speaker's list. To raise your hand, click on "Participants" at the bottom of the screen. When the list pops up, you'll see next to your name that you can click on the "raise hand" button.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly.

Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the use of headsets with a boom microphone is mandatory for everyone participating remotely.

Should any technical challenges arise, please let me know. Please note that we may need to suspend the meeting for a few minutes, since we must ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

I won't read the information usually addressed to those participating in person, because no one is in the room.

Should you wish to raise a point of order, please activate your microphone, and indicate to me clearly that you wish to raise a point of order.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can maintain the order of speaking for all members.

I also want to inform the committee members that the last five minutes of the meeting will be set aside for the adoption of the committee's budget.

I now want to extend a very warm welcome to our witnesses. For the first hour, we'll be meeting with Raymond Thériège, the Commissioner of Official Languages.

Mr. Thériège, it's our pleasure to welcome you again.

We'll also be meeting with Pierre Leduc, assistant commissioner, policy and communications branch; Ghislaine Saikaley, assistant commissioner, compliance assurance branch; and Pascale Giguère, general counsel, legal affairs branch, at the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages.

Please note that I'll be using a card to let you know that you have one minute left. When I use a red card, it's like in soccer. Your time is up.

Mr. Thériège, you have the floor for seven and a half minutes to give your presentation.

**Mr. Raymond Thériège (Commissioner of Official Languages, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, honourable committee members.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate in the study on the impact of COVID-19 on the government's ability to provide information in both official languages.

Although today's meeting is taking place on a virtual platform, I would like to point out that I'm addressing you from treaty 1 territory, the traditional territory of the Anishinabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene peoples, as well as the homeland of the Métis nation. I'm happy to join you in your different territories and communities.

[English]

**Mr. Terry Duguid (Winnipeg South, Lib.):** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Sorry, Mr. Théberge.

Mr. Duguid, do you have a point of order?

[English]

**Mr. Terry Duguid:** Mr. Chair, my channel is on English and Mr. Théberge's translation is coming through at the same time as he is speaking in French. I think either the interpreters have to do something or he needs to put himself on the French channel.

• (1540)

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Duguid.

I'll ask the clerk to help us fix this technical issue.

**The Clerk:** Mr. Théberge, you probably have an old version of Zoom. If you speak English during your presentation, please switch manually to the English channel.

**Mr. Raymond Théberge:** Okay.

**The Chair:** Please continue, Mr. Théberge.

[English]

**Mr. Raymond Théberge:** As you know, the pandemic has greatly impacted Canadians' lives. This unprecedented health crisis has exposed several shortcomings related to the respect of our official languages and the capacity to communicate equally in French and English.

These shortcomings didn't only happen recently, but also during several other emergency situations over the last decade.

[Translation]

Last April, I spoke to all the deputy ministers and official languages champions of federal institutions. I reminded them of the importance of meeting their obligations for communicating with the public and with their employees in both official languages at all times. This is essential to protect the health and safety of all Canadians.

[English]

Since the beginning of the pandemic, my office has received more than 100 complaints related to the crisis and 84 of them have been found admissible and are currently under investigation.

I also felt it was essential to better understand the problems faced by the public and to make specific recommendations for the federal government to address the gaps in communications with the public.

[Translation]

At the end of October, I published my report entitled "A Matter of Respect and Safety: The Impact of Emergency Situations on Official Languages."

Some of the most striking examples that I've seen since the start of the pandemic include press conferences in a single official language; disinfectants labelled in a single official language; and briefing materials and alert emails sent to federal officials in a single official language.

[English]

My report also mentions unilingual alert messaging incidents that have occurred in previous crises such as amber or weather alerts.

Unfortunately, there are too many examples. One thing is clear: in addition to being a huge lack of respect, these deficiencies are completely unacceptable because they endanger the health and safety of the population in an emergency.

The 2,000 or so respondents to the questionnaire launched by my office last June were clear and precise: during an emergency, relevant information should be systematically provided by our leaders in both official languages, regardless of the level of government.

[Translation]

Some of the testimonies speak for themselves. Here are some examples.

One person expressed concern that measures regarding official bilingualism were quickly being called into question in emergencies. According to this person, whether the issue is labelling on disinfectant bottles or notifications from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or RCMP, regarding dangerous situations, speed takes precedence over accessibility for Canadians in official language minority communities.

• (1545)

[English]

Another respondent told us that in a crisis, it was necessary for him to obtain communications in the language of his choice. He told us that in a state of stress, fatigue and crisis, it was quite possible that his capacity to understand a second language was weak, and that he might miss information that put his life at risk.

There will certainly be other emergency situations, but the problems of that witness must not be repeated. In my report, I propose solutions to the federal government to address the recurring problems of communicating with the public in both official languages in emergency situations. I find that in emergency situations, many federal institutions choose to provide a response immediately in only one official language and rely on translation to provide information in the other language. While I understand the need to communicate quickly in an emergency, it should never be at the expense of any of our official languages.

[Translation]

I therefore recommended that the government implement an action plan to facilitate the drafting and simultaneous delivery of emergency communications of equal quality in both official languages. This could include the establishment of an accelerated translation service for emergencies and crisis situations.

Another issue is that communications aren't integrated into the emergency preparedness and crisis management planning of institutions. Timely, clear and factual information isn't routinely provided in both English and French at the same time.

[English]

Formal plans and procedures should be amended to include clear directives to ensure that communications of equal quality are issued in both official languages simultaneously in emergency situations.

[Translation]

All managers and public servants involved in emergency or crisis communications should be trained to implement emergency communications plans and guidelines in both official languages.

Canadians expect to receive bilingual communications from their leaders in emergencies. These communications may come from all levels of government.

I therefore recommended that the federal government develop a strategy to encourage and support the various levels of government and to work with them to integrate both official languages into communications in emergency or crisis situations.

[English]

I believe that with this report, federal institutions now have the tools to address gaps when it comes to communications in both official languages in emergency situations. I urge them to implement in the coming months the measures I propose in order to make concrete progress in communications in both official languages.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Mr. Thériault, sorry, but you have 30 seconds left. Actually, your time is up. You've given your presentation, and my colleagues have read it. You'll have the opportunity to speak again during the question period.

I now want to give the committee members the opportunity to ask questions. Each member will have six minutes. Mr. Gagné will ask the first question.

Mr. Gagné, you have the floor.

**Mr. Bernard Gagné (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Thériault, it's always a pleasure to welcome you to our committee. In April, you said that you contacted the official languages champions of all departments along with the deputy ministers.

Does this mean that they didn't listen to you?

• (1550)

**Mr. Raymond Thériault:** At first, we noted obvious shortcomings in a number of situations involving press conferences and

communications. However, after we took action, there were some improvements. Remember that our report not only addresses the COVID-19 pandemic, but also emergencies in general.

Clearly, in emergencies, the government isn't equipped to meet the information needs of Canadians in both official languages.

**Mr. Bernard Gagné:** Sorry, I'll stop you right there.

In recent weeks, we've met with witnesses, including Stéphanie Chouinard from Queen's University in Kingston. She literally called into question the automatic response of the government, regardless of the party in power, which seems to consider official languages a nuisance rather than a reality or an obligation. Quite frankly, I just about fell off my chair when she said that. If the government operates in this manner, no wonder it's so difficult to comply with the Official Languages Act.

I'll tie this in with the modernization of the Official Languages Act. Should we make sure that the new act includes parameters for emergencies in Canada?

**Mr. Raymond Thériault:** The preamble to a modernized act, for example, could certainly specify the circumstances in which the act applies. Right now, the Official Languages Act doesn't apply to labelling. A labelling act focuses on private businesses.

