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• (2025)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to the 16th meeting of the Standing Committee on Official Languages. Today, we are considering the challenges of the parliamentary interpretation service in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We must follow certain procedures. I know that a number of you, especially committee members, are very familiar with them. However, since we are hearing from witnesses, I will allow myself to outline those procedures.

First, I would once again like to welcome a new member of the committee, the member for Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, Joël Godin.

[*English*]

For those participating virtually, I would like to take the opportunity to remind all participants of the meeting that taking screenshots or photographs of your screen is not permitted, and also highlight the fact that this was mentioned by Speaker Rota on September 29, 2020.

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of “floor”, “English” or “French”. Before speaking, click on the microphone icon to activate your own mike, and when you are done speaking, please put your mike on mute to minimize any interference.

I remind everyone that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly.

Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the use of headsets with a boom microphone is mandatory for everyone participating remotely. Should any technical challenge arise, please advise the chair. Please note that we may need to suspend for a few minutes as we need to ensure that all members are able to participate fully.

[*Translation*]

For those in the Wellington Building, masks are required, unless you are seated, when physical distancing is not possible. Should you wish to get my attention, signal the clerk.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses. We are hearing from Steven MacKinnon, parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Public Services and Procurement. We are also welcoming, from the De-

partment of Public Works and Government Services, Michael Vandergrift, associate deputy minister, Lucie Séguin, chief executive officer, Translation Bureau, and Matthew Ball, director of interpretation and chief interpreter, Translation Bureau.

Mr. MacKinnon, you have seven and a half minutes for your presentation. Each party will then have six minutes to ask questions.

On that note, I give you the floor.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Services and Procurement): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also thank the committee members for their kind invitation.

This evening, I am speaking to you directly from the Quebec side of the Ottawa River. I am joined by the people you just introduced, whom I will not introduce again. Suffice it to say that it is with pride that, for four years, I have been fulfilling the duties of parliamentary secretary in this department alongside the people accompanying me this evening, among others.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak about how my department is working to protect the health and safety of our interpreters during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Translation Bureau, which is about 87 years old, is part of Public Services and Procurement Canada. It supports the government in its efforts to serve and communicate with Canadians by providing linguistic services, such as translation and interpretation in both official languages, as well in indigenous and foreign languages. In addition to spoken languages, we also provide interpretation in sign languages.

The exceptional work of our interpreters is essential in facilitating meetings such as this one. Interpreters work mostly behind the scenes, ensuring parliamentarians and Canadians can follow our proceedings in the official language of their choice. Their work has been especially important over the last few months, as evidenced by your interest in this file.

I know that I speak for every parliamentarian and all Canadians when I say thank you to our interpreters.

● (2030)

[*English*]

In the fall of 2017, the Translation Bureau created the Conference Interpretation Advisory Panel and a special procurement working group representing the freelance interpreter community as together we sought a new contracting mechanism.

Many of the six guiding principles—and I worked on those with Minister Foote at the time—agreed upon between PSPC’s acquisitions branch, the Translation Bureau and the interpreter community back then continue to guide us today.

First, our goal is to ensure compliance with the federal government’s contracting policy by maximizing flexibility and agility to meet the specific needs of the interpretation community. Second, and this is very important, is to focus on the quality of services offered to clients. Third is to promote the economic vitality of Canada’s interpretation community. Fourth is to work together to define the most relevant, sustainable and effective tool for all. Fifth is to reduce the administrative burden associated with the new solution, both for the interpreter community and for the Translation Bureau. Finally, we recognize the practices related to the profession of conference interpretation.

[*Translation*]

The government is taking important steps to ensure that our interpreters have the support they need to do their jobs safely. Their health and well-being remain the top priority.

Creating the best possible conditions for interpretation ensures not only that the language rights of all Canadians are respected, but that the dedicated professionals who provide this service are protected at all times.

[*English*]

The Translation Bureau works closely with the House of Commons and the Senate, federal departments and agencies and other partners to provide interpretation of parliamentary and government proceedings, including virtual sessions.

[*Translation*]

To be clear, the bureau is not responsible for the technical aspects related to interpretation, such as providing the necessary equipment. That responsibility belongs to clients—including the House Administration—with whom the bureau collaborates closely to make sure interpreters have everything they need to provide quality service.

Even in ordinary times, interpretation is a demanding and complex task. We know that it requires very specific technical conditions to be performed safely, particularly with respect to sound quality.

The pandemic has forced us to find different ways to meet and work together. Now more than ever, it is especially important to respect public safety guidelines. As we rely more and more on virtual meetings, we continue to adapt to new challenges.

