March 9th, 2019

Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage (CHPC)
Sixth Floor, 131 Queen Street, House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Re: Support for Indigenous Sign Languages

This brief is to express our perspective and opinion that the Indigenous Language Act is missing one key element for the Indigenous Deaf Peoples in Canada. Indigenous Deaf Peoples wish to have Indigenous Sign Languages acknowledged and recognized by our federal government in the Indigenous Language Act, Bill C-91. It appears that Indigenous Deaf Peoples were not entirely involved or included in the consultations during 2017-2018. This is our opportunity to share our perspectives and opinions. Thank you for taking the time to read our brief.

Introduction

First, we will introduce our Society’s mission, vision, and work to give a full description of the host organization for our Indigenous Sign Language Council working collectively for this cause. Then we will give a brief background, drawing from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). We will list the sample Indigenous Sign Languages that we want to provide to illustrate the importance of Indigenous Sign Languages be included in the Indigenous Language Act as an amendment. We describe how not only Indigenous Deaf Peoples use visual, gestural and sign languages but hearing Indigenous Peoples also make use of “Hand Talk” and visual gestures for communication. We will include a section on historical accounts about Indigenous Sign Languages. Finally, our Council members’ biographies will be in the end of the document for your reference.

BC Hummingbird Society for the Deaf (BCHSD) is receiving support from the Canadian Association of the Deaf-Association des Sourds du Canada (CAD-ASC), specifically from the Indigenous Director-at-Large Chad Wolfe. The BCHSD is the host of a Council focused on Indigenous Sign Language recognition and collaboratively working with the CAD-ASC. The collective goal is to have Indigenous Sign Languages recognized in the Indigenous Language Act (ILA), as mandated by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

BCHSD Mission, Vision and Work

First, the BCHSD wishes to introduce the organization, with its mission, vision, and work:
Our Mission

The BC Hummingbird Society for the Deaf is committed to a vision that creates opportunities for members to access and engage in traditional knowledge, language, and culture. We recognize that having a sense of community and belonging is important for building and maintaining a strong sense of self as an Indigenous Deaf person.

Our Vision

Our work focuses on issues such as achieving equality and access for Indigenous Deaf Peoples.

Our Work

Since 2017, BC Hummingbird Society for the Deaf has partnered with Indigenous Deaf communities to advance Indigenous Peoples’ rights and cultures across BC and Canada. The core of our efforts rest on the principles of supporting, amplifying efforts, and raising awareness of self-determination for Indigenous communities. BC Hummingbird Society for the Deaf provides a rights-based approach to our relationships that respects and strengthens Indigenous Deaf rights while honouring traditional Indigenous worldviews and lifeways. Our goal is to inform, create resources for, support access to information, bolster freedom of expression, and assist Indigenous communities to organize and shape their futures in ways consistent with their traditions, languages, and cultures.

ISL Council of BCHSD

While our council originates from British Columbia, our Council is working collectively with Indigenous Deaf from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba as well as the Yukon. We are a Council focused on Indigenous Sign Languages for all of Canada and represent some of the Indigenous Sign Languages of Turtle Island.

Our Council is made up of members from the following:

- Tr’onted hwech, Dawson City, Yukon
- Stó:lō and Tsimshian Nations, Terrace, British Columbia
- Tsleil-Waututh/Shíshálh (Coast Salish), British Columbia
- Secwepemc/Shuswap, Xat'sull First Nation, Soda Creek, British Columbia
- Ermineskin Cree Nation, Maskwacis, Alberta
- Montreal Lake Cree Nation (Woodland Cree), Saskatchewan
- Standing Buffalo Dakota Nation, Saskatchewan
- Brokenhead Ojibwa Nation, Manitoba
- Mi’kmaq, Nova Scotia

BCHSD will be encouraging Indigenous Deaf peoples in our provinces and territories across Canada to work with their governing organizations, and with the CAD-ASC to advocate for inclusion of Indigenous Deaf persons in the planning and decision making within their Indigenous communities. ISL Council values collaboration on this specific matter as we agree strength is in numbers, where possible.

In Canada, besides BCHSD, there are 2 officially recognized organizations or events that represent Indigenous Deaf Peoples that BCHSD is aware of, we are aware of two others: 1) Nunavut Deaf Society (NDS) and 2) Indigenous Deaf Gathering (IDG). The IDG was a one-time event that took place July 4-8, 2018 hosted by the Oneida Nation of the Thames. Event description: Indigenous Deaf Gathering was a conference where the Oneida Nation welcomed all
Indigenous Deaf people across Canada and the USA to learn and share their teachings, histories of Oneida and their new development of Oneida Sign Language. The Oneida Nation promoted services and organizations for First Nations Peoples that may not be aware of what they have to offer. The Oneida Nation addressed and met the needs of Indigenous in some aspects of mental health and well-being issues. To see the event flyer, click here, for more information, the IDG can be reached at idgathering@hotmail.com.

