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# Standing Committee on Official Languages

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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg





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• (1835)

[Translation]

**The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting No. 18 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages. The committee is meeting on its study of Challenges of the Parliamentary Interpretation Service in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Madam Clerk, are there any replacements? Are there any members in the room?

**The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Josée Harrison):** There are no committee members in the room, but there is a replacement, Mr. Mazier, who is replacing Mr. Williamson this evening.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

This is intended for those participating virtually.

[English]

I would like to take this opportunity to remind all participants to this meeting that screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted, as was mentioned by Speaker Rota on September 29, 2020.

[Translation]

Members and witnesses may speak in the 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.

[English]

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

[Translation]

A reminder that all comments by members should be addressed through the Chair.

[English]

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly.

[Translation]

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

[English]

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise the chair. Please note we may need to suspend for a few minutes as we need to ensure all members are able to participate fully.

[Translation]

I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

In the first part, we will start off with Mr. Yvon Barrière, Executive Vice-President, Quebec Region, of the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

Mr. Barrière, you will have seven and a half minutes to make your presentation, which will be followed by questions from members of the committee.

I would like to inform all witnesses and members of the committee that I will tell you when you have one minute of speaking time remaining. If you see the red card, your time is over, and you must wrap up in the following 5 to 10 seconds.

With that, ladies and gentlemen, I will invite Mr. Barrière to take the floor.

• (1840)

**Mr. Yvon Barrière (Regional Executive Vice-President, Quebec Region, Public Service Alliance of Canada):** Mr. Chair, members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages, first I want to thank you for inviting me to talk about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the government's ability to deliver information in both official languages.

The Public Service Alliance of Canada, or PSAC, represents more than 200,000 workers across the country and around the world. Our members work in federal departments and agencies, Crown corporations, security businesses, universities, casinos, community service agencies, indigenous communities and airports. In addition to its head office in Ottawa, PSAC has 23 regional offices. We represent nearly 50% of federal public servants.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought its share of challenges for our members. Overnight, many of them had to start working from home, and their interactions were reduced to virtual ones only. Our members went above and beyond to provide emergency services to Canadians in a very short period of time. A specific example of this is the Canada emergency response benefit, which has helped thousands of people and was developed quickly thanks in part to our members' hard work.

From the outset, it is important to recognize that all federal public servants have the right to speak and work in the official language of their choice. While this may be true on paper, inequality between English and French persists in our institutions, and the pandemic has exacerbated the many existing problems. I would even go so far as to say that systemic discrimination is deeply rooted in the federal government. It is taken for granted that English comes first and French second.

As you know, in his most recent report, the Commissioner of Official Languages, Raymond Th  berge, found that there are gaps in the government's French-language communications during emergencies, as is currently the case with the COVID-19 pandemic. He stressed the need to modernize the Official Languages Act, which turned 50 last year, and to thoroughly review it. Otherwise, we will continue to face the same problems.

PSAC fully agrees with Commissioner Th  berge: we must absolutely modernize the Official Languages Act.

The pandemic has made these gaps even wider. Most people, who now work from home and interact only online, have complained that managers often do not send important information to employees in both official languages. I have seen this myself. The pandemic has also made it harder for our members to work in French. A glaring example is that Zoom and Teams meetings are often held in English, and, unfortunately, simultaneous interpretation services are seldom available.

Without face-to-face meetings to break the ice, language barriers are hindering effective communication now more than ever before. Often, francophones feel like they must speak in their second language so that their colleagues do not fall behind, either because the interpretation is not available or not delivered quickly enough. Conversely, anglophones do not feel comfortable enough to speak in French for fear of being judged. There are two important points here: first, the lack of information offered in both languages to employees and, second, the absence of tools and dialogue spaces to facilitate the use of both languages, especially since people are working from home.

If we want a dynamic, diverse and bilingual federal public service, we must create an environment where employees are both able and encouraged to work in the language of their choice. The fact that people are working from home should galvanize the government into taking action and improving bilingualism in the federal public service, thereby enabling us to provide better services to the public and ensure that everyone feels comfortable working in the language of their choice.

The federal government has a duty to provide the tools to do so. The Canadian public service should be an employer of choice that

encourages bilingualism. We must never forget that there are French speakers and bilingual people in every province and territory of Canada, not only in Quebec.

• (1845)

These people have the right to work in the language of their choice, and the public has the right to receive services in English and French. It is crucial that federal employees have access to communications and documents in English and French. That applies equally to Canadians who receive services. The pandemic makes this a health and safety issue.

Improving bilingualism must absolutely be a priority for the federal government. One of the most concrete examples of the government's inaction on official languages in the public service is the bilingualism bonus. Bilingual positions today pay a bonus of \$800 per year, an amount that has not been reviewed since the 1990s. We have pressure the government to review this policy many times, but it has always refused to budge. Worse yet, in 2019, the government even suggested eliminating the bilingualism bonus, adding insult to injury.

Bilingual public servants who receive this ridiculous bonus are increasingly inclined to reject it as a result of the extra work it entails. I repeat: we are talking about 25 cents an hour here, after tax. Bilingualism should be recognized as a superior-quality skill, and there are solutions for improving French's standing in the public service. The bilingualism bonus must be increased in order to recognize the value of working in both official languages.

PSAC is also asking the government to create a bonus to recognize and compensate employees who speak or write in an indigenous language for work purposes. Since Parliament has already taken legislative action to further the recognition of indigenous languages, the federal government, in its capacity as an employer, should lead by example and formally recognize the contribution of its employees who use indigenous languages for work purposes by offering them a bilingualism bonus.

There is also a need for more language training to encourage English-and French-speaking workers to develop their second language.

In addition, Treasury Board must stop outsourcing language training and focus on creating its own training program made up of public servants who focus on the specific requirements of the federal public service.

The government must also acknowledge that the pandemic has made it tremendously difficult to access information in both official languages and should work on correcting the situation immediately.

In closing, I would like to say that I have high hopes for Minister Joly's bill, which is a step in the right direction. That being said, much work remains to be done to introduce legislation and a system that are solidly established and well respected.

Thank you for listening. I will be pleased to answer your questions.

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

We will now go to questions and answers, which are divided into six-minute periods. As you are the only witness here, please go ahead and answer the questions put to you without waiting for me to intervene.

I now turn the floor over to the vice-chair of our committee, Mr. Blaney.

**Hon. Steven Blaney (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Barrière, welcome to the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Before I became a member, I was fortunate to be a federal public servant at a regional office in Quebec City.

I was going to say that your testimony was shocking, but I should say instead that it was very emphatic. You mentioned systemic discrimination against francophone employees in Canada's public service. I'd like to ask you to tell us more on that subject. After all, that's some strong language.

Is that reflected in your situation?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** Thank you for your question, Mr. Blaney.

I remember very clearly that, in another life, you were a federal public servant on the south shore facing Quebec City. I have heard about you. Don't worry though; it was relatively positive.

I can definitely cite some examples of discrimination. There are a lot of situations in the federal public service. I mentioned at the outset that we very often feel that the federal public service focuses first and foremost on anglophones and then on minorities.

The current situation is definitely unfair for francophone public servants. I'm not just talking about those living in Quebec, but also those in the national capital region and New Brunswick, and about two persons from the community of Saint-Boniface, near Winnipeg, Manitoba. There are several situations in which francophone public servants undeniably feel they're at a disadvantage.

Staffing is just one of many examples. If you look at staffing notices, you'll see many bilingual and unilingual anglophone senior management positions but no unilingual francophone positions. Many examples of that kind are indicative of what francophone federal employees experience day after day. They always feel they have to force themselves to speak English either to avoid slowing the work down or to make themselves clearly understood. Their constant concern is for efficiency, not their language, which they would like to be able to speak.

● (1850)

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I see.

If I understand you correctly, francophone federal employees are like second-class employees, since senior management positions, as you just said, are English-only or bilingual.

Mr. Chair, I found our witness's testimony very interesting. I wonder whether it might assist us in our ongoing study of the situation of French in Canada. I'm bringing that to your attention. We can discuss it later.

Thank you, Mr. Barrière. I want to return the favour. I have the greatest esteem for the federal public service and its representatives, particularly its francophone representatives.