[*English*]

Health and safety is a priority for Parliament, and it is priority for our government, and we are making every effort to ensure that our staff and freelance interpreters are protected.

At all times, interpreters are instructed to interrupt the service if the sound does not allow for safe interpretation.

[*Translation*]

Since virtual sittings of Parliament became the norm, the government has strengthened existing measures to protect interpreters at meetings involving remote participants.

Many of these measures came out of recommendations made to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

For example, Parliament is providing headsets with an integrated microphone to members of Parliament and senators, as well as to witnesses appearing before parliamentary committees. These headsets improve sound quality and decrease health and safety incidents.

Another measure is having a technician present with the interpreters at all times and having sound checks conducted ahead of meetings.

[*English*]

Moreover, the Translation Bureau has reduced the length of assignments for interpreters working at virtual sessions without reducing their compensation.

The bureau has also instructed participants to provide written statements to interpreters in advance, as I have done tonight, when possible, as well as to use video conference to allow interpreters to see their facial expressions and adjust their tone.

● (2035)

[*Translation*]

To ensure high-quality and safe interpretation services, the Translation Bureau is pushing forward with several research initiatives to develop evidence-based solutions. For example, it has undertaken a research project with the University of Geneva in Switzerland on fatigue and cognitive load during remote interpretation.

[*English*]

Furthermore, the National Research Council of Canada has tested a new active sound limiter. This type of device can protect interpreters from acoustic shock and can measure their daily exposure to sound levels so that they can avoid exceeding the daily dose.

[*Translation*]

The National Research Council of Canada has also provided the bureau with preliminary results of an analysis to confirm that sound levels in Parliament do not exceed federal noise exposure regulations, and is continuing testing and sampling to ensure safer working conditions.

I should also note that the Parliament of Canada, on the advice of the Translation Bureau, has replaced all of its interpretation consoles with models equipped with built-in sound limiters, which also meet international standards.

[*English*]

Finally, with the support of health and safety experts at PSPC and external audiologists, the bureau is developing a hearing protection standard for interpreters.

[*Translation*]

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted an abrupt shift in how interpretation services are being delivered. Although far from ready to go completely virtual, the work to improve conditions for interpretation was already well underway. As a result—

The Chair: Thank you.

I know that committee members had provided us with questions they wanted to ask. If you would like to split your floor time, don't hesitate to let me know.

Mr. Blaney will begin and will be followed by Mr. Williamson. They will have six minutes to ask questions.

Mr. Vice-Chair, go ahead.

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

I welcome our witness and his partners.

Mr. MacKinnon, thank you for appearing before the committee.

You are seeing all the challenges of real-time interpretation. Our meeting started a bit late.

I would like to begin by thanking you for the sensitivity you are showing toward our interpreters. We have already held two meetings on this issue. Today's meeting is the third. The committee felt it was necessary to get to the bottom of things.

It is true that you provide us with headsets, but we have learned that they could be of better quality, especially for people working in Parliament. It's not about having stereo sound, but rather about having better sound quality for interpreters, who must hear and interpret at the same time, which presents an additional difficulty.

Mr. Parliamentary Secretary, our first suggestion would be to provide high-quality headsets. Some interpreters have only one ear-piece. We can imagine the work our interpreters do.

The other aspect I would like to discuss is hybrid Parliament. This evening, I am in Lévis, you are in Gatineau and our chair is in Montreal. We know there are two types of meetings. Some are held in person and others are virtual. As soon as someone is in virtual

mode, like me this evening, do you consider that to be a virtual meeting, as suggested by the European Parliament's definition?

We want to make sure there are enough interpreters. We recommend three interpreters for a four-hour segment. I would like you to talk about that. I feel that you are very concerned about ensuring that the interpreters, who are the ears of the House, provide us with a very important service in the best possible way.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Exactly.

Thank you very much, Mr. Blaney. I thank all of you for worrying about the plight, health and work safety of interpreters. I thank them from the bottom of my heart, once again, for their work.

As I said in my presentation, Parliament and our clients provide headsets and all the technical equipment that we use in our work and that interpreters use. I am sure it would be a good idea to send your suggestion to them. Of course, you regularly make recommendations to our partners on the technical equipment provided to interpreters and on its use.

Concerning the definition of “meeting”, as I said in my presentation, we have had to adapt along the way. Measures were taken as we went along. The Translation Bureau and freelance interpreters have had to adapt a number of things, including the contract between us. That contract was amended in December, but retroactively, to cover the period starting nearly at the beginning of virtual meetings. Unfortunately, that agreement or those contracts are about to expire.