**UNDRIP and UNCRPD**

Our Council is unique in that as Indigenous Deaf Peoples, we have dual rights according to two United Nations Conventions and Declarations. Our Council can draw from both the UNDRIP and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Our Indigenous Deaf Peoples believe BCHSD needs to remind Canada that Indigenous sign languages are an Indigenous right, as well as an inherent right - to speak and pass on our languages — that is recognized internationally by the UNDRIP, which Canada has officially adopted. It is the Federal Government’s obligation to support such education and to do so in a manner that ensures that the quality of the education offered in the Indigenous ancestral sign languages must be equal to that offered in English and French.

> “Indigenous peoples have the rights to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.” Article 14(1) of the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

BCHSD is aware that the Declaration further outlines rights for Indigenous Languages additionally in UNDRIP Article 13, Article 14, and Article 16.

The language bill will advance the achievement of the objectives of the UNDRIP as it relates to Indigenous languages. UNDRIP gives particular attention to Indigenous Deaf peoples in the implementation of this Declaration as described in:

- **Article 21.2**: Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities.
- **Article 22.1**: Particular attention shall be paid to the rights and special needs of indigenous elders, women, youth, children and persons with disabilities in the implementation of this Declaration.

The UN CRPD has 5 articles that mention the significance of Sign Language rights - Articles 2, 9, 21, 24, & 30:

- **Article 2** - Definition: Whereas “Language” includes spoken and signed languages and other forms of non-spoken languages;
- **Article 9** - Accessibility:
  1. To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others…
  2. States Parties shall also take appropriate measures:
     c) To provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters;
- **Article 21 - Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information**
  States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice: b) Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages

- **Article 24 - Education**
  3. States Parties shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community. To this end, States Parties shall take appropriate measures, including
  b) Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community;
  4. In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language

- **Article 30 - Participation in cultural life, recreation, and sport**
  1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities: a) Enjoy access to cultural materials in accessible formats;
  4. Persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture.

The CRPD protects and ensures that we as persons with disabilities, and/or Deaf, have the rights to communication and having our sign language available to learn and promote on an equal basis as others, for example, spoken languages. Before we conclude with the United Nations section, a tidbit of information that you may, or may not be aware of, on December 19, 2017, there was a UN resolution officially adopted at the 72nd United (UN) General Assembly to declare September 23 as International Day of Sign Languages (IDSL). The first date of this celebration of IDSL was on Monday, September 24, 2018, Indigenous Sign Languages is also celebrated on this day as well.

**Assembly of First Nations**

BCHSD understands that this past July 2018, the Assembly of First Nations approved two Resolutions (#24-2018, #38-2018)** that emphasize that the AFN is mandated to assure the restoration of and promotion of the rights of Indigenous persons who are Deaf or have disabilities, specifically emphasizing the rights of sign languages and accessibility to all aspects of the AFN. Thus, we feel confident we can work in collaboration with the AFN.

**If you click here, you will see the individual files within a folder with both of the AFN-approved Resolutions in 2018 related to the restoration and promotion of the rights of Indigenous Deaf and persons with disabilities.

**Indigenous Sign Languages (ISL)**

Indigenous Sign Languages in Canada include the following examples:

- Coast Salish Sign Language (CSL);
- Inuit Sign Language (IUR) *Recognized in 2008*;
- Oneida Sign Language (OSL);
● Plains Indian Sign Language (PiSL):
  ○ Blackfoot
  ○ Cree
  ○ Dakota
  ○ Ojibwe
● Secwepemc Sign Language

This is not a comprehensive list of the Indigenous Sign Languages in Canada; this list is only a small sample of the Indigenous Sign Languages that our Council is working toward inclusion in the Indigenous Language Act. Our Council would like to see all Indigenous hand talking, and visual-gestural languages, including Sign languages, be included in the Act, which includes sign languages. Whereas there a spoken language there is likely a visual-gestural language within the Indigenous cultures.