Today I learned that Jean-Yves Duclos, President of the Treasury Board and member for Quebec City, had suffered a pulmonary embolism. If he is listening to us, I would like to tell him that we wish him a quick recovery and that the thoughts of all parliamentarians are with him.

I'm often mistaken for him when I go cross-country skiing because we may have a similar physique.

Mr. Barrière, when we had Mr. Duclos here in committee, he told us he had tried to correct these deficiencies during the pandemic. You said these gaps or this discrimination have been worsened by the pandemic.

Have you felt that government authorities, the Treasury Board in particular, have tried to rectify matters? Or have their efforts merely been in vain?

I'd like to hear what you have to say about that. I mustn't have a lot of speaking time left, but we have an indulgent chair.

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** First of all, considering I was somewhat short of time earlier, I would like to join with Mr. Blaney in saying that my thoughts go out to Mr. Duclos as well. He is, after all, my boss, indirectly that is, since I represent a lot of public servants.

As regards those vain efforts, I would say that some departments have been extremely proactive. I don't mean to be judgmental, but some departments have been extremely vigilant and have offered to provide interpretation services for meetings conducted in both official languages. However, others have done nothing and have asked people receiving the \$800 bonus to cooperate. In many instances, the assistants of certain managers have provided translations and summaries as they were required. It really depends on the departments.

You mentioned that francophones didn't have access to senior management positions. I don't necessarily agree because, in those specific cases, candidates at least have to have a minimum level of bilingualism.

Thank you, Mr. Blaney.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

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

Gentlemen, I also want to thank you for your kind words for Mr. Duclos. He is now back home and feeling better. This is a reminder that we must be cautious during this pandemic.

The next six minutes will be for Ms. Lattanzio, who will speak to Mr. Barrière

Go ahead, Ms. Lattanzio.

• (1855)

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

Welcome to the committee this evening, Mr. Barrière.

You mentioned the report of the Commissioner of Official Languages. I'd like to talk to you about the survey of 11,000 public servants working across Canada that the Commissioner conducted in the winter of 2020-2021. The respondents consisted of equal numbers of anglophones and francophones.

That survey yielded some interesting findings on the scope of linguistic insecurity within the public service. The Commissioner says that linguistic insecurity is a challenge, particularly for francophones, but also for anglophones in Quebec. He also stresses the need for different but complementary solutions for francophones and anglophones, for both first- and second-language speakers.

What do you think about the approach based on the various problems that both linguistic communities experience in the public service?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** I've read and reread the findings of the Commissioner's survey, which are particularly interesting, and I may have summed them up earlier in a single sentence. Francophone federal employees often speak English in order to move files along, but also to ensure their anglophone colleagues understand. If I remember correctly, nearly 80% of anglophones who don't want or don't dare to speak French refrain from speaking it for fear of being judged or of not necessarily having the skills.

There are some disproportionate numbers. It's not necessarily about targets, but some anglophones find that their work slows down when they speak French. So that's the opposite of what some francophones experience. Anglophones and francophones may therefore find themselves in diametrically opposite situations.

**Ms. Patricia Lattanzio:** What do you think about the linguistic insecurity experienced by Quebec's anglophone minority?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** There are some potential solutions. I discussed them in my introductory remarks.

First of all, I think we have to promote and maximize language training for both the anglophone minority living in Quebec and certain persons in the national capital region and New Brunswick. The number of training courses offered during work hours should definitely be increased to improve bilingualism and reduce the linguistic insecurity that anglophone employees currently feel.

**Ms. Patricia Lattanzio:** I see.

Mr. Barrière, I thought PSAC intended to conduct a survey in the near future. What kind of information do you hope to gather? What

kind of questions do you want to ask? What are the objectives of that survey?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** You're very well informed, because no one really knows about that project. I congratulate you. You've got good intel, as they say.

Yes, together with the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec, we propose to conduct a survey of our colleagues in the national capital region to confirm what we're currently hearing.

To be quite honest with you, before I appeared here today, we conducted a short survey, and we will definitely be working with a firm like Léger to develop it further.

We have no particular intentions, but we will ask questions related to the problem of French and official languages to determine whether the act is being complied with in respondents' workplaces so we can explore the matter further.

Quite honestly, based on the survey results, I will volunteer to go and knock on Mélanie Joly's door and deliver those results to her.

**Ms. Patricia Lattanzio:** All right.

When do you intend to conduct the survey?

• (1900)

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** In the next few weeks, Ms. Lattanzio.

**Ms. Patricia Lattanzio:** I see.

Do you have any further recommendations to add to the report of the Commissioner of Official Languages?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** We're talking about reform, and that's important. Earlier I discussed bonuses, training and second-language training. I also mentioned indigenous languages.

As regards the two official languages, we'll have to establish procedures to prevent people from experiencing this insecurity. We'll also have to acquire resources. I'm thinking of translation and all the documents that public service staff receive.

I hope that, from now on, all documents in English and French will arrive at the same time and all news releases and emails will be professionally translated. I'm told that translations are often done using Google Translate. We know that's true because we can see the grey highlighting.

In short, all these areas will have to be corrected so we can improve the language skills of staff, managers, supervisors and senior management.

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

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

Mr. Barrière, Mr. Beaulieu will ask you the next questions.

You have six minutes, Mr. Beaulieu.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ):** Thank you very much for your testimony, Mr. Barrière.

This is surprising. I would've expected this kind of testimony from francophones outside Quebec.

When you talk about systemic discrimination against francophones, you're also talking about the situation in Quebec. Do I understand you correctly?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** Yes, absolutely.

You just have to pay attention to the words you use. I don't really like the words "against francophones," but unfairness and discrimination clearly do exist.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** It was interesting that you spoke a little more from the viewpoint of francophones in the federal public service.

It's generally anglophone pressure groups that come and represent Quebec in the Standing Committee on Official Languages. This shows how important it is to hear francophones' views as well.

You've been a public servant for a long time. Do you have any other examples of problems people encounter when working in French?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** I've been a federal public servant for a little more than 25 years, slightly longer than Mr. Blaney. I was really surprised to see we were still receiving directives and regulations in English. There was always a brief note, not too badly written, informing us that the translation would be available soon. Sometimes it took a few days, sometimes a few weeks. However, some things did startle me. To answer your questions regarding discrimination, I also sat on the National Health and Safety Committee for a long time.

So you'll understand where my remarks and the introduction to the speech I made earlier come from. I sat on the National Health and Safety Committee, of which representatives of the employer and the union were also members. Three unions were represented there: the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, UCCO-SACC-CSN and PSAC.

We represented employers and employees. We discussed safety issues as they pertained to our members. At one point, I went around the table and noticed that the three union representatives were coincidentally francophones from Quebec. In fact, I have to say that, for two of those individuals, including me, the level of bilingualism was quite average. The chair and two directors representing the employer were perfectly bilingual or came from Quebec or the national capital region. Their French was impeccable. There was also a unilingual anglophone from Winnipeg. All committee meetings were conducted in English and translated from English into French.

At one point, I raised my hand and asked whether we could hold the meeting in French because 11 out of a total of 12 members spoke French. However, by default, we always began every meeting in English. Even the chair, a francophone who spoke very good English, always began the meetings in English. It was a well-established, very practical procedure and culture. Everything took place in English by default. However, we did have access to interpretation.

Getting back to the pandemic, I recently inquired about this, and the meetings of that same department's health and safety committee are now held by videoconference. They're conducted in English without interpretation.

Despite the way the committee has evolved, I can assure you that, if one francophone member speaks in French, the unilingual anglophone members don't understand what's being said. That's why those representing the union in Quebec and eastern Canada feel compelled to speak English.

• (1905)

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** Tell us briefly about the bilingualism bonus.

How do public servants perceive it? Is it adequate?

I'd like you to tell us about that.

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** That's a very good question, Mr. Beaulieu.

The \$800 figure was introduced in the 1990s. As I said earlier, we've often requested an increase, but it's always been denied. There was even a push in 2019 to do away the bonus completely in exchange perhaps for a little more training. It's definitely a problem now. The \$800 figure brings an additional workload with it.

