

SUMMARY: Addressing the challenges faced by interpreters during virtual parliamentary meetings and hearings / COVID-19

Submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Official Languages (LANG) in the context of the study on Challenges of the Parliamentary Interpretation Service in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic | **Tuesday, February 16, 2021**

Background

During the previous session of Parliament, the House of Commons Procedure and House Affairs Committee (PROC) held a study in the context of Parliamentary Duties and the COVID-19 Pandemic. As part of that study, on Monday, May 4th, 2020 Greg Phillips, in his capacity as national president of the Canadian Association of Professional Employees (CAPE), testified before the committee. Speaking on behalf of federal interpreters represented by CAPE, Mr. Phillips sounded the alarm on the strain and increasing number of injuries government interpreters have been sustaining during virtual parliamentary meetings held since the modified sittings of the House.

In his remarks, Mr. Phillips highlighted several concerns that have been brought to CAPE's attention including "technical glitches or poor compliance with interpretation standards and conditions." Injuries reported by interpreters include acoustic shock, headaches, nausea, and tinnitus. Over time, these can impair their hearing and concentration, which are critical to do their job.

Not only is the health of the interpreters a concern, but their situation is also affecting their ability to effectively champion Canada's two official languages given their important role in defending our country's linguistic duality. When glitches occur or whenever poor sound makes it difficult to follow a speaker, interpreters are unable to offer the high-quality interpretation in both languages that is both essential and expected.

Updates

We were pleased to see that some progress has been made based on our recommendations and the PROC's [report](#) to Parliament. For example, the use of a headset with a boom mike is now mandatory for everyone participating remotely and chairs are reminding members of the rule as this committee's chair did at the start of meeting 14 on Tuesday, February 2nd.

However, since our appearance in May, we have been made aware of additional health and safety risks to which our members, federal interpreters, are being exposed on a regular basis. There is urgent need to address the problem since injuries are frequent and serious. Our members are injured because they are exposed to risks that have not been removed or mitigated. Their current working conditions are affecting their health and safety. We therefore implore you to take immediate action.

More specifically, federal interpreters have been reporting that many witnesses are not using the approved headsets and microphones provided. Some who do, do not use them properly and are therefore not complying with the agreed virtual meetings safety guidelines. As a result, our members continue to experience problems of poor sound quality which can lead to fatigue, cognitive exhaustion, migraines, and acoustic shock. The effects of acoustic shock can cause short to long term injuries including a loss of

hearing. There has been a marked deterioration in the working conditions of interpreters and, an increase in the number of workplace incidents reported by the interpreters, since the beginning of the pandemic. The Translation Bureau receives that information through their internal Occupational Health and Safety Committee and is therefore best placed to provide those numbers to the LANG. This is not only jeopardizing their ability to deliver interpretation services and ensure the transfer of information in both official languages but could lead to permanent disability.

Given the importance of this issue to the health and safety of our members, we will also be sending a letter to the PROC to address our concerns with respect to committee witnesses not complying with the virtual meetings safety guidelines. In the letter, we will be asking the PROC to consider sending out a notice, along with the approved headsets, to all witnesses that are to appear before a parliamentary committee. The purpose of the notice is to inform witnesses that by choosing not to use the approved headsets or by not using them properly, they are compromising the delivery of interpretation services and, perhaps more importantly, exposing the interpreters to serious health and safety risks.

Considering the ongoing virtual sittings and the many challenges the interpreters continue to face, we want to highlight the following points for this committee's consideration.

Recommendations:

1. Clearly communicate the standards and conditions for interpretation services (including the use of House of Commons approved headsets) to the clerks and inform witnesses in advance to ensure all requirements are met.
2. Make the use of the approved equipment an absolute requirement.
3. Make sure session chairs are aware of the standards so they can hold all participants to them.
4. Make sure each witness receives information detailing the health and safety concerns for the proper use of officially recognized headsets prior to each event they are part of.
5. Inform witnesses that lack of compliance puts the interpreters' health and safety at risk; and
6. Briefly go over the standards checklist before each session with witnesses.

About the Canadian Association of Professional Employees (CAPE)

CAPE is the third largest labour union in the federal public service and represents over 18,000 economists, policy analysts, researchers in the Library of Parliament, analysts in the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, statisticians, translators, interpreters, and terminologists. Our members help guide and inform policymaking as well as protect and defend our country's linguistic duality.

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