Not only for Indigenous Deaf People

In addition to the spoken word, some Indigenous cultures historically have used sign languages to communicate. PSL was not necessarily for the deaf alone; people with full hearing capabilities also used the language to visually narrate their discussion. (See also Plains Indigenous Peoples in Canada.) For example, “Plains Sign Language (PSL), arguably the most well-known in Canada and the United States, is known to various First Nations that typically inhabited the Prairies, including the Cree, Dakota and Siksika. Other Indigenous sign languages include Plateau Sign Language, historically used by Salish, Ktunax and other Plateau peoples, and Inuit Sign Language, used in the Canadian Arctic.” (Source: The Canadian Encyclopedia: “Indigenous Languages of Canada” (Rice, Keren. “Indigenous Languages of Canada.” The Canadian Encyclopedia, Historica Canada, 13 August 2008, URL)

Further, “a commonality between the Deaf and Native American communities is their use of visual-gestural language (Davis, 2011; Davis & McKay-Cody, 2010; Paris & Wood, 2002). For centuries, Native Americans used a visual-gestural, or sign language, commonly referred to as Indian Sign Language (ISL), American Indian Sign Language (AISL), Native American Sign Language (NASL), or Plains Indian Sign Language (PiSL) (Alford, 2002; Davis & McKay-Cody, 2010; Farnell, 1995). In the Native American community, visual-gestural language was used primarily to ensure that Deaf and hard of hearing members of their tribes had communication, and secondarily to communicate with other tribes that did not share a common language (Alford, 2002).” (Source: Goff Paris, Damara. “Using Art-Based Ways of Knowing to Explore Leadership and Identity With Native American Deaf Women.” IN Education Journal, exploring our connective educational landscape. University of Regina. Autumn 2015, URL).

Indigenous People are losing their languages

Let’s think about the history of Indigenous Peoples in the last two hundred years. “Kill the culture and the stories die.” This is how huge numbers of the population were lost even before ethnographers could get to them.

Currently, most American Indian languages are endangered, and in modern times the traditional use of sign language among American Indians has been overlooked and understudied - perhaps due in part to misconceptions that it was primitive language that had long vanished from the landscape of North America. (Davis, Jeffrey E., “Hand Talk - Sign Language among American Indian Nations.” Cambridge University Press, p. 17)
The numbers of Indigenous using their cultural sign languages is not known but it appears many have been colonized for the most part by the introduction of American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des Signes du Quebec (LSQ). There are efforts around North America to preserve and revitalize these Indigenous sign languages for future generations. Our Council is working with people to preserve by written and digital means (including videos), a variety of Indigenous sign languages to reclaim and revitalize these lost systems of communication.

There are parallels in the Deaf community to the experiences of today’s Indigenous adults who survived residential schools. And this is where their indigenous languages went to “sleep” - perfectly described in these words: “Residential school students caught speaking these languages were punished. When your family is tortured for speaking their language, then you can come to ask why. Even after these schools were shut down, loss of language knowledge and the fear of speaking Indigenous languages lingered, and therefore inhibited the passing of these languages from one generation to the next.” (The Canadian Encyclopedia) For Deaf children, who went to the provincial schools of the Deaf, they experienced a variety of punishing actions, for example, a slap of the hands for using the different unfamiliar sign languages which were rooted from their home origins. The result is that these Indigenous students were assimilated and taught ASL or LSQ and eventually their indigenous languages were soon forgotten. These languages are not endangered because they were lost or not in use, they are endangered because they were stolen by force. American Sign Language and Langue des Signes Quebecois have displaced Indigenous signs in much the same way English and French have pushed spoken Indigenous languages into near extinction.

Conclusion

Eerik Lagerspetz wrote in his essay On Language Rights:

“It is argued that a right to use one’s own language can be justified by appeal to the practical role of language in human life. The ability to communicate effectively is essential for human autonomy and well-being...” Lagerspetz, E. Ethical Theory and Moral Practice (1998) 1: 181. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1009990824715

Language and culture are intimately connected, and as such - connected to the human experience. Quoting Melissa Malzkuhn, an American Deaf activist, academic, artist, and digital strategist; “To sign is HUMAN.” This is a call for equal access to sign language as a human right. The foundation of this campaign is a belief that with natural sign language exposure and acquisition, deaf children and adults build the cognitive foundations for language learning that leads into literacy skills. With little exposure or no experience with sign language, the consequences are harsh, with a lifelong impact in education and mental health struggles. Only 3% of deaf children, worldwide, receive education in sign language. This is even more crucial for Indigenous Deaf children and adults, as they have been colonized and deprived of their heritage and culture to the point of losing self-identity.