For example, during the pandemic, colleagues still ask those who get the \$800 bonus to translate what's just been said. So they wind up taking on a second role, that of translator, which shouldn't be the case.

I'm thinking, for example, of people who work in call centres. They have two lines, an English one and a French one. They have a heavy workload since they have to interact in English most of the time, given the number of calls.

I'm also thinking of parole officers at the Correctional Service of Canada, who have what's commonly called a "certain work volume." When they get the \$800 bonus, their work volume... Out of 25 inmates incarcerated in Quebec penitentiaries, 17 or 18 are anglophones from western Canada or Ontario. That means extra work for those officers because they have to communicate and write in English in order to respond adequately to official language requests.

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

Mr. Boulerice, you have the floor for the next six minutes.

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP):** Mr. Barrière, welcome to the Standing Committee on Official Languages. I'm very pleased to be hearing you this evening. Your testimony is invaluable and will help us as we continue our study.

Obviously, I immediately want to add my voice to those wishing Minister Duclos a quick recovery. That's important. I wanted to say that because we are all colleagues here, but also because I didn't want anyone to think I was insensitive to his situation.

When he recently came to speak with us, he told us that no compromises were acceptable on official languages. Considering everything you've told us, however, I see there have been compromises during the pandemic, and perhaps even more than usual. Meetings are held where no interpretation is provided, and people sometimes speak to us in English when there's a majority of francophones around the table, as you just pointed out.

I'd like you to tell us about two things.

First, have documents written in English only been sent?

And, second, I'd like to hear your comments on the quality of translation done by subcontractors.

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** While preparing, I contacted a number of representatives of several departments and asked them always to check the facts. To answer your first question, our employees never receive the French versions of documents within a reasonable time-frame. That's a point we've often raised and that I myself raised when I was at the department.

However, we see that departments have two ways of viewing the matter and two ways of acting. When some of them complete a study or have just reviewed directives, they say they'll wait for the translation before they send documents to everyone. I congratulate them for doing so. However, other departments initially send out documents in English, and then employees are forced to issue a reminder a few days or weeks later saying they haven't received the documents in French. They don't really feel like paying to have them translated.

As you know, English takes precedence over French in collective agreements, directives and regulations. However, if we want to offer Canadians service in both languages, our francophone employees must be well informed and know exactly what the situation is. This is all the more important in the context of the pandemic because the information often concerns health and safety.

Now, as to whether the translations are always well done, I can't give you an answer since I haven't been able to verify the two models. However, when unilingual anglophone managers addressed a mixed group of anglophones and francophones, I was told that the boss said, "Bonjour, comment ça va?" and then continued in English, as though he had ticked his French-participation box and could now move on to something else.

In many instances as well, administrative assistants are bilingual and translate news releases attached to emails and memoranda. Otherwise, as I said at the outset, people sometimes notice that the translation is somewhat awkward. You know as well as I do that applications like Google Translate don't always produce good results, and that can cause confusion in many instances.

• (1910)

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice:** That's why it's important to assign the task to real professionals.

The pandemic has changed the way everyone works, including federal public servants, who have had to adjust to new circumstances. I find it appalling that people have had to pay for their high-speed Internet connection out of their own pockets. The federal government continued to pay for a basic connection, but didn't

revise its policy if people required high-speed access for work. I think that shows a lack of respect.

And speaking of respect, I'd like to go back to the bilingualism bonus. I've encountered many organizations where the bilingualism bonus represented 5%, 6% or 7% of salary.

When the bilingualism bonus hasn't been raised in 30 years, what message does that send to people about the importance of bilingualism in the public service?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** I think that to ask the question is to answer it. It gives us the impression that it's a somewhat secondary issue. As I told you, our PSAC members devote themselves heart and soul to achieving good results. However, the \$800 figure is clearly inadequate.

Mr. Boulerice, I would also add that there may be a shortage of francophone employees in the public service. Some unusual situations arise, and I would really be curious to conduct some tests and compare the English and French versions of sentences. I can respond in more detail on your next turn to speak. I'm getting the stop signal.

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

Thank you, Mr. Boulerice.

We will go to the second round, and Mr. Dalton has the next five minutes.

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

I will be sharing my speaking time with Mr. Godin.

Mr. Barrière, I'll begin by thanking you for your testimony, which was very interesting.

I'm a member from western Canada, from a suburb of Vancouver. I'd like to know what you think about the situation of federal employees in the west, particularly in Vancouver and Alberta.

What do you think are the challenges facing those minority employees?

• (1915)

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** Thank you, Mr. Dalton.

First of all, I'd like to thank you for the effort you're making to speak in French. You could simply have spoken English and relied on the interpretation. I admire people who make the effort.

Yes, some communities and towns near Vancouver are experiencing language problems. I heard there's a struggle under way to establish or maintain French-language schools in your beautiful province. I see that Ms. Lalonde doesn't entirely agree.



I mentioned discrimination. I think it's more given in the west, in British Columbia. Everything's done in English. If someone raised his or her hand and wanted to speak French at a committee meeting or conference, I don't think that person would even be considered. In eastern Canada, when a department wants to hire someone to represent it on a particular issue, it very often selects a bilingual employee because that person will have to participate in a study committee or a committee organized to improve certain practices, for example.

In your case, we know that the majority of people whose mother tongue is French also speak English. That's a very well-established way of doing things in the west. Everything is unfailingly done in English. People have no opportunity to use their French, unless they sit on a national committee and occasionally speak with people from the national capital region, Quebec or New Brunswick.

**Mr. Marc Dalton:** Do you think there are enough people there who speak both languages to serve the public in those regions?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** Do you mean just the west or across Canada?

**Mr. Marc Dalton:** More the west because I'm the only person on this committee who is a representative of the regions west of Manitoba.

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** I made a few checks. I'll answer you by discussing a message that was forwarded to me. It's a message that a public servant sent to individuals from eastern Canada. So you can imagine what the situation might be in the west. The message, which really surprised me, is dated December 23, 2020. Here's a passage from it:

Please provide the following information to facilitate initial contact with the pay unit of the [department]. Please note that there are a limited number of departmental compensation advisors who only speak French, which may cause minor delays in making appointments.

If that's the situation in eastern Canada, it's definitely worse—even though I don't like that word—in western Canada

**Mr. Marc Dalton:** Thank you very much.

I'm going to turn the floor over to Mr. Godin.

**Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Although I don't have a lot of time at my disposal, I'm going to take a few seconds to acknowledge Jean-Yves Duclos, my colleague from the Quebec City region. Some people serve our Parliament in a manner that goes beyond partisanship. I'm thinking good thoughts for Mr. Duclos, who is a gentleman, and I wish him a speedy recovery.

Mr. Barrière, you mentioned systemic discrimination. That's a shocking expression, but one that probably reflects the actual situation. You discussed the bilingualism bonus. As I see it, it doesn't work and hasn't been raised for many years.

Could we not address the problem the other way around, by requiring that senior authorities be subject to an obligation of result, failing which their salary, compensation or bonus might potentially be reduced?

Earlier you talked about people who start off a conference by saying, "Bonjour et bienvenue." They feel that's enough and immediately switch to English.

Doesn't the fact that a bonus is offered diminish the importance of francophones? Shouldn't we look at the problem the other way round by requiring senior authorities to produce results and imposing compliance obligations?

• (1920)

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** I entirely agree with you regarding obligations of result. While you were speaking, I was thinking of a time when language skills in staffing processes could be imperative or non-imperative. That was often much less discriminatory because a unilingual francophone could apply for the position. If that person was the one with the best skills, he or she could be offered the position conditionally on taking training for one year to become perfectly bilingual and thereby to meet the language requirements of the position. The linguistic profile could be BBB or CCC, for example. That was one way of proceeding.

For our people to be bilingual, and to have access to new positions and new challenges, perhaps they should be offered a bonus greater than \$800. The amount of the bonus should be an incentive for everyone, anglophone and francophone alike, wishing to improve and become bilingual.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Barrière. That's all the time we have.

We are now on the second round, and I want to inform the members of the committee that there will not be a third round—with five-minute periods allotted to both parties—as we must set aside some time to adopt the budget for our next study.