I have something to say about the automatic response issue. In my presentation, I was about to say that the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages celebrated its 50th anniversary and that, over those years, we've recorded 56,000 admissible complaints. In my opinion, this shows that we're still having a great deal of difficulty ensuring that federal institutions meet their obligations.

**Mr. Bernard Gagné:** I'm troubled to hear that.

You said that you've received about 100 complaints since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that 84 of these complaints were being investigated. How are these complaints related to each other?

Is the issue still the safety of Canadians, or is it government communications?

**Mr. Raymond Thériault:** The complaints certainly focus a great deal on government communications. They also relate to the language of work of public service employees. For example, some people complain about emails or directives sent in only one official language.

During the pandemic, we saw an increase in the number of complaints from workplaces. Remember that there's a very strong link between the language of work and the language of service delivery. There must be consistency between part IV and part V of the Official Languages Act.

**Mr. Bernard Généreux:** I try to look at the past and think that we can do better in the future. What can we include in the new legislation that would prevent what we just went through from happening again? We were hoping that this bill would be introduced before Christmas, which won't be the case. We're talking about a white paper, and we no longer know when it will be tabled.

This time, the issue is a pandemic. However, it could be an earthquake that hits the entire country or a tsunami—although that would be surprising. In short, you understand that there could be a national emergency other than a pandemic. In this case, we've had some real issues in terms of government communications, given the lack of an automatic response when it comes to official languages.

How can this type of automatic response be included in the act? Do you think that it's possible?

• (1555)

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** In this new legislation—which we're still waiting for—there must be consistency between the different parts.

Moreover, some parts of the act don't contain any regulations governing them, such as part V, which relates to the language of work, and part VII, which relates to community development. Without regulations, it's much more difficult to clarify expectations and objectives.

A modern act should apply in all cases. One way to ensure this is to include provisions in the preamble, for example, or to set out recommendations.

It will also be necessary to think about ways to give more teeth to the act.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Thériège.

Thank you, Mr. Généreux.

Mr. Arseneault, you now have the floor.

**Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Thériège. It's always a pleasure to welcome you to our committee.

I'll refer to the report that you wrote regarding the lack of communication in both official languages during the pandemic. You made three recommendations. It would take too long to address them one by one. I have only six minutes, and our chair is extremely strict about time.

I think that the third recommendation raises many issues in terms of enforceability. You're asking that the federal government, which has a great deal of expertise in official languages, develop a strategy to encourage and support the different levels of government. This means the provinces or maybe the municipalities.

You received complaints. Whether the communications concern forest fires, a pandemic, health or anything else, we must be able to understand them in our mother tongue. It's the language that we automatically favour.

What do you think of the federal government's encouragement towards the other levels of government?

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** I'll provide a concrete example.

The national public alerting system is an initiative involving federal, provincial and territorial stakeholders, along with all emergency measures organizations. In this context, a forum is useful. By the way, the forum created in this area will likely be introduced soon. This forum will facilitate discussions between the provinces, territories and federal government.

We need to know how the federal government can use its expertise to ensure that alerts—such as Amber Alerts, forest fire warnings or alerts related to climate emergencies—are provided in both official languages.

Some progress is already being made. A test of the alert system took place last week. We noted that the alert was provided in both official languages, except in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

However, all stakeholders must work together. The system is extremely complex. I should add that it isn't just up to the federal government to address this situation. The provinces, territories and emergency measures organizations must also play a role, not to mention private sector providers.

The issue affects all Canadians. Keep in mind that an alert provided in both official languages will be understood by 98% of Canadians.

**Mr. René Arseneault:** Amber alerts are a good example. As you may recall, last year, in Gatineau, we received a tornado alert in both official languages on our cell phones.

Do you think that the provinces and territories are open to the idea of working with the federal government, as encouraged?

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** The governments must be committed to ensuring the safety of Canadians. I would hope that, with the right level of co-operation, safety could be ensured.

The official languages issue isn't just a federal government matter. It concerns all Canadians.

**Mr. René Arseneault:** Your recommendation sparked this entire conversation.

You also said that the different levels of government should be encouraged and supported. What exactly do you mean by “supported”?

• (1600)

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** Let me give you a very basic example.

During the pandemic, the Translation Bureau developed a very specialized lexicon for COVID-19. We can certainly consider making this expertise available to other provinces and territories. I know that the Translation Bureau wants to help create some type of specialized unit with a mandate to facilitate a timely response to emergencies.

**Mr. René Arseneault:** The idea is to share with the provinces the expertise that the federal government may have acquired with respect to alerts, regardless of the nature of the emergency. The expertise could be related to the pandemic or to forest fires, for example. Is that right?

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** That's right.

**Mr. René Arseneault:** In this pandemic situation, I find it fascinating that the chief medical officers of Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick speak in both official languages. I'm also thinking of Mr. Kenney, the premier of Alberta. He has certain skills, including the ability to speak fluent French. However, these people come and go. They're exceptions in the history of these provinces.

What do you think about the fact that, during a pandemic, public health authorities are given this obligation, or "burden"—since it's often a burden—to provide guidelines?

The emergency situation calls for action. There may not be enough time to get everything translated.

In your opinion, how can we make people understand that everyone needs information in both official languages at the provincial level?

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** You made a good point. Some provinces and territories have tried to better meet the needs of Canadians in terms of communications in both official languages.

At the ministerial conference on the Canadian francophonie, Minister Joly clearly stated that this isn't the time to provide fewer services. Instead, it's the time to provide more services. For a number of years, we've seen an increase in services and in the creation of policies and different units in several provinces.

However, certain items must be prioritized, such as emergencies that require a response. This calls for strong leadership. It's necessary to ensure that all Canadians can receive the information. All the experts will tell you that communication is the most important thing in an emergency.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Thériège.

Your input is extremely important. However, I have the difficult job of managing the timer. You can address this issue a little later.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for six minutes.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ):** Good afternoon, Mr. Thériège. Thank you for your presentation.

Could you sum up the situation in Quebec?

Have you received any complaints, or have things been running fairly smoothly during the pandemic?

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** One complaint emerged from our study. It involved a French pamphlet sent out to the English-speaking community.

In Quebec, alerts are always sent out in both official languages. They're never an issue.

The issue where we received the most feedback involved a French pamphlet sent out to the English-speaking community.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** However, people can receive information in English upon request. I know that, in my constituency, the same situation occurred. We need to look at the Charter of the French Language. When it comes to safety, things may be different. However, usually mass mailings are in French, and they can be in English upon request. In my constituency, a gentleman asked to receive information in English, and he received it.

Have people told you that they asked for information in English and didn't receive it?

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** I don't have this type of detailed information. All I know is that they received a pamphlet in French.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** Other than that, have there been any issues? Have the press conferences, for example, been bilingual?

• (1605)

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** Premier Legault always wraps up his remarks by providing information in English. We haven't received any complaints in this area.

In any event, these complaints aren't admissible for the purposes of the Office of the Commissioner's study. We wanted to see how things were running at the national level, whether we're talking about New Brunswick or Ontario. We wanted to see the big picture. Our recommendations concern the federal government, not the provinces.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** That's right.

In short, basically, things have been running smoothly in Quebec. Is that right?

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** According to my information, we haven't received many complaints, except with regard to the pamphlet.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** I have another comment. In the regions designated bilingual, the reflex is to disregard French. Is that due to the fact that, even though a lot of people are in bilingual positions formally, they took French training only once and do not actually use their French skills? Alternatively, is it due to the fact that the language of work tends to be English, and so it's difficult to work in French?

