

Ministre des Services publics
et de l'Approvisionnement
Receveur général du Canada



Minister of Public Services
and Procurement
Receiver General for Canada

Ottawa, Canada K1A 0S5

The Honourable Bardish Chagger, P.C., M.P.
Chair
Standing Committee on Procedure and
House Affairs
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Dear Ms. Chagger:

Pursuant to Standing Order 109 of the House of Commons and on behalf of the Government of Canada, I am pleased to provide a government response to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs' twentieth report, entitled *Future of Hybrid Proceedings in the House of Commons*, which was presented on January 30, 2023.

I would like to thank you and the members of the Committee for your thoughtful consideration of the use of hybrid proceedings by the House of Commons and its committees and your examination of some of the challenges related to interpretation during these proceedings. The Government appreciates the significance of the Committee's eight recommendations, which strive to assure first and foremost that health and safety measures are prioritized for those supporting the functioning of Parliament. The recommendations acknowledge that this multi-faceted issue requires the engagement of multiple partners, including the Government, its ministers, the House of Commons Administration, and members of Parliament themselves.

The Government supports the recommendations contained in the Committee's report and intends to table a proposal in the House of Commons to make permanent changes to the Standing Order consistent with what the Committee recommended.

I would note that many of the Committee's recommendations fall exclusively within the purview of the House of Commons and its recognized parliamentary privilege to regulate its own internal affairs. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of members to determine whether to continue a hybrid Parliament, including the voting application, how they participate in House proceedings, and how the House of Commons Administration can best support interpretation services and interpreters.

Nevertheless, I also acknowledge that the Government has a key role to play in ensuring effective and uninterrupted parliamentary proceedings through the recruitment, training and retention of skilled interpreters, and in ensuring the availability of health and safety supports. To this end, I have addressed recommendations 3 and 4 in detail as they touch on the Government's role in providing interpretation services in Parliament.

.../2

The Government is committed to protecting the health and safety of interpreters while providing essential interpretation services that ensure that the language rights of members and Canadians are respected during parliamentary proceedings. The Translation Bureau works in close collaboration with the House of Commons Administration to support Parliament's hybrid sittings and committee meetings. The Government recognizes that interpreters are facing challenges due to the technological setting of hybrid parliamentary proceedings, and is taking necessary steps to ensure that parliamentary work can be done in a safe environment.

Incidents resulting in hearing injuries are unacceptable and must be avoided. The health and safety of interpreters is a top priority for me. Interpreters are a pillar of the parliamentary function in Canada.

I am committed to working collaboratively with key partners and stakeholders to ensure that critical interpretation services are available to all members of Parliament in a manner that meets the specific needs of all members while ensuring a healthy and effective workforce.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H. Jaczek', written in a cursive style.

The Honourable Helena Jaczek, M.D., P.C., M.P.
Minister of Public Services and Procurement

Enclosure

c.c.: Mr. Justin Vaive
Clerk
Standing Committee on Procedure and
House Affairs

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS' TWENTIETH REPORT, FUTURE OF HYBRID PROCEEDINGS IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

Recommendation 3

That the Minister for Public Services and Procurement Canada promote the recruitment and retention of interpreters as a career and promote the educational programs available to achieve this.

Government Response

The Government accepts this recommendation. The Translation Bureau conducts activities within its mandate to increase visibility of its accreditation process and ensure it adds capacity to its roster of interpreters.

There are significant challenges resulting from the current global shortage of qualified interpreters. While overcoming the labour shortage is a complex and long-term endeavour, the Government has a range of actions underway to address the issue. The Translation Bureau has been working to increase the number of qualified staff and freelance interpreters it can rely on, and is taking proactive measures to ensure that it hires all qualified available candidates who are interested in joining the bureau, either as staff or freelancer.

For example, the Translation Bureau will be increasing the frequency of accreditation exams with a view to bringing in as many recruits as possible. The Translation Bureau is also continuing to develop initiatives to promote the profession and attract future candidates. The Translation Bureau works in close collaboration with the only two establishments that offer a program in conference interpreting in Canada, the University of Ottawa and York University, to train the next generation of interpreters. The Translation Bureau hires all program graduates as interpreter interns. Furthermore, since 2022, the Translation Bureau, in partnership with York University, organizes workshops to help potential candidates succeed with the accreditation exams.

The Translation Bureau offers competitive benefits to staff interpreters, including interpretation leave, compensation, health coverage and pension. Retention is therefore not a problem once they decide to work for the Bureau. Nonetheless, it is recognized that given the existing labour shortage in interpretation services, freelancers have significant leverage in establishing their working conditions, including schedules, clients and rates.

To attract new recruits in the field of interpretation, the Translation Bureau will continue discussions with industry partners and professional associations to promote the profession, in Canada and internationally. For example, it will continue to participate in outreach activities to attract more interpreters to the profession and support educational initiatives, such as providing teaching interpreters, and collaborating with universities that are exploring the development interpretation programs, all with the objective of increasing interpretation capacity. Notably, in March 2023, the Translation Bureau met with several universities in Quebec to discuss their linguistic programs and to seek interest in the development of an interpretation program; follow up discussions are ongoing.