It is time for the Indigenous Language Act to recognize the visual-gestural languages and sign languages, official or not, as equal to the spoken Indigenous languages. Therefore, it is the position of the BCHSD to ensure the ILA creates an inclusive approach, as described below.
Changes recommended in Bill C-91 are:

In the Interpretation section, to include the words “Indigenous Deaf Peoples” as added to the list and defined; and

In the Interpretation section the words, “Indigenous Sign Languages” are defined as the first languages of the Indigenous peoples; and

Wherever the words “Indigenous languages” are mentioned, to add “Indigenous Sign Languages”; and

Wherever the words “Indigenous peoples” are mentioned, to add “Indigenous Deaf Peoples” and “Indigenous persons with disabilities”;

Therefore, the Indigenous Sign Language Council would support such an amendment to include and add the above words in the Act to show the support of revitalization, sharing, and passing on tradition, culture and value of the preservation of our signed languages.

Thank you in advance for your support, as we try to give a “voice” to the House of Commons, with the Standing Committee and federal government members about Indigenous Sign Languages in Bill C-91.

Thank you in advance and in full appreciation of your support.

All my relations,

Chad Wolfe, Chairperson
Indigenous Sign Language (ISL) Council
BC Hummingbird Society of the Deaf
Biographies (Cultural name, English name and First Nation location and brief description)

ᐣᐧᐠᐧᐠ, Chad Wolfe, Ermineskin Cree Nation, Maskwacis, Alberta

I am Ermineskin Nation representative. I am the chairperson for Indigenous Sign Language Council hosted by the BCHSD. I am Indigenous Director-at-Large on the board of the CAD-ASC. I am currently researching indigenous sign language with the (CAD-ASC), the main goal is to focus the work on indigenous Sign language rights. I am the Indigenous representative of Deaf Youth Canada (DYC) Committee and a board member of the BC Hummingbird Society of the Deaf (BCHSD).

I grew up very close to my mom, my sisters, my late nohkom Dorothy and my chapan Maryanne and my adopted dad Chris, and I have learned a lot about my roots and traditions. I grew up listening to stories and teachings which were passed on orally by my elders to the next generation, as well as many indigenous people. My adopted dad taught me about how the buffalo represents the qualities of perseverance, ceremonies, and teachings. With that, I have gained morals and values that created the foundation for my life and make me into the individual that I am today.

I am the father of three beautiful children: 2 sons, Zaylen and Eaglechild and a new baby daughter Mikwanis.

ᐘᐸᓇᒐᐦᑯᐢ, Crystal Wolfe, Ermineskin Cree Nation, Maskwacis, Alberta

I am a descendant of Chief Kiskiyo (Bobtail) of the Bear Hills and who was Treaty 6 signer for Maskwacis. My Cree and Deaf Culture are an important part of my life and I regard these cultures highly and promote them in my community as well as through education, ASL (American Sign Language) conferences, Nehiyawi ᓀᐦᐃᔭᐃᐧ  classes, various individuals and groups through my travels. I have met and become friends with Indigenous people from all over the world. I am North Alberta Director at for Alberta Cultural Society of the Deaf (ACSD). I am a board member of the BC Hummingbird Society of the Deaf (BCHSD).

As a First Nation, who has been travelling across the land for years. I am free spirited, with my love of the Creator, the land, and the people. I am very concerned about environmental issues and have much respect for the differences in people’s cultures, lifestyles, and traditional teachings. I can also read and write Syllabics (transliteration) which is a nehiyaw form of orthography. I am currently an ASL/Cree Instructor.

Siyámotsiya, Paula Wesley, Stó:lō and Tsimshian Nations, Terrace, British Columbia

As a child of two cultures, native and Deaf, I am a NorthWest Coast Artist and Carver, bringing a unique perspective to my art. In addition to my contemporary practice, I advocate the revitalization of Indigenous Languages and that also includes Indigenous Sign Languages in Canada. These are the oldest sign languages in the world. I do not want to lose them. What I want is for these languages to grow so these signs can be shared and transferred to disseminate stories and knowledge, but at the same time provide support for the people using them to engage in the mainstream. I am a board member of the BC Hummingbird Society of the Deaf (BCHSD).

“Culture is not dying. Through contact and the technological revolution Indigenous culture is constantly adapting, observing, and searching for its place in the world.”
Nicole “Nikki” Sellars, Secwepemc/Shuswap, Xat’sull First Nation, Williams Lake, British Columbia

I have two cultures: Deaf and First Nation. I have 3 languages: Secwepemc, English, and American Sign Language. When I was a little girl, my Secwepemc family and I communicated through Secwepemc Sign Language until I enrolled at a Deaf residential school. I still remember some of my Indigenous Sign Languages (ISL) as I began to use ASL for communication. I am still learning my native Secwepemc Sign Language and I want to see it revitalized.