What do you attribute those challenges to?

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** The Mendelsohn-Borbey report on the language of work in the public service was released in 2017. It shows that public servants' language of work is commonly English and that, very often, French is treated as a language of translation. Certainly, that's a contributing factor, and the problem is exacerbated in emergency or crisis situations.

According to the employee satisfaction survey, 91% to 92% of English-speaking public servants report being able to work in the language of their choice, versus 62% to 63% of French-speaking public servants. That speaks to a certain culture within the public service, which the Mendelsohn-Borbey report noted. It sets out recommendations to address that.

Modernizing the Official Languages Act provides an opportunity to clearly define the language of work issue, as well as everything connected to it, so that both official languages are respected.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** Perhaps something more problematic still is when employees who work in regions designated bilingual have to communicate with employees in regions that aren't. In that case, it's not exactly easy to work in the language of their choice, would you not agree?

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** In the current context, with people working virtually, that kind of thing is going to happen more and more, regardless of the region.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** Would it help the situation if the requirements for positions designated as bilingual were a bit more stringent?

I'm not sure how true this is, but I was told that some people who are not bilingual are hired on the condition that they take French training. While they sometimes do take the training, they never use their French skills and, therefore, aren't able to work in French.

**The Chair:** Mr. Th  berge, you have 10 seconds to answer. Thank you.

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** I'll revisit the topic later, when I discuss section 91 of the act and the application of language requirements to a specific position, which really contributes to the situation you described.

**The Chair:** Thank you for your co-operation, Mr. Th  berge.

Ms. Ashton, it is your turn. You have six minutes.

**Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Commissioner, for being with us.

My question has to do with comments you made the last time you were here. I asked you about the impact of modernizing the Official Languages Act on government communications in emergency situations.

I know that you already talked about it and that you will be repeating yourself today, but I want to be sure your recommendation ends up in the committee's report.

Do you think there is an urgent need to modernize the Official Languages Act?

• (1610)

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** Certainly, the act needs to be modernized. Last year, we put out a position paper on that very subject. Parliamentary committees and stakeholders have done the work. We are at a point where we have to modernize the act to make it more current, more robust, more relevant and more powerful than it is now. It's 50 years old. The world has changed a lot in 50 years.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Thank you.

You said several parts of the act were not covered by regulations; you mentioned parts V and VII. Does that mean every previous government has fallen short in applying the act or in failing to bring in regulations?

Could the government have acted quickly to remedy the problem by making regulations during the crisis?

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** The government can always develop regulations. I don't think any government has necessarily made changes to the act in the past, other than in 1988. Today, the act needs more than regulations; it needs structural changes. Regulations can apply only to parts of the act that already exist. If they don't exist, they can't be amended. A complete modernization means a review of the act in its entirety.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** You said you had received hundreds of complaints. Is there reason to believe that all of them pertain to poor communications in French?

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** The vast majority of the complaints concern problems with French-language communications. As I said a moment ago, French is very often treated as a language of translation. Consequently, authorities are neither equipped nor prepared to communicate in both official languages in an emergency.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Everyone can see that, but I just wanted to make sure it was stated clearly. There is an imbalance between English and French, and the complaints pertain to the absence of French.

How do we fix that, do you think?

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** Part VII of the act deals with the development and vitality of communities, so it really needs to be strengthened to enhance the vitality of communities and give them the tools they need.

Whether it's part IV or part V of the act, measures have to be taken to ensure people can truly work in the language of their choice. Currently, part V is not covered by any regulations, but that is where the focus has to be in order to provide quality service and communicate in both official languages. Part V is the key to making sure the internal capacity to do that exists.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Another factor, I think, is that the bilingual bonus for public servant has not changed for quite some time.

Should the government do more to encourage public servants to become bilingual?



**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** That's a question that comes up a lot. I am not so sure that the bonus is an effective way to encourage bilingualism, but I know the subject is being discussed right now.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** I want to come back to the modernization of the Official Languages Act.

How could a modernized act ensure that the government's communications with the public were of equal quality in both English and French?

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** That would be possible if legislation or regulations were brought in to address the active offer or the areas covered by the act. For example, labelling—something we're hearing a lot about these days—is not subject to the Official Languages Act. A much stronger part V and many more regulations would provide access to a greater number of tools. It might also lead to a change in culture, which would, in turn, make that reflex mentioned earlier much more automatic.

**The Chair:** Ms. Ashton, you have 30 seconds left.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Quickly, I'd like to know whether you were consulted on the white paper announced by the minister.

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** No, I wasn't.

• (1615)

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Ashton.

Thank you, Mr. Th  berge.

[English]

We'll begin the second round now with Mr. Dalton, for five minutes.

[Translation]

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

Thank you, Mr. Th  berge, for your opening statement.

Last week, a witness told us that the Official Languages Act should be seen as a tool, not a barrier. That was their take when it came to the emergency situation caused by the pandemic. If I'm not mistaken, you would agree.

I had a conversation recently with members of an organization representing francophones and francophiles here, in British Columbia. I found out that it took them twice as long to receive services from Service Canada than members of the English-speaking community. That really worries me. They had to wait eight weeks to receive service in French, as opposed to the four weeks English speakers have to wait.

Do you find that acceptable?

Do you have any comments on the matter?

I am talking specifically about Service Canada, a very significant government organization that delivers employment and all kinds of other services to Canadians.

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** The basic principle where official languages are concerned is substantive quality. Everyone should be

able to receive service in the language of their choice, and the quality of that service should be the same in both languages. If you are saying there is a difference of four weeks between the service provided to one group and the service provided to another, obviously, that's not substantive equality.

We do not even come close to adhering to the principle of substantive equality of official languages. That's one of the challenges we are confronted with right now. Substantive equality is one of the act's objectives, but it is not respected in many situations, as we are seeing.

**Mr. Marc Dalton:** Here, in British Columbia, francophones and francophiles received better service from the province than from the federal government. It was necessary to have provincial information about COVID-19 translated into French. Officially, the province is unilingual. I must say, I was quite surprised that that was necessary.

I know British Columbia is not the only province in that boat. You said that communicating in only one language—as was done in English—was disrespectful, possibly dangerous and unbelievable. Saying the right things and claiming support for both official languages are one thing, but walking the talk is another.

This is not the first time we've had to deal with an emergency, perhaps on a more local level.

Why were we not adequately prepared to respond in the emergency created by the pandemic? How did we get here?

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** Looking back at emergency events in the past decade, we see that federal institutions do not have the necessary infrastructure to offer those services in both official languages and to respond quickly in the face of the emergency.

For instance, we don't necessarily have the people with those skills in place. We don't have the capacity. Official languages aren't necessarily a consideration in the planning phase. We are realizing that much of what federal institutions do to address official languages is informal. It's not documented and it's not part of the process.

One of my recommendations when it comes to communications by federal institutions is to start building that capacity today. We know that there will be more emergencies and that we obviously won't know when until they happen. For that reason, we should immediately start equipping communications divisions with that capacity across all federal institutions that will play a part in the response.

• (1620)

**Mr. Marc Dalton:** In fact, you said in your report that many federal institutions have no formal guidelines for communications with the public or with employees during emergencies.

Would you mind elaborating on that?

**The Chair:** Mr. Dalton, you're out of time. You can follow up on your question in the next round.

Sorry to cut you off, Mr. Th  berge.

Ms. Lattanzio, it is your turn for five minutes.

**Ms. Patricia Lattanzio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Thériège, thank you for being with us again today.