For the moment, I will turn the floor over to Ms. Martinez Ferrada for the next five minutes.

**Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Barrière, thank you for being with us this evening.

I too would like to acknowledge my colleague Mr. Duclos and his entire family. I hope he recovers quickly and comes back to us soon, perhaps even to this committee. Why not?

First, I'd like to comment briefly on systemic discrimination. I would prefer instead to discuss an organizational culture in which we should really develop reflexive responses to the English and French question. Those responses probably don't exist at the present time. The notion of systemic discrimination raises several questions. I'm going to make a comment on the subject that, I honestly admit, makes me somewhat uncomfortable.

Mr. Barrière, many union organizations, including the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada and the Canadian Association of Professional Employees, as well as the Public Service Commission, recommend better language training in the second official language. You discussed this matter at length, but I'd nevertheless like to go back to it because I'm convinced that, if we want to promote linguistic duality in the public service, we need to conduct a language review that is based on a new second-language training framework.

What do you think of the idea of establishing a new second-language training framework?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** Ms. Martinez Ferrada, first, I want to tell you that I definitely did not want to bump heads with anyone, including you, when I used words that had quite a serious connotation. That's especially true of the word "systemic," which is widely used these days. However, I wanted to draw a parallel. It's never as significant as systemic racism, but it's nevertheless very much present. Your comparison with culture is quite apt.

As to whether we would do well to acquire the resources to promote bilingualism, I would emphasize that PSAC and I are entirely in agreement on that process. I believe that, to achieve our ambitions and establish a bilingual public service, we must have the necessary means. To improve the services we offer to Canadian citizens, there must be training, education and greater awareness for everyone.

**Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada:** Thank you, Mr. Barrière.

As you know, the language reform that the minister revealed last week entails several proposals, and you named a few. They include a new second-language training framework and a review of second-language evaluation standards, particularly for supervisory positions. If the senior public service is truly bilingual, that will be felt within the organizations. Consequently, there also has to be a review of official languages qualifications criteria, which you briefly discussed.

Do you agree that these measures will help strengthen the current structure? Promoting both languages within the public service must be automatic. That's precisely what we have to work on.

• (1925)

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** That's definitely what it takes.

It always depends on the example that's set. I can't disagree with what you're telling me. Currently, however, we often use the statistics included in the Official Languages Act. For example, it provides that such and such a department in a particular region must have a minimum of so many bilingual persons. We do our best to work within that framework.

Here's an example from my former department—I'm going to reveal where I used to work—Correctional Service Canada. I was always surprised to see that we couldn't find a plumber or an electrician to work at the Port-Cartier Institution, near Sept-Îles. Why couldn't we find anyone?

We needed bilingual employees for staffing purposes and to meet the criteria of the Official Languages Act. No one in that line of

work near Sept-Îles is bilingual. Consequently, senior management must set an example in order to improve bilingualism at all levels.

**The Chair:** Thank you both for your remarks.

I now turn the floor over to Mr. Beaulieu for two and a half minutes.

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

We talked about surveys earlier. There's also an insecurity on the anglophone side. You said that some anglophones lacked self-confidence when speaking in French.

Do you think any anglophone employees are uncomfortable speaking English?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** I believe you mean francophone employees.

Yes, they're definitely uncomfortable, not necessarily because they lack the opportunity, since they often have occasion to speak it, but as a result of a lack of training. In many cases, the technical aspect of a subject may become a handicap from a performance standpoint. In meetings, people don't want to look bad in front of senior management, for many reasons, whether it be for the purposes of their performance evaluation or obtaining an acting or higher-level position.

There's definitely an insecurity in that regard among both anglophones and francophones, and insecurity is omnipresent across Canada when it comes to bilingualism.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** What I'm trying to understand, in fact, is whether a large percentage of anglophones are uncomfortable speaking English.

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** I think they're definitely more comfortable speaking English. They very often want to speak English. They very much appreciate simultaneous translation at meetings attended by both anglophones and francophones.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** My next question may be a tough one. Is it efficient to work in the language of one's choice?

Wouldn't it be better to have a common language in the workplace?

What happens when one person wants to speak French but the other wants to speak English?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** Well, that's a little more...

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** There's a philosophical aspect to your question.

I think the situation calls for cooperation, healthy communication and respect.

I see the Chair is waving the red card; I'm saved by the red card.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** That's a question that's hard to answer.

**The Chair:** But it's not like in soccer; we don't eject you. Stay with us because you'll be participating with Mr. Boulerice in the final two-and-a-half-minute round.

We are listening, Mr. Boulerice.

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Barrière, a little earlier, you made a remark that struck me. You said there might ultimately be a shortage of francophone employees in the federal public service.

Based on your experience in recent years, what might explain the lack of a critical mass of francophones or bilingual people in certain regions?

• (1930)

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** That's a very good question, Mr. Boulerice.

What explains that from a hiring standpoint?

All departments propose revisions to their staff every year. They try to determine why their employees, and even possibly citizens, have to wait for services in French. I can't explain that to you.

I think that, in this type of forum, and in the context of communications that one might have with the Treasury Board and Ms. Joly, we could review the current statistics. It might even be quite easy to determine what percentage of the population the francophone community of Canada represents and to modify the offer of French-language and bilingual services based on that.

That being said, we absolutely feel that the francophone community is underrepresented in the public service.

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice:** It's important to note that an emergency, crisis or technical problem is often used as an excuse to disregard the rights of francophones.

Do you think the fact that there's a pandemic or emergency justifies systematically setting aside French within the public service?

**Mr. Yvon Barrière:** No, not at all.

We're a minority, even though there are millions of francophones. That's why I referred to discrimination earlier. In the context of a pandemic, it's even more important to provide all the information in both official languages to public servants, and thus indirectly to Canadians, in a satisfactory manner and as promptly as possible.

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

Mr. Barrière, you are the executive vice-president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada for the Quebec Region. On behalf of all the members of the committee, I want to thank you for participating in and contributing to our study. We look forward to seeing you again.

We will suspend for only two minutes so we can welcome the next witnesses.

• (1930)

(Pause)

• (1935)

**The Chair:** We will resume.

The committee is meeting today to discuss Challenges of the Parliamentary Interpretation Service in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

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

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

A reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[*English*]

Interpretation in this video conference will work very much as it does in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either floor, English or French.

[*Translation*]

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly.

[*English*]

When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

[*Translation*]

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for this second part of our meeting.

You will have seven and a half minutes to make your opening remarks, followed by a round of questions from members of the committee.

Mr. Beaulieu has a point of order.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** We seem to have interpretation problems. I heard only a small portion of what you said in English.

**The Chair:** I will repeat that part. We can do a test.

[*English*]

Interpretation in this video conference is similar to a regular committee meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of either floor, English or French.

[*Translation*]

Did the interpretation work, Mr. Beaulieu?

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** Yes, it works.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** All right.

I would like to welcome our witnesses.

We have Pam Aung-Thin, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister for Communications and Public Affairs, from the Department of Health.

We also have Manon Bombardier, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister for the Health Products and Food Branch.

The members may share their speaking time. The last five-minute round will be eliminated so that we can adopt the budget for our next study.

Ms. Aung-Thin and Ms. Bombardier, I will indicate to you when you have one minute left. The red card means that your speaking time is over.

Ms. Aung-Thin, you have the floor for seven and a half minutes.

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Communications and Public Affairs, Department of Health):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for inviting me to appear before the Committee today.

I appreciate this opportunity to describe how Health Canada has been meeting the requirements of the Official Languages Act as we keep Canadians informed as we fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

My name is Pamela Aung-Thin and, as you mentioned, I am the acting assistant deputy minister of the communications and public affairs branch, which provides services to both Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Accompanying me today is Manon Bombardier, acting associate assistant deputy minister of Health Canada's health products and food branch.

Our branches play an important part in the government's overall response to the COVID-19 outbreak in Canada.

I want to begin by saying that communicating with Canadians in the official language of their choice is more than just a legal or policy requirement for us—it is a core communications practice.

During a crisis, clear, effective communication takes on even greater importance because being misunderstood can put the health and safety of Canadians at risk. We take this responsibility seriously and it shapes how we do business every day.