The Translation Bureau is also in the process of hiring a recruitment firm to proactively contact interpreters who may be interested in working for the Bureau and Parliament, either as an employee or as a freelancer.

Taken together, these measures will contribute significantly to promote the recruitment and retention of interpreters as a career and promote the educational programs available to achieve this goal.

Recommendation 4

That the Translation Bureau examine the health and safety supports currently available to interpreters, whether employed full-time or on contract, and look at areas of improvement, and that they continue to work collaboratively with the House of Commons administration and the International Association of Conference Interpreters to ensure their concerns are immediately addressed in a transparent manner.

Government Response

The Government accepts this recommendation. The Translation Bureau is continuously reviewing new practices and options to protect the health and safety of both staff and freelancer interpreters through partnerships, research activities and discussions with international stakeholders. The Translation Bureau is communicating in a timely and transparent manner with all stakeholders, including parliamentary and government partners, the International Association of Conference Interpreters, along with other professional associations and health and safety experts in audiology and acoustics, to ensure the health and safety of interpreters. Specifically, the Translation Bureau carefully considers all concerns that are raised by stakeholders, including the International Association of Conference Interpreters – Canada Region, as well as union representatives, and addresses concerns based on rigorous analysis and research. The Translation Bureau commits to maintaining this practice equally and supports constant communication and dialogue with all partners and stakeholders, which is key to improving working conditions.

From the beginning of the pandemic, as the House of Commons transitioned to hybrid proceedings, the Translation Bureau worked closely with clients and the interpreter community to adapt to evolving interpretation needs and related risks. In response to the increase in virtual participation in meetings, the Government rapidly implemented a number of important protective measures that have applied to all parliamentary proceedings in hybrid mode. These include providing ISO compliant equipment to interpreters to minimize the risk of acoustic shock, and reducing the length of assignments,

Despite these measures, the shift to hybrid proceedings and the accompanying change in sound quality led to a sharp increase in health and safety incidents for interpreters. The Translation Bureau responded swiftly by implementing a series of additional measures in collaboration with the House Administration to protect the health of staff and freelance interpreters. This includes, for example, reducing the number of hours worked by interpreters in a virtual environment, reinforcing the fact that service can be interrupted when sound quality does not allow for adequate interpretation, developing guidelines and technical requirements for Members and other participants, and commissioning research and testing to support the interpreter's health and safety.

Additional steps to protect the health and safety of the interpreters were also taken in relation to the implementation of the two directions issued by the federal Labour Program on February 1, 2023.

The first direction relates to the use of a proper microphone. Indeed, since February 6, 2023, all virtual participants in parliamentary proceedings are now formally required to use a unidirectional microphone that meets ISO standard for interpretation. Interpreters are instructed not to interpret participants who are not using an appropriate microphone. The Translation Bureau has worked closely with the House and Senate administrations to develop rigorous protocols and requirements for meeting participants, technicians and interpreters to ensure that only ISO-compliant microphones are used and that interpretation is interrupted if this condition is not met. On February 16, 2023, the speaker of the House of Commons, issued instructions to make approved headsets mandatory for virtual participation in parliamentary proceedings and reiterated this requirement later that month to all Members of Parliament before Question Period.

The second direction deals with the testing of the sound systems of the House of Commons and

Senate committee rooms to ensure their safety for interpreters. To fulfil this requirement, the Translation Bureau has retained the National Research Council to conduct sound tests in real work environment and is hiring outside experts, including audiologists, to determine if the sound test results demonstrate a health and safety risk to the interpreters. If necessary, these experts will also provide recommendations to address any deficiencies, and preventative measures.

Throughout this process, the Translation Bureau consulted representatives from the Labour Program as well as union representatives on the proposed measures to comply with both directions. The Labour Program confirmed that measures implemented to address the first direction on microphones are adequate and has accepted the plan to comply with the second direction on testing. The Translation Bureau also met with its interpreters and the Industry Advisory Panel on several occasions to provide regular updates on the implementation of these measures and will continue to do so in future.

The Translation Bureau is gathering data from independent, outside partners, including the National Research Council, to confirm that the sound for in-person meeting participants meets the ISO standard for sound quality across parliamentary facilities. The Translation Bureau is also working with audiologists from the University of Ottawa who are conducting a study to monitor the hearing-health impacts on interpreters. The Translation Bureau monitors and contributes to the development of international best practices, and is a member of the community of Heads of Interpretation Services, which exchanges on the evolution of the profession. This data-driven approach dovetails with measures the Translation Bureau is already implementing in relation to the two directions issued the Labour Program.

The Translation Bureau collaborates on a daily basis with the House Administration, which is responsible for the technology that supports Parliament's hybrid proceedings, and other parliamentary partners to implement further improvements. The Translation Bureau will continue to ensure that equipment provided meets the prescribed standards and reduces risks for interpreters.

Finally, to further strengthen its commitment to protect the health and safety of its staff and freelancer interpreters, the Translation Bureau created an executive position to ensure continued engagement with Parliament, stakeholders and interpreters. The new Director, Parliamentary Affairs and Interpreter Well-being, will maintain an open dialogue with organizations such as the International Association of Conference Interpreters, to seek their input and guidance, listen to their concerns and recommend appropriate action to improve the health and safety of interpreters.