[English]

I want to ask a specific question with regard to the situation in Quebec. My colleague said it went relatively well. You said you had received only one complaint with regard to the flyer that was received in French, and then it was immediately corrected.

Does that exclude the fact that the minority English community in Quebec still faces obstacles when it comes to the delivery of services in health? Just because one does not launch a complaint, does not necessarily mean there are not, like they say in French, *des lacunes*, gaps.

I'd like to hear your comments on that.

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** I'd like to clarify one point. When we talk about the flyer that was sent out in French, a number of people raised that issue. It wasn't just one person. It was the most significant situation that was highlighted by the English-speaking community of Quebec.

I think when it comes to health, information should be provided in both official languages. Health, as you know, is a provincial jurisdiction. I'm not going to go into all the debate around provincial and federal jurisdiction, but I think it's important for all citizens, when they're in situations of vulnerability, to be able to understand the information provided in their first language. I think it's a question of respect, and I mentioned that, but it's also a question of security. If you're looking at some medication and you can't read the label, it could be very dangerous.

Also, I do think that at a very human level we should look to communicate, because often when you're in a health situation you're stressed out and it's a crisis. I get confused in my second language if I get stressed. I think it's very important to keep as a fundamental rule that it's a question of respect.

**Ms. Patricia Lattanzio:** Okay. I totally get that. I enjoyed reading your report, and I agree with you.

I'm going to take you now to section 7 of the Official Languages Act. I know we spoke a lot about section 5.

We know the Government of Canada has committed a total of \$22.5 million to the health sector over five years to improve access to services in the official-language minority, OLM, communities to support existing health networks and communities on the ground. How does this work with the existing supports from provincial jurisdictions, and more importantly, do the provinces have the proper structures to support the OLM communities?

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** This is part of the action plan, so we are looking at the implementation of the action plan. We're working with various stakeholders in various provinces to see how the program is rolling out, whether it's having the impact we're hoping it will have on the official-language minority community, whether it's in Quebec or Manitoba or whatever the case may be.

I think it's a bit early to say whether or not it's working. However, we do have a lot of high expectations when it comes to the action plan, because it is one of the significant investments we are making in OLM communities. We are looking at that, and we will be talking to various stakeholders to see how it's rolling out.

[Translation]

**Ms. Patricia Lattanzio:** My next question has to do with the asymmetry that exists in official languages. A report came out recently; a study was done on the asymmetry vis-à-vis the right to receive service in both official languages.

Mr. Thériège, first, can you comment on the enforcement of and compliance with language laws in the health care field around the country?

Second, is it safe to say the pandemic highlighted the asymmetries in service availability and in the various provincial laws and policies?

• (1625)

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** That's an extremely broad question. I'll try not to step out of my lane.

The act, in its current form, provides for symmetry. In a number of provinces, however, asymmetrical arrangements happen on the ground.

Whether in health care or another field, transparency and accountability with respect to government investments are extremely important issues that ought to be studied.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Thériège.

It is now over to Mr. Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** I'm going to pick up where we left off earlier, the designation of bilingual positions.

What can we do to strengthen the language requirements for positions designated as bilingual, the idea being to improve things?

**Mr. Raymond Thériège:** We recently released a report on section 91 of the act, the section under which language requirements for positions are determined. Those requirements must be established objectively, but very often, that isn't the case.

We even provided the Treasury Board Secretariat with a tool that would help classify positions properly. Underestimating the language requirements of a position can result in the inability to provide services. It is therefore extremely important to adhere to section 91 and objectively assess language requirements.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** The Official Languages Act is 52 years old. In your report, you sound the alarm. You say that French is treated as a language of translation and that there is often a perception that little progress has been made. French is in dramatic decline in the rest of Canada, but also in Quebec.

Isn't it time to question the blueprint for linguistic development behind the Official Languages Act? Obviously, the assimilation of francophones is continuing. It has even gotten significantly worse since the Official Languages Act was introduced, so much so that obtaining services in French in an emergency is very difficult.

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** Part of the answer lies in asking where things would be if the Official Languages Act did not exist. I am a Franco-Manitoban, and I can assure you that the Official Languages Act has done a lot for our development. I don't want to think about what would have happened had we not had the act.

However, does the act, as it currently stands, provide the tools and mechanisms needed to support the continued development and vitality of our communities? That is a question that deserves serious consideration.

In the throne speech, the government mentioned the unique reality of French, so I think that consideration and reflection will inevitably happen.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Th  berge.

The last question goes to Ms. Ashton.

As you all know, we have another panel of witnesses, and we have to suspend momentarily for a sound test.

Ms. Ashton, you may go ahead for two and a half minutes.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Commissioner, you said you were not consulted on the white paper. That shows the government developed the white paper behind closed doors, without consulting anyone, and that it is not taking the work seriously. You also said that modernizing the act was the key and that bringing in new regulations would not be enough. The committee discussed the modernization of the act. Witnesses at our last meeting told us that such a study should have been mandatory in order to put together a bill.

Do you agree that the next step should have been studying the modernization of the act, not developing a white paper behind closed doors?

• (1630)

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** As I mentioned earlier, parliamentary committees and our office have already done that work. A lot of input has been collected and a lot of stakeholders have been consulted. We have all the tools we need to modernize the act. We are still pushing for a modernization of the act in 2021. It is urgently needed, but like everyone else, we are waiting to see what the government will lay out in terms of next steps.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Thank you, Commissioner.

You said it was urgently needed. Your report on what happened during the crisis shows that official languages can be a matter of life and death, if you will.

If the act isn't modernized before this session of Parliament ends, would you consider that a failure?

**Mr. Raymond Th  berge:** On one hand, I'm disappointed that a genuine effort to modernize the act has not been undertaken, but on the other, I have no choice but to be optimistic. My hope is that we will see some progress and that the government will introduce a bill this session, one that addresses communities' needs and the new realities of our linguistic landscape.

**The Chair:** Ms. Ashton, you have just 10 seconds remaining. I'm going to stop you there.

Mr. Th  berge, we greatly appreciate your being with us today. We are always delighted to have you. I also want to thank the officials who joined you, Pierre Leduc, assistant commissioner of the policy and communications branch, Ghislaine Saikaley, assistant commissioner of the compliance assurance branch, and Pascale Gigu  re, general counsel in the legal affairs branch. It was a pleasure to have you all, and I hope we'll have an opportunity to see you again next year. Thank you everyone.

I will now suspend the meeting momentarily so the witnesses from the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages can take their leave and the second panel of witnesses can join us.

• (1635)

The committee is meeting today to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the government's ability to deliver information in both official languages.

[English]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike.

As a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[Translation]

Interpretation in this video conference will work very much like in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either floor, English or French. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly, and when you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

I would now like to extend a very warm welcome to our witnesses, who will start things off with opening remarks. They will each have seven and a half minutes, followed by rounds of questions.

I want to let you know that I use a card to signal that you have a minute left and a red card to signal that you are out of time. I have the difficult job of interrupting you when you are speaking.

Joining us, we have Linda Lauzon, executive director of the Association de la presse francophone, Fatiha Gatre Guemiri, executive director of the East Island Network for English Language Services, and Jennifer Johnson, executive director of the Community Health and Social Services Network. From the Public Service Commission, we have Patrick Borbey, president, and Susan Dubreuil, acting director general of the personnel psychology centre.

Ms. Lauzon, you have seven and a half minutes for your opening statement. You may take it away.

• (1640)

**The Clerk:** We can't hear you, Ms. Lauzon.

**The Chair:** Ms. Lauzon, I'm going to give you a chance to get sorted out with the help of the technicians. We'll come back to your opening statement afterwards.