The expectations regarding the use of official languages in government communications are quite clear. Under the Official Languages Act, federal institutions are required to communicate and offer services to the public in both official languages.

The Government of Canada's policy on communications and federal identity provides further guidance. It requires that government departments provide information in both official languages in accordance with the act, and that they consider the needs of official language minority communities in Canada in their communications.

We, in the health portfolio, strive to meet these requirements in all our communications. For example, every news release, statement or written product we issue is released in both English and French at the same time. Information published on our website is also posted simultaneously in both English and French.

During the pandemic, we are also making key information about COVID-19 and the government's efforts to reduce the spread of the disease available in many other languages, including several indigenous languages.

When we host media availabilities and technical briefings, there are always experts available from Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada to speak in both official languages.

Finally, within the department and the agency, communication with employees takes place in both official languages and employees are encouraged to work in the language of their choice.

Employees and managers are assessed at mid-year and year-end on performance objectives related to language requirements in their performance agreement.

These are standard communication practices in the Government of Canada—practices that we endeavour to follow at all times. The COVID-19 pandemic has not changed this. While this unprecedented crisis has presented some additional challenges, we always respect official languages.

Our top priority is protecting the health and safety of Canadians. Since the beginning of the pandemic that has meant doing everything possible to control the spread of COVID-19. This includes facilitating access to products needed to slow the spread of the disease.

With the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, there was unprecedented demand for products to limit the spread of COVID-19, including hand sanitizers and disinfectants, household and workplace cleaners, and hand and body soaps. For these products, labels are a key source of information for Canadians about how to use these products. Normally, every product sold in Canada requires a bilingual label.

At the beginning of the pandemic, demand had increased exponentially, to the point where it was often very difficult to find many of these products on store shelves or through online retailers.

- (1940)

Foreign suppliers of hand sanitizers and hard surface disinfectants indicated that they were producing these products with a global English-only label, and that they would ship only to countries accepting English-only labelling.

Due to the unprecedented demand, and to ensure that Canadians would continue to have access to these products to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Health Canada implemented interim policies in March and April 2020 to facilitate access, on a temporary and emergency basis, to certain products labelled in only one official language. To note, hand sanitizers manufactured in Canada with unilingual labels could only be sold in unilingual regions, based on the language of that region.

Health Canada closely monitored the supply of hand sanitizers and disinfectants. As supply began to stabilize, a return to bilingual labelling was proactively initiated on May 9, 2020, with a transition period permitted until June 8, 2020 for existing products. Health Canada required importers to provide information at the point of sale directing consumers to bilingual label information online.

Our interim measures helped address the high demand for health products necessary to help slow the spread of COVID-19.

In addition, the interim measures for products manufactured in Canada supported the tremendous mobilization of the Canadian business community to support the fight against COVID-19. All across the country, we witnessed remarkable collaboration from companies and industries that stepped up and offered their support, expertise, and resources to address critical supply needs.

To conclude, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed so much for Canadians over the past year. However, it has not changed the health portfolio's commitment to communicating and serving Canadians in the official language of their choice.

Despite the exceptional circumstances, I am confident that the health portfolio has continued to meet its obligations under the Official Languages Act throughout this prolonged crisis.

We are now happy to answer any questions you may have.

• (1945)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for your remarks.

We'll now move on to a six-minute question period.

Mr. Blaney will ask the first question.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome the deputy minister of health to our committee.

I'd like to begin by congratulating you for your management of so many aspects of the pandemic. You have shown a great deal of flexibility.

Two companies in my riding also helped out during the pandemic. These were Plastiques Moore, which provided equipment to help distribute the vaccines, and Distillerie des Appalaches, which switched from making gin to producing disinfectant. It was easy for them to obtain an authorization number. There was a great deal of flexibility.

Where I feel that you failed was in official languages. I was disappointed in your testimony, Ms. Aung-Thin. I had expected more transparency.

The Commissioner of Official Languages was highly critical. He said that: "In times of crisis, it is all the more critical for the federal government to ensure that all Canadians have access at all times to essential information in the official language of their choice, regardless of where in the country they live."

Given that the initial health information was released only in English, and that in your presentation you acknowledged that language is a safety issue, you're more or less confirming that the Commissioner of Official Languages was right when he said that in

times of crisis official languages go out the window. I would have expected more transparency.

Why not acknowledge that you might have done better, for example, by communicating to a greater extent in French during this critical period? You might then be able to respond more efficiently in any future emergencies.

**Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I have a point of order before the deputy minister speaks.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Ms. Lalonde.

**Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde:** There seems to be a technical problem for the people listening to our conversations via telephone. Unfortunately, they have not had access since we returned from the pause, before our two witnesses spoke in the second hour.

I'm sorry, Mr. Blaney and Ms. Aung-Thin.

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

I'll check with the clerk to make sure that everyone, including the technical team, has access to the meeting.

Don't worry, Mr. Blaney, I've stopped the clock until the problem has been dealt with.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** I'll rephrase my question. What has Health Canada learned from its missteps in managing official languages during the pandemic, and which were pointed out by the Commissioner of Official Languages, to ensure that they are not repeated in the likely but unwelcome event of a new emergency arising?

**The Chair:** Please wait a moment.

I'm stopping the clock again, because I am waiting for a sign from the clerk to know whether the problem has been dealt with.

**The Clerk:** Give me just a moment, please, Mr. Chair and members of the committee. I'm going to check that everything is working before continuing.

**The Chair:** We're going to pause the meeting until the situation has been corrected.

• (1950)

(Pause)

• (1955)

**The Chair:** We are now resuming the meeting.

Mr. Blaney, you've used one minute and 50 seconds of your six minutes of speaking time. You asked a question and I would therefore ask one of our two witnesses to answer it.

You have the floor, Ms. Aung-Thin.

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll answer first, and then hand over to my colleague.

Communication in both official languages is always a priority for us at Health Canada. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we found ourselves in a new situation, and it was definitely a challenge to answer all the requests for documents.

We have nevertheless worked hard to increase capacity to make sure that we can continue to communicate in both official languages at all times. We've added more translation services within the department. We also have purchase orders with several translation companies for additional services. We are continuing to look into all possible ways of facilitating communication with the public in both official languages.

I would also like to mention that when we publish documents or send out news releases for the public, whether online or elsewhere, they are always published in both official languages at the same time.

I will now give the floor to my colleague.

• (2000)

**Ms. Manon Bombardier (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Health Products and Food Branch, Department of Health):** Thank you, deputy minister.

As a regulatory organization for health products, Health Canada is required to communicate on a regular basis with regulated industries and others, to inform them of some of the measures we introduced hastily to allow ready access to essential health products to combat COVID-19.

We also have to communicate quickly with consumers if, for example, any products are a health risk. We do this through our website. We also have to communicate such information to health professionals, those who administer these health products or who work in hospitals and long-term care facilities, so that they have the information they need to protect themselves and their patients.

All information is available on our website in both official languages. We also email bilingual information on new policies to the industries we regulate.

I can therefore assure you that we take our role of regulating health products in a bilingual environment seriously, and that we comply with the requirements of the Official Languages Act.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you.

We know that you are committed to providing services to consumers and industries in both official languages, but our study is on the pandemic. In this instance, the people of Canada were your public, and they were and still are exposed to a risk. As you know, we are near the end of the second wave, and would like to avoid a third.

Now during this critical period, the person in charge of health communications had trouble expressing herself in French. I would suggest that you come up with solutions to avoid situations like this. We need to learn from the mistakes that were pointed out by the Commissioner of Official Languages. In a crisis, as you have acknowledged, people turn to words that they have in common, and their mother tongue is extremely important.

What I mean to say is that if you normally communicate in both official languages, but neglect one of those languages in a crisis, this constitutes a threat to the health and safety of some citizens. That is what we understood from the commissioner's words. We want to avoid the possibility of this situation occurring again and francophones being treated like second-class citizens in Canada.

**The Chair:** There are 15 seconds left for an answer.

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** Dr. Tam, Canada's chief public health officer, gives her presentations in English, but Dr. Howard Njoo, the deputy chief public health officer, does so in French.