It is my goal for all the Indigenous deaf communities all over Canada that our Indigenous Sign Languages to be preserved, carry on for new generations. I was the ISL Chairperson for the ISL, ASL and LSQ Awareness Day in Victoria, BC, on September 22, 2018. I am a board member of the BC Hummingbird Society of the Deaf (BCHSD).

I currently work as a tutor for college students learning ASL.

Rae-Mairi Richardson, Mi’kmaq, British Columbia

I grew up surrounded by multiple Indigenous Deaf and have the Indigenous culture ingrained in my values and I have been practically raised and adopted by the George family of the Tsleil-Waututh/Shíshálh First Nations. My great grandmother is Mi’kmaq and on the paternal side, my great grandmother originates from the Siberian tribe. I treasure Indigenous languages and cultures including Indigenous Sign Languages.

I am currently Director at Large for the Greater Vancouver Association of the Deaf (GVAD). I work as a freelance Deaf Interpreter, as a member of the professional sign language associations - Westcoast Association of Visual Language Interpreters (WAVLI) and the Canadian Association of Sign Language Interpreters (CASLI). Sometimes I volunteer across the border in Washington State with Deaf-Blind individuals. I am a board member of the BC Hummingbird Society of the Deaf (BCHSD).

In my work with students at BC School for the Deaf and Provincial Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services with Indigenous and non-indigenous youth and children and I enjoy it very much, sharing valuable cultural information and passing it along, in hopes for tradition and culture to carry forward.

Burton Bird, Montreal Lake Cree Nation/Woodland Cree, Saskatchewan

I am from Montreal Lake Cree Nation (Woodland Cree). I grew up mainstreamed at First Nations school, using Indigenous Sign Language (Cree) and it was not until age 18 that I finally learned American Sign Language (ASL) when I went to the Saskatchewan School for the Deaf at age 18 until 21. I have a Deaf sister, Patti Bird. I am Indigenous Director at Large of Saskatchewan Deaf Sports Association (SDSA).

I am an internationally recognized Deaf Hoop Dancer and been invited to perform at various events in the United States and Canada. I performed at the World Federation of the Deaf conference in Montreal in 2003 and Paris in 2015.

I teach youth Cree language and culture. It is my value to preserve traditional language and culture and pass it on to future generations.
Clarence “Clancy” Barber, Tr'ondëk Hwëch’in, Dawson City, Yukon

I am from the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, Yukon, my hobby is carving of Indigenous wood sticks, traditional Han Han dancer, attendance at Indigenous Pow Wows. As an Indigenous Deaf Person, I assisted with the ISL, ASL and LSQ Awareness Day in Whitehorse, Yukon on September 22, 2018. I am involved in this Council because I value the Indigenous Sign Languages to preserve and carry forward for future generations.

Kevin Goodfeather, Standing Buffalo Dakota Nation, Saskatchewan

I am from Standing Buffalo Dakota Nation. For many years, I have enjoyed going to many different Pow Wows and Indigenous events across Canada and the US. I have enjoyed meeting new people and visiting around in order to learn more about the Indigenous lifestyle. I personally attended the Intertribal Deaf Council in San Carlos, Arizona in 2006.

I am currently President of Saskatchewan Deaf Sports Association (SDSA), and Vice President, Regina Association of the Deaf (RAD).

I'm a part of this Indigenous Deaf group in order to support for our PISL/ISL since I would like to have it recognized and help to get our language alive and carry down the generation(s), not to have our language dying.

Resources & References

The Canadian Encyclopedia - [link](https://www.canadiantopics.com)


Davis, Jeffrey E. A Historical Linguistic Account of Sign Language Among North American Indian. The above descriptions as they appear here in this excerpt were taken out of order from the original list of descriptions first published by Long(1823). It was not until 1852 that the American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb editors published the “Indian Language of Signs” (Gallaudet 1852) that included the entire list of 104 Indian sign descriptions verbatim and in the same order as Long’s original 1823 publication. This document is available for download at this [link](https://www.hrc.on.ca)

Goff Paris, Damara. “Using Art-Based Ways of Knowing to Explore Leadership and Identity With Native American Deaf Women.” *IN Education Journal, exploring our connective educational landscape*. The University of Regina. Autumn 2015, [URL](https://www.uofr.ca)