Discussions and informal negotiations are underway. I have participated in them with stakeholders and interpreter representatives to discuss those issues. The formal consultation process that was launched on February 5 through a request for information is still ongoing. This will naturally transform into a request for a proposal to sign a contract on July 1 that will better regulate and anticipate interpreters' virtual circumstances.

● (2040)

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you, Mr. Parliamentary Secretary. From what I understand, you are sensitive to the fact that needs have skyrocketed. At the same time, we have had issues. The interpreter community is talking about toxic sound. What we are realizing is that, as soon as a witness is in virtual mode, as you are this evening, interpreters must take into account that context and the systems being used. I encourage you to take into consideration the fact that, as soon as the participant is in virtual mode, the meeting is of a hybrid variety. At that point, teams must be adapted. We want to take care of our interpreters, as they are precious.

I would like to put another question to you. Have you made efforts to ensure a sufficiently large pool of interpreters? I think there is a shortage, especially when it comes to interpreters working from English to French. That is often the direction of interpretation. However, we sometimes have interpreters who must interpret into a language they are not used to working in.

Is that something you consider to be extremely important?

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Absolutely.

The Chair: Mr. MacKinnon, can you answer in 20 seconds? Time is flying.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Telework circumstances have resulted in interpreters participating in an increased number of activities. They are working fewer hours in a typical work shift. So it is certain that those resources are under pressure. However, Mr. Blaney, we are proud of being able to respond to all the party whips' planning requests and of serving our parliamentary partners properly.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacKinnon.

I now give the floor to Mr. Arseneault for the next six minutes.

Mr. René Arseneault (Madawaska—Restigouche, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I may be wrong, but I think it is Mrs. Lalonde's turn.

The Chair: Okay, we are listening, Mrs. Lalonde.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Thank you very much. I will share my time with my colleague Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

I thank Mr. MacKinnon and the Translation Bureau officials for joining us this evening. My colleagues and I are really worried, as we have said, by the long-term hearing problems and the ongoing or increased injuries suffered by our interpreters.

When they appeared, the representatives of the International Association of Conference Interpreters, or IACI, mentioned that 70% of interpreters who were surveyed had been injured through remote interpretation.

Could Mr. MacKinnon and the Translation Bureau officials tell us what the Translation Bureau is doing to prevent those injuries?

● (2045)

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Of course. I will ask Ms. Séguin to give you more details in a moment.

Mrs. Lalonde, we have begun a fairly serious and rigorous research program, and we have adopted certain measures that have necessarily improved the interpreters' hearing experience. As an example, I mentioned the headset, which is constantly being evaluated and will continue to be evaluated at the suggestion Mr. Blaney made this evening.

I will let Ms. Séguin tell you about other measures we have adopted to protect interpreters' health and safety.

Ms. Lucie Séguin (Chief Executive Officer, Translation Bureau, Department of Public Works and Government Services): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for inviting our colleagues from the Translation Bureau and from Public Services and Procurement Canada to participate in this very important study.

The Translation Bureau takes very seriously the increase in the number of health and safety incidents. The vast majority of the Translation Bureau's salaried employees have reported incidents. The majority of them are reporting excessive fatigue and headaches, but also tinnitus, ear pain and hypersensitivity.

To deal with that, as Mr. MacKinnon mentioned, the bureau immediately implemented very rigorous measures. It also began a research program to obtain evidence on the impact that has on interpreters, not only in the short term, but also in the long term. As our colleagues from the IACI said when they appeared, on February 2, there is very little evidence, very little scientific data on the impact that has on interpreters' hearing health.

I will talk about a few of our initiatives. We are developing and implementing a program for protecting interpreters' hearing. The program includes training, research and tests in a variety of areas including acoustics, interpretation function and audiology, which are carried out by experts, by qualified physicians.

We immediately implemented and distributed internal and external sound limiters, which are used to protect interpreters from acoustic shocks. That is another measure we have adopted.

As the parliamentary secretary mentioned, we have shortened work days and have increased the rest period between assignments.

We informed you of the situation, and I am happy to see how seriously you are taking interpreters' health and safety. For instance, you do sound checks with interpreters beforehand. We really appreciate that.

In addition, committees have instructions: headsets with integrated microphones, as Mr. Blaney mentioned, cable Internet connections and awareness of our environment—in other words, minimizing noise and muting our microphone when we are not speaking.

In addition to the sound checks we are doing, there is now always a sound technician and a coordinator on site in case of problems, which is a step forward.

We have also instructed interpreters to interrupt the service if they feel that their health and safety are at risk. This is really important because we want to avoid them increasing the volume, which could lead to acoustic shocks.

I could give you more details on the research underway if you like, but we work closely with our colleagues from the House of Commons in charge of technological aspects.

Thank you.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: I have one minute left.