So even though it's not the same person, the messages are delivered in both official languages by two Public Health Canada senior officials, to ensure that all Canadian citizens are updated on COVID-19 news.

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

Mr. Arseneault, you have the floor for the next six minutes.

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

I note that 12 minutes went by between the first and final questions from my colleague Mr. Blaney. I would like to have the same amount of speaking time, please.

Ms. Aung-Thin, you said something at the very beginning that struck me, a francophone outside Quebec from the bilingual province of New Brunswick. At the very outset, you said that for Health Canada, communicating in both official languages was a core communications practice and not just a legal obligation.

That means a context of proactive offer, in which one does not need to be whipped, pinched or have one's knuckles rapped to fulfil one's linguistic obligations. You do so proactively even before the legal obligation is there.

To return to my colleague Mr. Blaney's comments, the Commissioner of Official Languages did in fact single out Health Canada in connection with its capacity to communicate in both official languages at the very beginning of the pandemic. However, the commissioner also said that Health Canada promptly corrected the situation and he seemed satisfied.

Nevertheless, we can ask what went wrong. How can essential products like those mentioned have been labelled in only one official language?

The products you mentioned included disinfectants, hand sanitizers, household cleaners and soap. Why was it impossible, even in a pandemic, to obtain such essential products from the usual providers who make the bilingual labels?

My question is perhaps more for Ms. Bombardier.

• (2005)

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** Yes. Thank you for that question.

I'll give you a bit more background. As my colleague mentioned, at the beginning of the crisis, there was a huge demand for these products, particularly hand sanitizers. Compared to 2019, for the same period in March, demand was seven times higher; in May and June, it was 11 times higher.

I'm sure you noticed that there were no hand sanitizers, and very few surface disinfectants, on supermarket and store shelves. At the time, foreign exporters wanted to export products like these to Canada, but they were refusing to export them with bilingual labels, because they didn't have the capacity to produce them at the time.

Concurrently, many small Canadian businesses, like distilleries and breweries, changed their business model temporarily to contribute to the cause. Most of them were small enterprises that distributed locally in their neighbourhoods. We allowed these small businesses to distribute their products in the official language of their region. For example, if they happened to be in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, they could distribute their products with French labels. If they were in a bilingual region, they had to have bilingual labels. If they were in a unilingual English region, the labels could be only in English.

**Mr. René Arseneault:** Ms. Bombardier, am I to understand that the usual suppliers we were doing business with before the pandemic continued to send us products labelled in both official languages at the usual rate?

Is it because of the shortage and increased demand for products that we had to go to foreign suppliers?

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** That's right. Demand had increased by as much a factor of 11.

In Canada, there was not enough production capacity, not only to fill the shelves, but in particular to protect front-line health professionals who had to provide treatment to patients in hospitals and residents in long-term care centres. We had to make sure that these products were available.

**Mr. René Arseneault:** Can you remind me how we managed to solve the problem? Is it because demand went down? Is it because we began to translate the labels ourselves or told people to order them online?

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** Well, Health Canada closely monitors supply and demand. That's what it did for antiseptics. From the very beginning of the pandemic in March, we closely monitored market supply and demand. We found, particularly for imports, that the supply was increasingly able to meet market demand.

It was in May that we abandoned the policy allowing unilingual labelling. We let Canadian companies that had labels in French only, for example, use up their stocks. They were entitled to a month-long transitional period. However, as of June 8, all Canadian companies and all importers had to provide label information in both official languages.

**Mr. René Arseneault:** I have a minute left to ask Ms. Bombardier or Ms. Aung-Thin a question. I believe once again that it's more for Ms. Bombardier.

Ms. Bombardier, how will what we have just gone through prepare us for a possible repetition of the situation if demand for essential products like disinfectants becomes 11 times higher than normal? What are you planning to do? How would you prepare for this eventuality?

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** Several factors are taken into account in making decisions on a policy like that. It's not taken lightly.

In this instance, we were closely monitoring supply and demand. Foreign exporters were interested and had the capacity to send us the products. Distribution in Canada was nevertheless limited, and more regional or local. It was all of these factors that lead us to make this policy decision.

• (2010)

**Mr. René Arseneault:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Arseneault and Ms. Bombardier.

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

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** I'd like to return to the matter of labelling on public health products. It's not uncommon for companies that receive a product with English-only labelling, to translate the information themselves and add it to make the labelling bilingual. That might have been one option.

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** Thank you for the question.

As of June 8, foreign importers could continue to ship products with a unilingual French or English label, but at the point of sale, they had to provide a website address where the information in both languages could be obtained. This information had to be readily available to consumers at the point of sale, whether in the form of a sticker directly on products like disinfectants, or on a sign mentioning the website that had the information in both languages.

We allowed this flexible arrangement to make sure that Canadians could have the information in both languages.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** People who don't have a computer don't have access to this information in both languages. That complicates things somewhat.

Let's take Canadian Tire, for example. If it had received a unilingual product like that, would it not have been easy for them to translate the label and add the French text? Could that have been a solution?

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** That would have been possible. Our approach was not to be prescriptive. We offered a great deal of flexibility to the producers and distributors and they could have done what you just suggested.

For foreign imports, there had to be at least a website containing the information so that consumers could have access to it at the point of sale.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** Many citizens contacted us to say that they had received unilingual English alert messages in francophone regions. I don't know whether you are aware of that.

A specific case was brought to my attention, and I submitted a complaint to the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. Crisis Services Canada doesn't offer SMS support in French. That was about two weeks ago. On its Facebook page, all visual information is in English, even though there is a little bit of French text. I don't think this organization is directly under your jurisdiction, but it receives funding from the Mental Health Commission of Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada. I don't know whether any action can be taken to have this information translated.

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin:** Thank you for your question.

As I said at the beginning, we always put out our information in both official languages at the same time. It's a little more difficult to force our partners to do the same. If one of our partners has not provided information in both official languages, we can discuss it with them, but we can't necessarily force them to follow the same rules.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** On their website, they mention two funding agencies. I believe that these are your department and the Mental Health Commission of Canada. It seems to me that it would be reasonable to ask this commission to provide services in French.

You keep saying that everything is done in French and English at the same time. However, the Commissioner of Official Languages and others besides me have found gaps. Earlier, for example, the Public Service Alliance of Canada said that it was very difficult to operate in French in Quebec.

Unless you are the exception that proves the rule, you must find that there are challenges in providing services in French. I'd like to hear what you have to say about that.

• (2015)

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin:** Thank you for your question.

In the branch, we handle everything related to the working environment and communications within the department. We organize information sessions and meetings with deputy ministers and managers in our department. We also oversee information for employees.

When we hold meetings, we all always ask participants to speak in English or French. We prepare their notes in both official languages, with part of each document written in English and the other in French. We always provide simultaneous interpretation services for francophones and anglophones. All of the documents we prepare for employees—

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** This means that all your videoconferences are in English and French. Is that correct?

**The Chair:** Mr. Beaulieu, I'm sorry to interrupt, but your speaking time is over.

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

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Aung-Thin and Ms. Bombardier, for being here with us this evening, at such a late hour.

Mr. Barrière, of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, said earlier that there were problems with bilingualism and respect for French, but that it varied from one branch or department to another. He wanted to separate the wheat from the chaff.

I trust, ladies, that your department will be among the top students and not the dunces in the class. We will carefully read the Commissioner of Official Languages' report for the outcome of his evaluation of the various departments.

I'd like to come back to the labelling issue. You must have expected a lot of questions about it today, since it's been in the news.

As one of the witnesses said, we're all in favour of complying with the Official Languages Act, unless there is a technical glitch, a crisis or an emergency. During the pandemic crisis, you had to deal with astronomical needs for certain products. You mentioned disinfectants and personal protective equipment, I believe.

What are you planning to do to avoid putting French aside every time there's an emergency?

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** Thank you very much for the question.

I can assure you that we're not putting French aside.

As I explained, several considerations come into play when a new policy is being established, particularly in an emergency. There are of course health products available to prevent infection and flatten the curve. We know that the curve climbed, particularly in the first few months of the pandemic, and even continued to do so afterwards.