[English]

Madame Guemiri, the floor is yours.

[Translation]

Take it away.

**Ms. Fatiha Gatre Guemiri (Executive Director, East Island Network for English Language Services):** Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

Mr. Chair, I'll only be using a minute and a half of my time. I want my colleague Ms. Johnson to have the other six minutes.

I will start with a bit of background on the East Island Network for English Language Services, or REISA. Our office is located in Montreal's east end. We are a network of community partners that works to increase access to English-language health and social services in the east and north of Montreal. I sent a map to the committee, but I don't know whether it was handed out to everyone. We cover nearly two-thirds of the island of Montreal. We serve an English-speaking population of nearly 164,000, in an area that stretches from Saint-Laurent up to Pointe-aux-Trembles and down to Hochelaga. I'm pleased to see members of the committee who represent four ridings in the area served by REISA.

Now I will turn to today's topic, information in English. The situation in Quebec is unique. We look for all the information on federal government sites. During the pandemic, we looked on MPs' Facebook pages because the information was posted in both official languages. They know we follow them, and that gives us some satisfaction.

I will now ask Ms. Johnson to take over; she will provide an overview regarding access to English-language information. She is here on behalf of the Community Health and Social Services Network, or CHSSN, which represents 26 networks across Quebec.

[English]

**Ms. Jennifer Johnson (Executive Director, Community Health and Social Services Network):** Thank you very much. It's a pleasure for me to be here today.

As Fatiha said, I represent the English-speaking provincial organization called the Community Health and Social Services Network. I'm going to give you a portrait with a lens on health and so-

cial services in the English-speaking community in Quebec, a community-based response to the COVID pandemic, the use of federal information and the importance of that information for the community.

As Fatiha mentioned, there is a network of organizations across the province. I gave a map to you prior to this meeting. I hope you had a chance to look at it. It gives you really interesting information about population size and proportion. We have over a million English speakers in Quebec and they're distributed all across the province. Each one is very different.

Health Canada has been supporting these networks since 2004 to improve their capacity to improve access to English-language health and social services. I can tell you that the work that we've been doing since 2014 was a critical element for these organizations to be prepared for a crisis situation, which we experienced with COVID-19. The community became a lifeline for the English-speaking populations in terms of finding and getting the information they needed.

I surveyed all 25 of our networks and 100% of them used information coming from the Government of Canada website. Of them, 56% of them used it on a regular basis, 44% used it occasionally and 89% said it was easy to find. The other ways that they found information from the Government of Canada was through partners who would refer them. Fatiha mentioned that members of Parliament themselves and their Facebook pages were critical resources.

These community organizations then used this information and distributed it to the English-speaking community through newsletters, Facebook pages, newspapers and websites. In some instances where they had very vulnerable populations, they actually hired professionals to help, for example, people on the Magdalen Islands who are English speakers, very unilingual English speakers, navigate the compensation information coming from the federal government. These organizations were a critical element in ensuring that the English-speaking community members got the information they needed that the government was providing.

I'll give you a quote. One of our networks based in the Outaouais surveyed its English-speaking community members about which resources they went to for information. Of those surveyed, 42% went to the Canada.ca website for information versus the 25% who went to Quebec.ca for information.

The federal government is still playing a really important role in making sure that the English-speaking community in Quebec gets the critical information it needs during a crisis.

As I imagine you've heard multiple times, the linguistic barrier becomes a really pivotal problem in a crisis situation. I think that the information that we were able to get from the federal government really complemented what the Quebec government was doing to ensure that the English-speaking community got information.

I think my time is close to wrapping up, so I'll stop there.

• (1645)

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Ms. Johnson.

[Translation]

I'm not sure whether Ms. Lauzon, of the Association de la presse francophone, is with us again.

Ms. Lauzon, are you ready to give your opening statement?

**Ms. Linda Lauzon (Director General, Association de la presse francophone):** Good afternoon. Yes, I'm ready.

**The Chair:** Ms. Lauzon, you have seven and a half minutes.

**Ms. Linda Lauzon:** Mr. Chair, members of the committee, thank you for having us today.

[English]

I'm here before you this afternoon as the executive director of l'Association de la presse francophone but also as an authorized representative of the Official Language Community Media Consortium, which represents 105 community minority radios and newspapers. The consortium brings together members of l'Association de la presse francophone, which represents minority francophone community newspapers of Canada; l'Alliance des radios communautaires, which represents the minority francophone community radios of Canada; the Quebec Community Newspapers Association, which represents the minority anglophone community newspapers of Quebec; and the English Language Arts Network, which represents the minority anglophone community radios of Quebec.

Since the summer of 2016, we have pooled our expertise, our experience and the strengths of our respective networks. Now all four organizations work hand in hand and speak with one voice for our sector.

[Translation]

What is an official language minority community media organization? Since there are so many new committee members, I think it's important to explain what separates an official language minority community media organization from mass media and other media organizations. An official language minority community media organization is considered an essential service since it is often a community's only source of local news in its official language.

Its role as an essential service provider has been vital throughout the pandemic, reflecting the minority community and giving it a voice. Very often, minority communities are isolated, whether in rural or urban areas. An official language minority community media organization is a tool for community development and cohesion, while helping to build an official language minority community's sense of identity and contributing to its vitality. It also provides a space to share ideas and information. I want to reiterate, communities have used that space to the fullest extent during the pandemic. Finally, an official language minority community media organiza-

tion is an indicator of an official language minority community's vitality, one that government authorities refer to often.

Now I will turn to the essential role official language minority community media organizations play: keeping the community informed throughout the pandemic. As you no doubt know, the federal government has made numerous cuts to what it spends on advertising in traditional media. We therefore applaud the government on the measures it recently announced, which are meant to be a step in the right direction.

The cuts hit official language minority community media doubly hard, given that the critical mass of potential advertisers for the vast majority of our radio stations and newspapers represents a tiny fraction of the advertising pool in other media.

As the Commissioner of Official Languages pointed out in his June 2018 decision, further to a complaint made by our organizations, the federal government did not see fit to assess the impact of its decisions on our media organizations before making the cuts. Since the commissioner's decision in 2018, Public Services and Procurement Canada has not made any changes to remedy the situation.

Although I could give you a list of examples, I will focus on the federal government's advertising campaign to raise awareness about the COVID-19 pandemic. The \$30-million campaign was announced in April 2020. Our organizations received an average of \$1,500 each for the purchase of federal advertising space; that amounts to 0.5% of the ad campaign budget. That's a hard pill to swallow.

We found out that the public broadcaster's share of the ad campaign spending to combat the spread of COVID-19 was several million dollars. Keep in mind that the public broadcaster already receives more than a billion dollars in government funding annually. That means the responsibility to inform and educate official language minority communities—something all of our community media do—fell on our shoulders. Public broadcasters in the regions did not step up and assume the role. They got the real money, and we got mere crumbs.

Beyond the ongoing unfairness in how federal advertising dollars are distributed, the pandemic has had a major impact on the already strained ability of community newspapers and radio stations to inform their target audiences.

It goes without saying that local news has played an instrumental role throughout the pandemic, and the demand is constantly growing, now more than ever. Indeed, since the spring, our website and social media traffic as well as our audience shares have gone up 35% to 55%, depending on the region.

• (1650)

People looked to their community media organizations. That is a clear testament to the relevance and value of the local news coverage provided by our media organizations during the pandemic.