I am really proud of all the measures you have adopted. We all thank you for that.

I will yield the floor to my colleague, who has a question for you.

The Chair: You have 45 seconds, Ms. Martinez Ferrada.

Ms. Soraya Martinez Ferrada (Hochelaga, Lib.): I have 45 seconds, so I will be brief.

I thank the witnesses for joining us this evening.

Earlier, my colleague Mr. MacKinnon told us that the Translation Bureau has existed for 87 years. I am interested in what has happened over the past 10 years in terms of the political and economic decisions that have been made. Do you think that would explain work now being given to independent employees?

What is the situation of full-time staff following the decisions made over the past 10 years? I think the Translation Bureau has been weakened over the past 10 years. Right?

• (2050)

The Chair: You have 10 seconds to answer the question.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Yes, in 2015, when we were elected, there was little succession recruitment, and there were few interns, students and relationships with the universities attended by our interpreters and translators.

So we have been working on reversing the trend.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacKinnon.

Mr. Beaulieu will be asking questions over the next six minutes.

We are listening, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Thank you.

We have been told that using interpreters to translate into their second language generally leads to lower-quality interpretation. Since the majority of interpretation is done from English to French, francophones are the ones paying the price.

However, in the interpretation services arrangements request, you seem to want to enshrine in a legal contract the practice of having two interpreters per team, which implies that one interpreter will necessarily interpret into their second language.

Don't you think it would be better to increase the quality of services instead of decreasing it?

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you for your question, Mr. Beaulieu.

Of course, quality is our main concern.

To follow up on the answer I gave my colleague, Ms. Martinez Ferrada, we have been concerned about the quality of the French, the English and the Translation Bureau's products. In 2015, we appointed a chief quality officer, and ever since, that concern has been reflected in nearly all the decisions made, especially in the 2017 contract with interpreters.

We are now in the procurement process. We have already adopted certain elements by mutual consent, if you will, as we went, considering the pandemic and telework. We launched a new procurement process to guide those decisions. The issues, including the second language issue, will be addressed during the procurement process.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: If you're looking for the best possible quality, it's always best to work in teams of three. Interpreters tell

us that interpreting into a second language rarely provides the same quality.

You say that there should be teams of three when it comes to remote interpreting. You define this by saying that the majority of participants testify or speak remotely. But the European Commission, for example, says that it only takes one person taking part remotely for it to be considered remote interpretation.

Shouldn't remote interpretation be defined in the same way? Rather than a majority of remote stakeholders, a single remote person would be enough to define remote interpretation.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you for the question.

As I said, we've adopted a number of measures, precisely to provide a framework for working virtually, and we'll continue to be attentive to interpretation services.

I'd like to emphasize that they are indeed professionals, very well-trained people in the majority of cases. We're very privileged. We have the enormous privilege of being able to benefit from their expertise. We've had dozens of conversations with their representatives. We'll continue to listen carefully to what they have to say, especially since we want to renew the contractual relationship. The current process gives us a great opportunity to do so.

• (2055)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I want to come back to the headsets. I was stunned to learn that the headset we use, the Plantronics Encore-Pro 310, doesn't meet ISO standards.

Don't you think we should have a headset that meets ISO standards?

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: That question should be put to the technicians and officials of the House of Commons.

I'd ask Ms. Séguin or Mr. Ball to provide more information.

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you very much.

That's a good clarification. Headsets with an integrated microphone compliant with ISO standards will ensure better sound quality and, therefore, a better interpretation service.

As Mr. MacKinnon mentioned, I think this is an issue that will be addressed by our House of Commons colleagues.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: I have one last question for you.

When the clerk came in, he told us that he had conducted tests with you to assess the quality of the audio systems, and health and safety protocols. We would have liked to have seen those results, but he told us that he had to have authorization from the Translation Bureau.

Would you agree to send us the results of the tests that were done last summer?

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Would you like to respond, Ms. Séguin?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you very much for your question.

We'll be pleased to send you these results. The study was conducted by the National Research Council of Canada. We must first inform the authors and then we will be pleased to share them with you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Séguin.

Thank you, Mr. Beaulieu. You kept to your speaking time.

Mr. Boulerice, you have the next six minutes.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, everyone. I'm very pleased to be with you.

Mr. Parliamentary Secretary, you said you were very attentive to the concerns of our colleagues the interpreters. I hope you have all the equipment so you can listen and hear well.

My question concerns the organization chart. I'd like to know exactly who is responsible for setting the levels of exposure to potentially dangerous sounds that the interpreters face. Is it the responsibility of your department, Public Services and Procurement Canada, the Translation Bureau, or a House of Commons committee, such as the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs?