With respect to our regulatory role, it was important to make sure that protective products were available to Canadians, and particularly to front-line healthcare staff treating infected patients and higher-risk patients in vulnerable populations. We took supply and demand into consideration, and it was very important to do so. We also monitored everything very closely. As soon we saw that the situation had stabilized, we adjusted our policies.

We never allowed information to be given out in only one language. As of June 8, all information had to be made available in both official languages, whether for disinfectants, hand sanitizers, soap or any of the other products we've talked about.

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice:** In passing, however, I'd like instead to know what the plan is for the future, and what measures are being envisaged to prevent this from happening again.

You mentioned, Ms. Bombardier, that you had allowed products to be distributed, and placed on grocery store shelves, based on the official language of the region. That got me thinking. If I may, I'd like to ask another question.



What's the official language of New Brunswick?

• (2020)

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** The Treasury Board, several years ago now, developed a policy on the bilingual regions of Canada. Some regions are recognized as being primarily francophone, others as primarily anglophone, and others as bilingual. We used the Treasury Board system to allow products being distributed to have a French label in unilingual francophone regions, and an English label in unilingual anglophone regions.

I can assure you that in most instances, these were small businesses like breweries and distilleries that had altered their activities quickly in response to the crisis. Distribution was thus on a local basis. In bilingual regions, labels were still required to have both languages.

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice:** We are in fact very grateful to all these distilleries for having shifted their focus to help our health workers and the population.

Ms. Aung-Thin, you said earlier that when working with partners—and I understood this to mean private companies, or perhaps subcontractors—they could not necessarily be required to follow the same rules.

Why, when awarding contracts, can a clause not be included requiring compliance with official languages policy?

As soon as the private sector gets into the act, it's as if we no longer had to worry about it. However, when a contract is awarded to someone, by agreement, there's no reason why any conditions we want can't be included.

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin:** Thank you for the question.

I was speaking more about partners that are not corporations, but rather not-for-profit organizations. It really depends on the contract, the type of partnership and the kind of work. Specific conditions can be included, but these depend on each situation.

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice:** I would strongly recommend doing so in a way that complies with official languages.

I would like to ask a final, and very brief, question.

The Public Health Agency of Canada apparently sent out alerts in English only. The person who spoke before me asked pretty much the same question.

Can you explain how something like that, which strikes me as truly problematic, can have occurred?

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin:** This had to do with the COVID Alert app. One of our suppliers made a mistake, and sent out English-only messages to francophone clients. We found out about the mistake quickly and spoke to the supplier, who then sent out an apology, explaining what had happened, with reassurance that it would not be repeated.

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

We are now going to move on to the final round of questions.

Mr. Williamson and Mr. Mazier are going to share five minutes of speaking time.

Mr. Williamson, you have the floor.

**Mr. Marc Dalton:** Mr. Williamson is absent. Mr. Godin and Mr. Dalton will speak instead.

**The Chair:** Sorry.

You have the floor, Mr. Dalton.

**Mr. Joël Godin:** I'll be the one to speak first. I'll share my speaking time with Mr. Dalton.

**The Chair:** It will be a pleasure. Over to you, Mr. Godin.

**Mr. Joël Godin:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies, my first question will be very short.

I'm curious. Ms. Aung-Thin, you are the Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Communications and Public Affairs, at Health Canada. Ms. Bombardier, you are the Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Health Products and Food Branch.

How long have you been in these acting positions?

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin:** Thank you for your question.

I've been in this position at the Communications and Public Affairs Branch in an acting capacity since September.

**Mr. Joël Godin:** Okay.

What about you, Ms. Bombardier?

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** That's also when I took this position on an acting basis.

**Mr. Joël Godin:** When are you going to be officially appointed to these positions?

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** That's not something we can answer, unfortunately.

**Mr. Joël Godin:** Ladies, in her opening remarks, Ms. Aung-Thin mentioned among other things that you were facilitating access to essential products in order to slow the spread of the disease. That's altogether laudable. However, I believe that it's important to communicate effectively with people so that they can take appropriate action. It's a health issue. If people don't receive instructions in their language, it creates a health risk. The goal is to properly protect people.

The fact that it took the Government of Canada three months before requiring that both official languages be used on labels and in publications makes me uneasy. As people say in many other contexts, COVID-19 has been blamed for a lot of things.

I'm sorry, but you haven't convinced me about the fact that we were in a crisis and needed time to find solutions. It took three months. It would have been easy to send translated information to retailers, who would then simply have had to make black and white photocopies onsite. I find that this aspect has been neglected.

Were you both involved in the decision to put up with this for three months?

I'd like to hear your comments on this.

• (2025)

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** Thank you for your question.

When the policy was formulated, I was the Director General of the Natural and Non-prescription Health Products Directorate and was therefore involved in the policy decision.

As I explained earlier, it was a decision that took many factors into account, including supply and demand and the large volume of exports that were to arrive in Canada to help flatten the curve, which was climbing exponentially, and the need to protect the health and safety of Canadians.

It did indeed take three months. It's nevertheless important to point out that early on in the pandemic, many hand sanitizers had already received marketing authorization. Unfortunately, the manufacturers did not have the capacity to produce more. That's why we increased the volume—

**Mr. Joël Godin:** I understand, Ms. Bombardier.

I'm satisfied with your answer.

Would you do the same thing, which would lead to the same time lag, if there were a future pandemic?

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** Everything would depend on the circumstances of the pandemic and the factors in play at the time. We would take them all into consideration.

We always factor in our official languages obligations. We take them very seriously.

In this instance, things were extremely urgent and the health of Canadians was crucial. With due regard to all the factors at the time, that's the decision that was made—

**Mr. Joël Godin:** Excuse me, Ms. Bombardier. I don't have much speaking time.

I'd like to give the time I have left to my colleague, Mr. Dalton.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** There is just over a minute and a half remaining.

**Mr. Marc Dalton:** Thank you.

I was disappointed and surprised by what you said earlier in your remarks, which you gave us ahead of time and which Mr. Arsenault also read. You wrote and said: "...communicating with Canadians in the official language of their choice is more than just a legal or policy requirement for us — it is a core communications practice."

You went on to say that, "...federal institutions are required to communicate and offer services to the public in both official languages."

And elsewhere, you added: "For example, every news release, statement or written product we issue is released in both English and French at the same time."

This isn't what really happened.

It isn't what happened in Vancouver. I know that the francophone community found itself in difficult circumstances, because of the many immigrants who could only speak French. There was a lot of

frustration, because we had to rely on the province for information. Fortunately, we have a provincial minister who speaks both languages.

In my view, Health Canada really failed to meet its obligations in this area.

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

Would it be possible, ladies, to give a very brief 15-second answer?

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin:** Thank you.

We've taken note of the committee members' comments.

When I said that we communicated in both official languages, I wasn't referring only to the national capital region, but everywhere in Canada, in every region.

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

[*English*]

Now, for five minutes, we have Terry Duguid. Maybe he is going to share his time with Ms. Lalonde.

Mr. Duguid, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Terry Duguid (Winnipeg South, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I will share my time. Thank you to our witnesses.

Mr. Mazier and I are from Manitoba, and Manitoba has a very significant francophone community in St. Boniface, but also in southern Manitoba. I believe there are a few French communities in Mr. Mazier's district.

French seniors residences and 100% francophone communities, entirely French-speaking, were impacted by the pandemic. I certainly got the sense during the pandemic that these communities felt very underserved. The Manitoba provincial briefings were 100% in English, even Radio-Canada asked questions in English.

Could you comment on Health Canada's service to the region, and how you felt you did in this pandemic? I'm very interested in the next health crisis, and how you might improve service.

• (2030)

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin:** Thank you for the question. I will respond in English.

I feel that we performed very well, as far as official languages go. We hold press conferences. We offer our spokespeople in both official languages. Questions are responded to in English and French, depending on the language in which the questions are posed. We also offer simultaneous translation for those who may not speak the language that is being used. Media can ask questions in the language of their choice, and are responded to in that language.

**Mr. Terry Duguid:** Ms. Lalonde.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde:** Thank you.

First of all, ladies, I would like to thank you for all the work that was done.