Thanks to a number of assistance programs and stopgap emergency measures put in place by the government, our community media organizations—which, first and foremost, are organizations close to home, as you know—have continued to follow, relay and explain the considerable information put out daily by the federal government, as well as provincial, territorial and municipal governments.

I should mention that the emergency measures the federal government has introduced since the spring have helped to soften the impact of the crisis on our media organizations and their ability to inform official language minority communities. A number of media organizations in official language minority communities were able to access support through the measures and thus fulfill their roles as essential service providers. The measures helped. They made our outreach possible.

Like everyone, we face an uncertain future. How long the pandemic and the ensuing recovery period will last is even more uncertain. The emergency support measures are drawing to a close, but our media organizations want and need to continue providing this essential service to their communities. Without the resources, however, they can't, and the meagre \$1,500 they received will not do it.

I want to address the local journalism initiative, which has been instrumental. Thanks to the program, we maintained a presence in communities and created high-quality civic journalism throughout the pandemic. However, 105 local media organizations have to share just \$900,000 in funding a year. That's \$8,500 per organization per year. The program has proven to be excellent, but the funding is not in line with the demand. It is essential that the government boost program funding in order to help us.

• (1655)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Lauzon. We are coming to better understand the association's role.

We will now go to Patrick Borbey, from the Public Service Commission.

**Mr. Patrick Borbey (President, Public Service Commission):** Mr. Chair, thank you for inviting my colleague Susan Dubreuil and I to appear before the committee today.

I want to begin by acknowledging that we are on the unceded traditional territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

[*English*]

I would like to share what my organization has done to quickly adapt and to ensure that our obligations under the Official Languages Act were respected during the pandemic. I will also discuss actions the Public Service Commission took to ensure that departments and agencies were able to staff bilingual positions, including those in response to the crisis. Finally, I will provide you with some data on public service staffing that I hope the committee will find useful for its study.

[*Translation*]

To respect our obligations under the Official Languages Act during the pandemic, the Public Service Commission, or PSC, quickly adapted to changing circumstances. The department took action, both internally with its employees, in accordance with part V of the

act, as well as in communications and services with its clients and with the public, in accordance with part IV of the act.

Since last March, all communications with employees have continued to be in both official languages simultaneously. This includes frequent email messages from myself, COVID-19 updates and any other internal communications to employees. Over the past nine months, we held three virtual bilingual all-staff meetings. We have been finding innovative solutions to deliver these events with simultaneous interpretation.

In my role as leader of the organization, I raise official languages obligations with my executive management team on a regular basis, and I insist that employees have the right to write and speak in their preferred official language.

[*English*]

When dealing with the public, all communications with Canadians have continued to be in both official languages and have been released simultaneously in both French and English. This includes the content on our website and social media, answering public inquiries and providing information sessions to job seekers. Prior to and throughout the pandemic, I have ensured that when invited to participate in any event, I always deliver my remarks in both official languages.

In response to the pandemic, the PSC has partnered with Health Canada in establishing an inventory of volunteers to support provinces, territories and the Canadian Red Cross in their urgent health human resource needs. All materials were bilingual. Communications with Canadians were in the official language of their choice. The safety, security and well-being of our clients and employees is critical to our service delivery and in designing new staffing and assessment solutions, but never at the expense of the Official Languages Act.

[*Translation*]

As you know, there are several organizations with responsibilities regarding official languages within the federal public service. In accordance with the Public Service Employment Act, deputy heads are responsible for establishing official language proficiency as an essential qualification required for the work to be performed. They are also accountable for ensuring their employees meet the official language requirements of their positions.

The office of the chief human resources officer is responsible for policies related to languages in communications and services to the public, as well as official languages in the workplace. It is also responsible for establishing second official language qualification standards. The PSC's primary role is in the assessment of official languages, including the provision of second language evaluation tests.

• (1700)

[*English*]

For the assessment of proficiency in the second official language for bilingual positions, the PSC appointment policy requires that all departments and agencies in the core public administration use PSC tests. These evaluations are administered in PSC test centres across the country, as well as in selected departments and agencies.

In addition, our tests are widely used by separate employers, such as the Canada Revenue Agency and the Canadian Armed Forces. These tests ensure that merit is met with respect to staffing bilingual positions, so that Canadians can be served in the official language of their choice, and public servants can work in the official language of their choice.

On an annual basis, the PSC conducts and oversees more than 100,000 second language tests. Our databases hold over four million test results, the majority of which are second language test results.

There are close to 86,000 bilingual positions in the federal core public administration, not counting separate agencies. This represents 43% of all core public administration positions.

[*Translation*]

The pandemic has impacted government operations in many areas. In our case, it has affected the capacity to conduct in-person second-language evaluation testing.

The PSC promptly put in place two temporary policy measures and supporting guidance. They provide more flexibility to departments and agencies in assessing second-language requirements for appointments to bilingual positions. Both measures are meant to ensure that merit with regard to official languages and linguistic obligations provided by the Official Languages Act are respected. These measures allowed deputy heads to recruit the bilingual talent needed to support efforts related to COVID-19 or to ensure the effective functioning of the Government of Canada.

A pulse survey with organizations was conducted to obtain feedback on these temporary measures and to give us a sense of their use. The survey showed that 90% of respondents indicated that the two measures were useful to respond to their staffing needs.

Furthermore, the PSC implemented new virtual second-language interviews—

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** Mr. Chair, there's no interpretation.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu. I'll stop the clock for a few seconds.

I'd ask the clerk to check that with the technicians.

**Mr. Patrick Borbey:** I sent the document in both languages. I hope it's been distributed to members.

**The Chair:** It has been, Mr. Borbey.

Mr. Beaulieu, let me know right away if there's a problem.

Mr. Borbey, please continue with your remarks.

**Mr. Patrick Borbey:** I was talking about second-language interviews for oral proficiency. These interviews are administered remotely by PSC assessors to candidates in their own homes. Over 5,000 virtual interviews have been administered this way.

[*English*]

We also launched unsupervised Internet testing to evaluate second language reading and writing skills. These tests are performed online by candidates in their home.

We recognize that remote Internet testing is the way of the future for second language evaluations. We are working diligently to incrementally enhance our remote testing to better meet the needs of departments and agencies, as well as those of Canadians who no longer have to travel to our offices for tests. This is a priority for the PSC.

The PSC also continues to ensure that our tests are accessible to all Canadians, including those with disabilities. All new second language evaluations are reviewed by test development experts for accessibility and fairness. They are also available in multiple formats to accommodate the needs of diverse test takers.

• (1705)

[*Translation*]

I'll skip the last part, since you've received my document. It contains some statistics about the percentage of bilingual candidates for positions in the federal government. It's just to tell you that there's still a lot of interest. There are a lot of bilingual candidates across the country, and we're focusing particularly on official language minority communities, both inside and outside Quebec, for francophone communities, in order to find the best candidates.

Thank you for your attention.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Borbey.

I also want to thank all the witnesses. You have sent us your remarks, and they have been distributed to the committee members. I also invite you to send us briefs, if you have any, in connection with this study or any other study we conduct.

We'll now move on to questions. I'll ask for the co-operation of my colleagues, since it's already 5:05 p.m., and we have to spend five minutes approving the budget.

We're only going to do the first round of six minutes for each of the MPs. I invite members who wish to share their time with another colleague to let me know.

We'll start the first round with Mr. Williamson.

[English]

Mr. Williamson, the floor is yours for six minutes.

[Translation]

**Mr. John Williamson (New Brunswick Southwest, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My first question is for Ms. Johnson.