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: I'll let Ms. Séguin answer.

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you for your question.

I'll hand it over to the chief interpreter, Matthew Ball. That said, the standards we meet are set by the ISO international standards bodies.

Mr. Ball, can you continue?

Mr. Matthew Ball (Director, Interpretation and Chief Interpreter, Translation Bureau, Department of Public Works and Government Services): The bureau does meet several standards in its interpretation work. These include the ISO standard, which deals with maximum noise levels. We also comply with the Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations. We comply with both of these standards with respect to noise exposure.

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

I wasn't really looking for a technical standard. Rather, I wanted to know who is responsible for ensuring that these standards are met for the health and safety of the interpreters. Is it the responsibility of the Translation Bureau, Public Services and Procurement Canada, various departments or the Treasury Board as the head of the public service?

That's what I'd like to know.

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Thank you for your question.

We are the suppliers at Public Services and Procurement Canada. In many cases, we are responsible for government procurement and real property, and the list goes on. As service providers, we have a responsibility to ensure that our clients are held to a certain standard and we have collective agreements. We strictly adhere to these guidelines.

For the rest, I'll ask Ms. Séguin to reply.

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you very much for your question.

As the employer of salaried interpreters, the bureau is responsible for ensuring that health and safety standards—both health and hearing—are met. We have a responsibility to provide a professional service, so people, and we work with our colleagues in the House of Commons to inform them of the needs of interpreters to be able to provide quality services while ensuring their health and safety.

● (2100)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you.

Two weeks ago, Prof. Stoll demonstrated quite clearly that it's the Zoom platform that affects sound quality. I'm not sure that the interpreters' equipment, or that of members, which barely meets ISO standards, will be able to overcome the problems with the platform.

What solutions are being considered to specifically address the problem of sound through the Zoom platform?

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: That question is obviously outside my expertise, Mr. Boulerice.

However, I can assure you that we're working with various authorities from around the world, such as NATO, the European Union and the United Nations, who all use simultaneous interpretation. We are doing this to ensure that we meet the standards, but also to keep up with the latest trends. We want to be a leader.

It's up to Canada to act as an example in this field.

Perhaps Mr. Ball could let us know more about the work that is being done internationally to meet the standards.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. MacKinnon. I'm sure that, internationally, the work is being done very well, but I'm talking about the work of the national interpreters.

As an employer, Mr. MacKinnon, don't you think that three hours a day working with potentially toxic sound is a lot?

As an employer, do you promise that the next contract that will be awarded on February 19, I believe, will in no case and without any loophole allow you to exceed four hours of work per day?

Mr. Steven MacKinnon: Once again, Mr. Boulerice, our consultation and active listening process is under way with our partners and with freelance interpreters.

We'll continue to be very attentive, as we have been since the beginning of the pandemic and teleworking, to satisfy them on the one hand, and on the other hand, to adopt all possible measures in terms of technology, equipment and workplace standards to ensure the health and safety of interpreters.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. MacKinnon.

As agreed with the committee members, we've just completed this round.

We'll now have a period with Ms. Séguin, who is the CEO of the Translation Bureau, and Mr. Ball, who is the director of interpretation and chief interpreter of the Translation Bureau.

This gives me an opportunity to acknowledge and thank two witnesses: the parliamentary secretary, Steven MacKinnon, whom I thank for his presentation, and Michael Vandergrift, the associate deputy minister.

So we're going to continue without disconnecting with Ms. Séguin and Mr. Ball. I'd like to know—

Mr. Michael Vandergrift (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Public Works and Government Services): Mr. Chair, I can stay too.

The Chair: We accept with pleasure, Mr. Vandergrift.

I'd like to know if the Public Works and Government Services Canada representatives have a speech or if you're prepared to answer questions from committee members.

Ms. Lucie Séguin: We're at your disposal to answer members' questions to maximize the time for questions.

The Chair: We're very happy about it. Thank you.

We're going to start a six-minute round.

Mr. Blaney and Mr. Williamson will be up first.

We're listening, Mr. Blaney.

• (2105)

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

My questions are for Ms. Séguin.

I have three questions for you about the equipment.

Can you assure us that MPs will have better equipment?

Do you agree that when there is a person in virtual mode during a meeting, it's a virtual meeting?

What about the pool of interpreters working from English to French? Is there a shortage of these interpreters? If so, how can you assure us that the French interpretation is of high quality?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you for your question.

With respect to the equipment, we communicate the requirements to ensure health, safety and sound quality to our partners in the House of Commons, who are responsible for providing the equipment to you, honourable members. So we'll be communicating to our colleagues in the House of Commons that headsets must be compliant.