I represent the riding of Orleans. I have only recently been elected at the federal level, so some of the things you were discussing are unfamiliar to me.

I'd like to return to one item in particular. You said that you had agreed to English labelling in designated unilingual regions. And yet, as my colleagues mentioned, there are francophones across Canada, even though the percentage is not always high enough for the region to be designated bilingual.

What have you learned from the situation we're discussing today in terms of health and safety? And how are we going to prepare for the future?

I'm worried about the rules you followed for providing information in unilingual regions, where there might also be francophones. It's an issue that was often raised in the region and in the riding of Orleans.

I'd like to hear what you have to say about this.

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** Thank you for your question.

It's a Treasury Board Secretariat policy on recognizing certain unilingual francophone and unilingual anglophone regions. It doesn't mean that the community that speaks the other language does not exist in these regions, but rather that most of the people there speak the language recognized by the Treasury Board Secretariat. In these regions, we actually followed this practice for three months, early on in the pandemic. We allowed unilingual labelling in English or French for small businesses in these communities distributing products locally. However, in designated bilingual regions, bilingual labelling was always required.

It's important to note that there were very few products, compared to the 5,000 or so hand sanitizers we've authorized since the beginning of the pandemic. The sanitizers made by breweries and distilleries, which are what is at issue here, represent a low percentage of the hand sanitizers marketed during the pandemic.

**Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde:** Thank you, Ms. Bombardier.

What have we learned from all this? How are we going to make sure we're better prepared for another pandemic? It's not that I'm expecting another pandemic when we're currently living in one, but that's the reason for our study. What lessons have been learned by health Canada?

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** Several factors come into play in reaching decisions on policies like these. We take it seriously and shoulder our official languages responsibilities. We make sure that Canadians are provided with the information they need to protect themselves from health risks.

• (2035)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Bombardier and Mrs. Lalonde.

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

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** I'll pick up from where I left off earlier.

You are assuring us, then, that at all your meetings and videoconferences, interpretation services are available, or that things take place bilingually.

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin:** I mentioned official departmental meetings earlier. As for your question, we often organize meetings for all employees, and we make sure that these are held in both official languages. When we prepare speeches for senior officials, and communications for all employees, we always make sure that documents are available in both official languages. We also make sure that all briefing notes include a percentage of content in French and a percentage of content in English, and that interpretation services are available for employees.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** You're saying then that all meetings and all documents are always available in both official languages.

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin:** I'm speaking about official documents provided to all employees.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** What about working meetings and internal communications with employees? Are you saying these are all bilingual as well?

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin:** We always encourage employees to speak the language of their choice at internal management and working group meetings. We arrange for these meetings to be held in both languages, make internal communications available as soon as possible in both languages, and make employees feel at ease to speak in the language of their choice.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** I have one final question for you. Are you currently requiring bilingual labelling or are we still in a situation in which it can be only in English, provided that there is an English version available online, for example?

**Ms. Manon Bombardier:** Thanks for the question.

Bilingual labelling is required for all Canadian manufacturers. We monitor this to ensure that companies are complying.

Importers are for the time being allowed to deliver products with a unilingual label, provided that the information is available at points of sale in both official languages.

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

Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu.

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

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

This is after all the Standing Committee on Official Languages, and that explains our concerns about bilingualism and the provision of services in both official languages under all circumstances.

I would like to use my two and a half minutes to broach another subject.

As you know, there was a serious incident at the Joliette hospital, in which Ms. Joyce Echaquan died in tragic circumstances. There was apparently no interpreter available at the hospital at the time it occurred, even though there was supposed to be one. I know that this does not fall within your jurisdiction, but it leads to the issue of the safety of members of first nations and indigenous communities. It can sometimes be a little more difficult to communicate with these communities, and to provide them with information. During the health crisis, they have been at even greater risk because of a host of other issues, including the shortage of housing.

Has your department made special efforts in recent months with respect to indigenous languages?

**Ms. Pam Aung-Thin:** Thank you for your question.

Yes, we have also been working hard on indigenous languages. We have been providing information in indigenous languages not only in writing, but also via video and other means. We have also been advertising on television stations run by indigenous communities.

We have also used Google Drive to send out information on various public health matters. We have content not only in French and English, but also in several non-official languages. There are 23 languages in all, at least three of which are indigenous languages. The people and leaders of these communities can therefore find this information in their mother tongue, even if it is neither English nor French, and disseminate it within their communities.

• (2040)

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice:** Thank you very much for your answer.

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

That's all the time we have for the representatives of the health department, Ms. Pam Aung-Thin, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister of the Communications and Public Affairs Branch, and Ms. Manon Bombardier, Acting Associate Assistant Deputy Minister of Health Canada's Health Products and Food Branch.

Ladies, on behalf of myself and the members of the committee, I thank you for having accepted our invitation and for having testified before us this evening. I wish you both a wonderful evening.

Dear committee members, I'd appreciate it if you could stay for another 10 minutes.

I see that Ms. Martinez Ferrada has her hand up.

Go ahead, madam.

**Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before moving on to the budget, I'd like to propose a motion to my colleagues. During the meeting, we frequently alluded to the reform presented by the minister. I'd like to bring a motion to invite the minister to testify before the committee so that we can ask her questions about her proposed reform. I'm hoping to get unanimous consent from the committee.

I'd also like to discuss with you, Mr. Chair, and with the clerk, when this meeting with the minister might take place. If we are go-

ing to discuss the reform at each meeting, then I think it's important to have the minister appear so that we can ask her questions.

**The Chair:** Okay, thank you. I've taken note of your request.

We need to proceed quickly, because our team of technicians will only be with us for 10 more minutes.

Mr. Blaney, you have the floor.

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I agree with the budget proposal. I believe that \$4,600 is the smallest budget I've ever seen for a study.

And I think Ms. Martinez Ferrada's suggestion is an excellent idea. Everyone is talking about it, and after all, we are the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Without a bill, we could at least meet the minister. I can tell you that I will immediately ask her when she will be tabling her bill. That will allow the minister to be prepared to give me an answer right away.

**The Chair:** I'll have to check with the clerk to see whether a motion is required, or if we can immediately set aside an appropriate time to receive the minister, if that's what the members of the committee would like.

What do you think, Madam Clerk?

**The Clerk:** Mr. Chair, because a notice of motion was not presented 48 hours in advance, it would require the unanimous consent of the committee to propose and debate a motion today, if that is what the committee members wish to do.

**The Chair:** Right. So let's get to it quickly, without any debate, because—

**Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

**Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada:** Another committee I sit on found itself in the same situation: without unanimous consent, there is no debate.

**The Chair:** That's correct.

Mr. Beaulieu, you have the floor.

**Mr. Mario Beaulieu:** Is there a timeframe?

I'd like us to be able to at least begin the study of the status of French in Quebec. This study has been postponed repeatedly.

**The Chair:** We're getting to it, Mr. Beaulieu.

I'd like to inform the committee members that the witnesses for next Thursday have been confirmed. We'll be welcoming representatives from *Impératif français* and the Quebec Community Groups Network, as well as former senator Joyal, and lawyer and professor Érik Labelle Eastaugh.

Just a reminder as well that when we return from the break, we've assigned priority to Statistics Canada. After that, the following Thursday, we need to study the report on interpreters, before the next break.

- (2045)

In view of this schedule, I would like to ask the committee members whether there is unanimous consent on inviting the Minister of Official Languages, Ms. Joly at an appropriate moment. If so, it would mean that we wouldn't need a motion.

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

- (2050)

**The Chair:** We will therefore look into this invitation and I'll keep you informed of the outcome.

I will now return to Mr. Beaulieu's comment about the study on government measures to protect and promote French in Quebec and Canada. A few minutes ago, we sent you a request for approval of

a \$4,600 budget for this study. The amount can be explained by the fact that our work will be done primarily by videoconference and there will be virtually no one present in the room.

Accordingly, I am asking the members of the committee for approval of this \$4,600 budget so that we can begin our study on Thursday this week.

(Motion agreed to)

**The Chair:** To conclude, I would like to thank you all, as well as the technical team, the clerk, and the IT analysts and specialists who have been with us this evening.

The meeting is adjourned.

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