[English]

Ms. Johnson, you had a lot to say about how well the rollout went during the pandemic, but I think you missed the real slice, which was what happened before this planning took place so your organizations were ready and you were able to communicate effectively and offer your services and programs. You talk about the planning because I think that goes to the root of this study. It's the preparation that allows for the good work to happen after the fact.

[Translation]

If your colleague Ms. Guemiri has any comments to add, we have time to hear them, too.

[English]

Thank you.

It's over to you, Ms. Johnson.

**Ms. Jennifer Johnson:** Yes, that's super important, with regard to what we've experienced.

As I said, fundamentally we had a very good base. The resources that we've been receiving from Health Canada—to vitalize, to give these networks the capacity to know their community and know who the partners are, and to have good relationships—were well established. I have to say that was a critical element in the success factor of the community response to this crisis. Yes, we were all thrown off our game for the first couple of weeks when the pandemic hit, but they were able to move everybody into their homes, develop all of their relationships with their partners virtually; and then actually begin to even develop programming virtually, one-on-one and by telephone, with their vulnerable populations fairly quickly.

I can't emphasize enough how important it was that they had this capacity at the community level already developed in order to be able to evolve so quickly to the new reality that had been forced upon us.

The other element that I think is really critical is that those partnerships that had been established during periods of non-crisis were critical for this response. The public health institutions turned to these community organizations. Fatiha's is a great example of that, too. They turned to these community organizations to make sure that they were connecting to the English-speaking community.

I have an example of one network that decided to do a flu vaccine clinic for the English-speaking community, and they did it in

partnership with their CISSS, their local CIUSSS. They were able to bring out 60 seniors an hour or something like that with regard to flu vaccines. That normally wouldn't have happened.

The community trusted these organizations too. I think that was also a really important part of the response.

Last but not least, before I hand it over to Fatiha, is the planning. We had this great structure. We had leadership with regard to how the community could connect to the vulnerable populations through the CISSS and CIUSSS, although not every one of them, because obviously it depends on the territory. They were identifying vulnerable populations and asked our communities to do so as well.

Also, in terms of those lines of communication, whether it was for federal government information or provincial government information, the community knew about it. We had a very high level of information available in English, once the wheels got in motion. Yes, there was a delay in terms of making things available in English, but it's a pandemic. You can't expect the next day after a pandemic is announced that everything will be smooth. There's always going to be—

• (1710)

**Mr. John Williamson:** Just to be clear, was that delay from the Quebec government or from both governments?

**Ms. Jennifer Johnson:** I noticed it most from the Quebec government but that's because health and social services is their domain. They have to develop...

I can't criticize them too much. I think it was a normal delay, in some ways.

**Mr. John Williamson:** Yes.

I wasn't looking for a criticism, just a clarification.

[Translation]

Ms. Guemiri, do you have anything to add?

There's only 45 seconds left.

**Ms. Fatiha Gatre Guemiri:** I would add that the demand was obviously local. We took advantage of our partnerships with francophone community groups on the ground. They were the ones who provided us with the information, and we managed to pass it on. We immediately took advantage of these partnerships where we are represented in the field.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Williamson and Ms. Guemiri.

Mr. Duguid, you have six minutes.

[English]

The floor is yours, Terry.

**Mr. Terry Duguid:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our guests for their excellent presentations.

I'm going to share my time with Ms. Lattanzio.

I just have one question, which is for Mr. Borbey.



I'm a western Canadian MP from Manitoba, where we have a very vibrant and historic francophone and Métis community. Twenty per cent of our Canadian public service resides in western Canada.

I'm wondering if you could share with us what we could do to better prepare our public service in the west to serve our community in emergency situations in French in situations like floods and COVID-19. Based on my interactions, I know the community feels somewhat underserved. Could you comment on both training and bilingual requirements?

**Mr. Patrick Borbey:** That's a big question. Some of it is way beyond my area of responsibility.

In our recruitment efforts obviously we're always looking for bilingual candidates in all regions of the country and hoping that departments will use our inventories, whether it's through student programs or graduate programs or people at mid-career with some capacity in both official languages, to hire to improve their capacity to be able to serve those local communities.

The government has also committed to an additional large number of points of service in both official languages. We stand prepared to help with the staffing efforts that are going to be required to be able to meet that.

I think one of the things departments need to do—and again this is the responsibility of deputy heads—is to make sure their business continuity plans, BCPs, appropriately reflect their obligations to official languages. That's certainly something I made sure of in my own organization. We're going to be improving our BCP, because we learned a lot through this lesson, this last pandemic. I think a lot of departments have to take a look at that and see how they can strengthen it.

• (1715)

**Mr. Terry Duguid:** Thank you.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Ms. Lattanzio, you have the floor.

**Ms. Patricia Lattanzio:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

Mr. Borbey, I'm very limited in my time. I'm going to ask you a question and ask you to possibly submit the answer in writing, if you can.

Since the Canada Health Act does not contain specific commitments with regards to official languages, if the main linguistic legislation at the federal level does not address this—and neither does the Canada Health Act—shouldn't this be a recommendation in the new law?

Ms. Johnson and Madame Guemiri, I understand that during the pandemic 42% of the minority linguistic anglophones in Quebec needed to consult the Canada.ca website to get essential information on health services. What would you recommend so we can remedy this issue and that the members of the linguistic minority in Quebec can be assured that they will receive their health services in the language of their choice? I'd like to hear you both on that.

**Ms. Jennifer Johnson:** How do you improve it? I think one of the elements that could improve is by addressing the reality that seniors are not online. Seniors are the biggest problem with regard to accessing information. You really have to develop a better approach for getting the information to vulnerable populations like that.

Also rural and remote communities don't have good Internet. There has to be more than just an electronic response to getting it. That's both federal and provincial.

In terms of how you get more information to these populations, I think that it's about developing community capacity to reach vulnerable populations or even just regular English-speaking persons in the province of Quebec. It's about building that sense of community, developing lines of communication. I would say, "Keep investing in those elements."

Fatiha, what would you say?

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Ms. Guemiri, you have the floor.

**Ms. Fatiha Gatre Guemiri:** Ms. Lattanzio, that's a very thorny question. I'd prefer to send you an answer in writing, because it will be a long one.

For now, I can tell you that we're working in partnership with local health care institutions to adapt certain services. It's a very long process, but there's hope because we are seeing that there's some openness toward English-speaking minority communities in terms of access to the same services as those offered in the other language. We are working on that, and we have a regional access committee. New access plans for health care in English will be coming out soon. We need to do some kind of monitoring to make sure that certain services are available in English.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Ms. Lattanzio, your time is up and—

**Ms. Patricia Lattanzio:** Mr. Chair, I'm sorry for interrupting you. I've asked the witnesses to complete their responses in writing. If I understand correctly, they'll send their documents to the clerk. Is that right?

**The Chair:** Exactly. They already have the clerk's contact information.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor for six minutes.

• (1720)

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** On the one hand, I'd like Ms. Lauzon to tell us more about the need for funding for French-language media. A year ago, \$595 million was announced, plus \$50 million, and so on. I believe she estimated that the needs of community newspapers would be \$20 million a year.

Ms. Lauzon, can you tell us what your needs are? What assistance have you received from the official languages support programs?

**Ms. Linda Lauzon:** As part of the Action Plan for Official Languages, an envelope of \$14.5 million over five years was allocated to official language minority community media. Of this amount, \$4.5 million was allocated to youth internships and \$10 million to strategic projects. We were asking for operating funding—that was what was missing—but, unfortunately, the government did not see fit to provide us with any. Fortunately, we still received \$14.5 million.