At the beginning of the pandemic, we adjusted fairly quickly. New generations of headsets have already been deployed, and we're trying to keep up with this evolution.

As for the pool of interpreters, there are 74 salaried interpreters at the Translation Bureau. Sixty-three of them are assigned to official languages, five to foreign languages and six to sign languages.

With respect to official languages—which is of most interest to this committee—25 of our interpreters work in English booths and 38 work in French booths.

With respect to the shortage, we rely heavily on the contribution of freelance interpreters from the private sector. This includes AIIC members, but also unrepresented or independent freelance interpreters. More than 100 interpreters in Canada have passed the Translation Bureau's rigorous accreditation process.

With respect to your third question, which was on the definition of virtual mode, I'll let my colleague, Matthew Ball, provide you with some information on that.

Mr. Matthew Ball: Thank you for your question.

As you know and as you've experienced, remote interpretation and virtual meetings are revolutionizing the way we do things in Canadian society and around the world. Everyone is making the transition to find out how to work under these new conditions.

The bureau used definitions used elsewhere in the world to make changes to its current contract to take into account the more difficult circumstances and increased cognitive load when working with virtual sound. That's what we're doing right now.

As you heard earlier, an inquiry is in progress. Our partners in the Acquisitions Branch will be consulting with the entire freelance interpreter community in Canada to find the best definition. A process is under way to that end, and we are waiting to see the results.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Thank you, Mr. Ball.

I hope we can draw inspiration from the definition given by the European Parliament.

Mr. Chair, I'd like to share my time with the new member of our committee, Mr. Godin.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Godin.

You have less than three minutes left.

Mr. Joël Godin (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, CPC): I'll do this quickly, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here.

I'm new to this committee. What I'm hearing this evening is that everything is good. Everything is under control and everything is fine. We're taking good care of our interpreters, and there's no problem. The pandemic started 10 months ago, and there's some fine-tuning going on so that we're even better equipped, but there's no problem.

Yet, last Friday, the Standing Committee on Health met. I don't want to ascribe motives to my colleagues in the Liberal Party, but there was filibustering. At 4:30 p.m. the meeting was suspended. The committee is still suspended, and the interpreters are being made to take the blame.

If there's a problem with interpreter availability, why are we looking for new interpreters?

Could you tell us what constraints and problems you've been experiencing since the beginning of the pandemic?

What have you done concretely, and what are you going to do shortly?

• (2110)

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you very much for your question.

I'd like to mention that the situation isn't without risks and that we're taking these risks very seriously. I mentioned that the majority of the bureau's salaried employees have reported incidents that have caused hearing problems related to poor sound quality. Approximately 45 of our official language interpreters have submitted a total of 140 incident reports concerning sound quality.

I mentioned earlier that the most commonly reported injuries are excessive fatigue and headaches. There are also earaches and tinnitus. Currently, two of our interpreters are on sick leave due to sound-related problems. This fluctuates greatly.

We're taking this very seriously. We are putting measures in place to ensure their health and safety. We are adapting and finding ways to provide working conditions that meet health and safety standards.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Séguin.

That's all the time you had.

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

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I will try to speak as slowly as possible, because I have the impression that I'm the one who speaks the fastest.

Ms. Séguin, let me come back to my colleague Mr. Boulerice's question. Is the use of interpreters the responsibility of the Translation Bureau or the House Administration? You provide the human resources, while the House takes care of the technical aspect, if I understand correctly, but you have to come together at some point.

Where exactly does one's responsibility start and the other's begin?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you very much for your question.

The role of the Bureau, by virtue of its legislative mandate, is to provide linguistic services. A lot has been said about interpretation this evening, but our translators are currently preparing the minutes of this meeting, and they will be working until the task is completed. We provide linguistic services to the Senate, to the House of Commons and to federal departments. They are our clients.

In your example, our client is the House Administration. All our clients, including the House Administration, are responsible for the computer platforms and hardware required for our professionals to provide their services. The same is true for the Senate Administration.

Ensuring sound quality requires a very complex, integrated chain. As you also mentioned on February 2, there are a number of factors. These include the humans, the technology, the transfer of information and audio feed. The Translation Bureau is the expert when it comes to working with professionals and employers. We also use a good number of freelancers from the private sector. We al-

so rely on the contribution of some interpreters that we find in Canadian society.

Mr. René Arseneault: You take care of the client by providing human expertise. We have been hearing for some time that these human resources have a serious problem with hearing injuries.

What have the Translation Bureau and the House Administration done recently to work together on this problem?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you for the question.

