

Addendum to QCGN Brief for House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Language's Study on Official Languages and the COVID-19 Pandemic

This addendum was produced in response to questions received by the QCGN during its appearance on December 10th, 2020.

Issues:

The community sector filled several communication gaps from both levels of government at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Operationally, the QCGN became a major resource for many in our community to learn about government protocols and to understand the many aid packages being rolled out. Announcements were being made daily, often before details to access support had been worked out. The QCGN coronavirus hub was frequented by many in our community as a reliable source of information presented in English. The QCGN hub brought together information from three levels of government, and included input from civil society organizations, and other community stakeholders.

This type of work became common for many community sector organizations who shifted operations to support the needs of the less fortunate and most vulnerable, usually without additional funding. It was common for community sector organizations to make in-person visits to vulnerable members of their community to make sure information was getting through.

Additionally, a major miscommunication for the English-speaking community regarding the Covid-19 pandemic began on the week of March 30th, 2020, when a French version of a 24-page printed self-care guide began arriving at the doors of all Quebecers. This distribution continued for around 2 weeks. On the second page of the document was a message, in French, that noted where an English copy could be accessed on a website.

The distribution of a French only printed version of the Covid-19 self-care guide had adverse consequences and effects on the English-speaking community. Firstly, while much of our community is highly bilingual, our older population tends to be less bilingual and less connected to the internet. Our most vulnerable population was not provided with proper health and safety information during a serious health crisis. The government's initial response was to make the guide available online and to publicize this information in French. For seniors, and other vulnerable and less affluent groups, access to internet is not always available. Additionally, not everyone can easily navigate the internet. Therefore, the solution the government proposed would not adequately provide health and safety information to all those who needed it in English in a timely fashion.

The QCGN spent several of the following weeks imploring the Quebec government to distribute an English language guide to all Quebecers. We wrote letters to government officials and published pieces in the news to pressure the government to act. At first, the government of Quebec kept reassuring concerns by mentioning that the information was available in English, online. However, it made no attempts to solve the issue for those who could not access or navigate the internet. For several more weeks, efforts by the QCGN and the English-community were rebuffed. It should be noted that articles 15 and 89 of the Charter

of the French Language, allows use by the government of a language other than and in addition to French, and article 22 foresees this possibility when it relates to health and safety.

Through the QCGN's advocacy efforts the Government of Quebec did finally mail out around 800,000 English-versions of the guide to Quebec taxpayers who had previously requested to receive their Revenue Quebec documents in English. These began arriving to households in late May/early June and inserts of the guide were also placed into major English newspapers along with ads explaining how to access online information. By this time of course, we were coming off the peak of the first wave; for many the information was arriving two months after the French version, and for some too late to have the intended public health effect.

In between the time both guides were delivered, many non-profit organizations serving the English-speaking community spent some of their scarce resources to have the information translated for wider dissemination to citizens.

Recommendations:

It is paramount that during a health crisis information be available in both official languages at the same time and should be made as widely available as possible. The internet is a great tool, but the digital divide is real. High-speed internet is not universally available and is rare outside of urban centres. And even where it is available, it is not economically feasible or is beyond the technical ability of the most vulnerable.

Despite our best efforts, it remains unclear whether a plan has been created to ensure the mass distribution of relevant information in both official languages, to all, during the next public health emergency. This was not the first time a health emergency exposed problem of this nature and it will not be the last. Therefore, steps must be put in place to ensure this does not happen again.

- Encourage consultations with community organizations to assess needs of minority communities and ensure emergency funds can be made available.
- Encourage the Quebec government to devise a plan for the creation and dissemination of health and safety guidelines for any future public health emergencies.
- The Federal Government could enhance the Official Languages Health Program which aims to improve access to health services for Official Language Minority Communities. This federal program received funding under the Action Plan for Official Languages - 2018-2023: Investing in Our Future. While the program is not specifically designed for this, it could be improved to ensure that all health and safety information is created and distributed in all provinces in both official languages.