New measures were put in place when new legislation was introduced last June—the Budget Implementation Act, 2019, No. 1—to facilitate the registration of journalistic organizations. Unfortunately, they apply to only some of our media outlets, about 10% of them. Ninety percent of our newspapers haven't met the many criteria for a variety of reasons: they are small media outlets that have changed their business model; they no longer have any staff reporters; they use freelancers because they have no money; and they don't have the minimum number of employees. It should be kept in mind that, under these conditions, the payroll tax credits no longer apply.

In terms of the local journalism initiative, a \$50 million fund over five years was allocated in 2018 to all newspapers. Radio stations have also been included, and that's a good thing. However, most of the envelope was allocated to *The Canadian Press* and *News Media Canada*, or \$7 million per year, with the rest going to small groups in Canada's ethnic press and community television stations, for example.

The funding has been very helpful for community radio and newspapers, but it doesn't go far enough. In the absence of advertisements—because they are still non-existent—we need to find another way to provide resources to our media so that they can do their work in their respective regions.

Towards the end of my presentation, I was saying that the local journalism initiative is an easy measure to invest in. The program is already in place, and you don't have to reinvent the wheel. It fills a need, and it works. However, our media can't receive the small amount of \$8,500 per media outlet, when the Toronto Star receives \$60,000 per outlet. It doesn't work.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** So the program may not be suitable for small, French-language media.

**Ms. Linda Lauzon:** It's the same thing for English-language media in Quebec.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** You spoke about 90% of the media.

**Ms. Linda Lauzon:** Yes, I was talking about English-language media in Quebec and French-language media in the rest of Canada. The program isn't suitable, and neither is the envelope.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** The supply of English-language media services in Quebec is considerable. If we look at all the media in Montreal, there are almost more English-language than French-language media offerings in radio stations and newspapers. But that's another matter.

**Ms. Linda Lauzon:** Think of regions, such as the Gaspé region and the lower north shore, where the media is struggling to survive.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** My other question is for Mr. Borbey.

Mr. Borbey, you seemed to say in your remarks that everything is great, whereas the report of the Commissioner of Official Languages concludes that the language obligations of federal institutions in emergency situations aren't being met.

Commissioner Thériège says that the institutions operate primarily in one official language, with the other being relegated to the status of a secondary language. According to him, French is generally considered more of a language of translation, which has been set aside in the context of the pandemic.

How do you explain this discrepancy between the commissioner's finding and your own?

• (1725)

**Mr. Patrick Borbey:** I have shared with you my experience with my organization. I'm the chief administrative officer responsible for the Public Service Commission, so I've informed you about how we took on our responsibilities during the pandemic and, as part of the services we provide to departments—in our case, second language evaluation—how we were able to staff bilingual positions.

I've also told you how we've adapted so that we can continue to provide this service during the pandemic. That's what I've talked to you about. I don't have a broader responsibility for what the other chief administrative officers have been able to do during the pandemic, but I can give you the example of my own organization and how I, personally, assumed my responsibilities.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Borbey and Mr. Beaulieu.

Ms. Ashton, you the last six minutes.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for you, Mr. Borbey. The pandemic has shown that the government has had difficulty communicating its messages to the public in both official languages. We've also heard that there are problems within the government itself.

According to what we hear in the media and from government officials, French speakers are uncomfortable expressing themselves in French in meetings because they won't be understood by everyone. It's a problem that English speakers don't have when they want to express themselves in English. This seems to be particularly the case in the Gatineau and Ottawa region.

What should the public service do to fix this problem?

**Mr. Patrick Borbey:** That's a very complex question, and I only have a few minutes to answer it.

A few years ago, at the request of the Clerk of the Privy Council, I prepared a report with my colleague Matthew Mendelsohn. The report contained a number of recommendations aimed at improving linguistic duality in the public service. We highlighted certain problems, but also some best practices in certain departments, and we made a series of recommendations to the government under the theme of leadership in the areas of policy, culture—which is very important—training and tools.

So I've already commented on this matter, and I agree with you that we must continue to monitor this issue, since French is a minority language. It's always easy to forget things at meetings and cut corners. I can tell you that, as chief administrator, I don't allow that. Furthermore, I'm always ready to work with my colleagues to help them find ways to better respect linguistic duality.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Thank you. I have another question for you.

When people take the second-language exams in the public service, do you check what their motivation is? More specifically, do you think that, by increasing the bilingualism bonus, you would add an incentive to learn the other language, especially in designated bilingual regions?

**Mr. Patrick Borbey:** I am not responsible for the bonus, but I have made my position on it clear in the report I have just mentioned. In my view, the money is not well spent because the bonus is being given to people who have already achieved the level of bilingualism required for their positions. It's a measure from 30 or 40 years ago that has never really been brought up to date.

I would prefer to see that money reinvested, in cooperation with the unions, into better funding for second-language training, particularly for our young recruits just joining the public service. That would allow them to begin learning a second language, either English or French, right from the start. It would avoid situations where second-language learning becomes an obligation later on, in order to get over the language barrier inherent in management positions.

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** I would like to clarify my question.

What do you think about a bonus for those learning a language? Is that useful?

**Mr. Patrick Borbey:** I feel that those who want to learn a language would prefer well-funded language training.

• (1730)

**Ms. Niki Ashton:** Thank you.

My next question goes to you, Ms. Lauzon.

Thank you for your testimony. The state of independent media is really concerning and your heartfelt comments have been heard. I come from Manitoba and I know the province's Franco-Manitoban community well. Independent francophone media are very important for the vitality of the French-speaking community here in our province.

I am shocked to hear that the government has not supported you, especially as we know that federal government communications in French leave a lot to be desired.

Buying advertising in your publications would have been critical, not only to allow the government to communicate through them,

but also to support the media publishing the advertisements, who have seen their revenues melt away during the pandemic.

Why do you feel that the government has forgotten you?

**Ms. Linda Lauzon:** It forgot us a long time ago. In 2016, we even submitted a complaint to the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages to object to it. We tried to negotiate with Public Services and Procurement Canada and to explain the situation.

Cossette Media is responsible for buying advertising in this country. At the beginning of the pandemic, we shared with them—in real time, believe it or not—an up-to-date list of all our publications, so that we would not be forgotten. We got peanuts in return. We tried everything to be able to get information into our newspapers and radio stations, not to mention community radio stations, which are also very important. However, it all got us nowhere.

The priority was television, and, as I was saying just now, also the public broadcaster, which is currently funded by the state to a considerable extent.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Lauzon and Ms. Ashton.

That is all the time that we have.

I would like to take a moment to thank all the witnesses who have contributed to our study.

My warmest thanks go to Ms. Lauzon, from the Association de la presse francophone, Ms. Guemiri, from the East Island Network for English Language Services, Ms. Johnson, from the Community Health and Social Services Network, and Mr. Borbey and Ms. Dubreuil, from the Public Service Commission.

I invite the witnesses to send any other information to our clerk.

I'm now going to talk to the members of the committee.

We have to approve a budget for this study. We have emailed it to you. The total budget is \$4,250, which is made up essentially of expenses such as \$3,500 for videoconferencing and \$750 for meals, if there are any people in the room.

We do not need a motion.

Are there any objections to approving this budget so that we can continue the study that we are currently conducting?

Hearing none, I will sign the document and send it to the clerk.

My sincere thanks for your cooperation.

My thanks also go to the entire staff, the interpreters, the clerk and technicians, for facilitating our work so well.

Colleagues, you will soon receive the notice of our meeting on Thursday.

Goodbye, and I wish you a wonderful evening.

The meeting is adjourned.

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