We have daily meetings with our clients, particularly to plan the sessions. I would like to point out that the capacity issue has two aspects. The first is the number of interpreters. Canada has a shortage of interpreters, which is nothing new. The other is the increase in the number of virtual sessions, which has gone up dramatically in the House of Commons, the Senate and the Supreme Court. All of these meetings are now virtual.

For example, in April and May, we had to serve about 20 committees in the House and the Senate. In December, we had to cover 80 events per week. This magnifies our challenges. The frequency of the meetings of our democratic institutions has meant that our human resources are called on much more. The same is true for sign language and translation services.

• (2115)

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you. If you have any statistics that we could use in our report, feel free to forward them to the committee.

Do I have time for one more question, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes, you have one and a half minute left.

Mr. René Arseneault: How generous of you!

I have one question that I'm dying to ask. One of you will be able to answer. Before the pandemic, before the use of Zoom and headphones, before it became common for us and our daily reality, did you have any record of hearing injuries among your interpreters caused by the equipment used at the time? I am talking about before the pandemic.

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you for your question.

We have certainly seen a fairly significant increase since Parliament started virtual sessions. However, before the pandemic, we had reports of incidents related to sound quality, but also to sanitary conditions that posed risks to the health and safety of the workers.

That said, we have really seen an increased number of incidents since the beginning of the pandemic.

Mr. René Arseneault: Do you see a correlation with the increase in demand?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you for the question.

There is absolutely a correlation. We have specific statistics and reports on that. We see a direct link between the number of events for which we have to provide service and the number of incidents reported.

We require our employees to report all incidents. We think it is very important to document it whenever there is discomfort, injury or an incident causing a problem. Our health and safety specialists at Public Services and Procurement Canada, along with our union partners, are in charge of the process. They also have access to the reports.

Mr. René Arseneault: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Séguin and Mr. Arseneault.

We'll now go to Mr. Beaulieu for the next six minutes.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: The interpreters have told us that, in order to have the best possible quality of interpretation, they have to do it in their mother tongue or in their first language. When it's in their second language, the quality is lower.

In one of the recent sittings, we had asked what proportion of interpreters have French as their mother tongue.

I'm not sure whether you have that information. Earlier, if I understood correctly, you told us that there were 25 English booths and 38 French booths. That gives a proportion of about 60%. We were also told that 86% of the witnesses appear in English.

Could you answer those questions?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you.

To answer that question very quickly, I would like to give you some information about the Translation Bureau's accreditation process. This very rigorous process is recognized internationally as one of the most rigorous in the world.

The accreditation process used by the bureau is a minimum criterion for providing the bureau's services. We ensure that interpreters are able to interpret into their mother tongue, which we call their A language, and into the B language, which is the other official language.

Our interpreters, those who are accredited and employed by the bureau, have the ability to provide quality service and have passed a test for that. "Quality" means that it is in compliance with the Official Languages Act.

A number of interpreters choose to interpret in both languages, but we do not force anyone, either our employees or our freelance interpreters, to do so. Our interpreters who do not feel comfortable enough to interpret into their B language have the right to refuse.

If you want more details, I can ask Mr. Ball to provide you with some and tell you how things are done in the booth. The proportion is correct, the total number of official language interpreters is 63. Of that number, 25 work in the English booth and 38 work in the French booth.

• (2120)

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: That's good.

On another note, we are quite surprised. My understanding is that there are problems caused by platforms such as Zoom, and by the sound equipment that translates everything.

The Parliament team seemed to say that the sound equipment was of very good quality. However, we are told that Zoom does not conform to ISO standards. In fact, it is apparently one of the lower quality platforms. Because of a frequency that Zoom does not transmit, the interpreters are forced to turn up the sound volume, which might often cause injuries.

Do you see any solutions to this problem?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you for your question.

I'm going to give the floor to Mr. Ball, who can tell you about the different types of tests that the Translation Bureau is conducting to measure not only the quantity but also the quality of the sound.

I can tell you that sound quality remains our main concern. To be perfectly honest, we have not resolved all the issues related to sound quality. At the same time, we have a mandate to continue to provide this service to parliamentarians so that committees can meet in both official languages.

Mr. Ball, perhaps you can speak a little more about Mr. Beaulieu's question.

Mr. Matthew Ball: Thank you for the question.

Actually, the issue of sound quality is new to all of us. We are familiar with the quantity of sound, the pressure levels. We know how many decibels for how much time pose a risk to hearing health, but we know less about the quality of sound. Right now, we are trying to learn more about many aspects of sound quality.

Ms. Séguin referred to the research project that the bureau has sponsored with the University of Geneva, Switzerland, in conjunction with the National Research Council of Canada. We are trying to better understand the issue of sound quality and how it affects hearing health.

We know from reports from the interpreters, both staff and freelance, that there is certainly a problem. We see the number of incidents. That is why we would like to understand more about the issue of quality.

There are certainly problems with Zoom, but it is used all over the world for interpretation and for virtual meetings like these. However, there are other platforms out there, and we are also testing them to see if they affect sound quality. But it's not just the platform; it's also the microphone, the stability of the Internet, and so on.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: We know that our headsets are not compliant and that Zoom is one of the least efficient platforms.

If I understand correctly, we'll be able to get the results of the tests you have conducted to look at everything.

Basically, what you are saying is that we either have to reduce the number of hours of work for the interpreters or have more interpreters.

Do you feel that you have done everything possible to get more freelance interpreters? Are you committed to not requiring them to work in pairs when they are interpreting remotely?

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Séguin, could you answer the question in no more than 10 or 15 seconds, please? We are out of time.

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Okay.

In terms of the Bureau's initiatives to increase capacity, we are working with, and providing experienced interpreters as professors for, the only two universities that offer master's degree programs in interpretation: Glendon College at York University and the University of Ottawa.

The Bureau's employees will therefore be teaching the courses. We hire all the graduates who pass our accreditation test, but there are very few graduates. It's a rigorous program. There's not a lot of enrolment in Canada either. So we work with academic institutions. We recruit and we handle the accreditation process to ensure superior quality.

• (2125)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Séguin.

[English]

The last round of questions belongs to Mr. Boulerice.

The floor is yours for six minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you again to the witnesses for making themselves available and for being with us this evening.

However, I am rather worried and a little perplexed by the answers we have just heard during the last round of questions.

Ms. Séguin, you say that you haven't solved everything with respect to the sound quality issues for the interpreters. Mr. Ball, you say that you are still studying the impact of the platforms that are currently being used.

One question comes to mind fairly quickly. Are you putting the health and safety of the interpreters at risk? You actually have no idea what the repercussions are.

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you for your question.

The pandemic has propelled us into a virtual mode a little faster than we would have liked. The Translation Bureau and its interpreters were already providing remote interpretation services, but to a lesser extent.

Since then, we have had to adapt quickly. Since May, we have reduced the hours of work expected of our interpreters, both permanent and freelance, to compensate for the risks and higher cognitive load of remote interpretation. We are not downplaying the risks; the risks are real.

One of the objectives of the contractual mechanism we have in place is to have a legal basis and to codify the working conditions in their contract in order to protect the health and safety of the interpreters on an ongoing basis.

It is in our interest to listen carefully, to consider the uniqueness of the profession and the health and safety issues, because we absolutely need freelance and Bureau interpreters to be able to keep providing the service.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Exactly. You need them and we need them too in order to uphold both official languages.

I am sure you understand that, if you tell the committee that you are in the process of studying the issue and you don't know too much about the repercussions, it kind of gives the impression that the current interpreters are guinea pigs, in a way. According to the surveys, people are saying that they have suffered injuries and that the sound is toxic.

I am also concerned about the definition you are giving for in-person meetings and distance meetings. One day, members will be meeting in the same room as they did before. If all the witnesses appeared and provided their comments remotely most of the time, you would still consider it an in-person meeting because all the members would be in the same committee room. That's very troubling for the interpreters. In my opinion, if most, if not all, of the witnesses appear remotely, that does not meet the definition of an in-person meeting.

Can you tell us more about that?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you very much for your question.

In Canada, at the Translation Bureau, the long-term effects and impacts of exposure to sub-optimal sound quality have not been fully documented. Our AIIC colleagues who appeared before you made the same comment.

First, the Translation Bureau is investing resources to gather statistical evidence to help not only Canada and the Translation Bureau, but also to be ready to collaborate with the AIIC and with independent interpreters by sharing those results with them. That is a commitment. Our commitment is to share the results once the research is done.

Second, we have adopted new measures. Previously, when interpretation was done in person, we required interpretation for six consecutive hours. We have now reduced that to a maximum of four hours. On average, our freelance interpreters and our employees spend three hours in active interpretation.

So we have reduced the hours of work, because we recognize the inherent risks involved. At the same time, we have also implemented other measures such as sound limiters. We support our employees and our freelancers who make the decision to interrupt their service by giving them the right to do so. As you will have noticed, that does happen. If interpreters cannot hear you, they can't interpret what you are saying.

We do provide these protections, this support. We are delighted to see that members and honourable senators are fully aware, and are understanding and patient. We want—

• (2130)

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Ms. Séguin, let me add something. Right now, the Chair is indicating to me that I have one minute left.

I am happy that you have reduced the hours of work. I hope there will be no loopholes in the next contract with the freelancers meaning that they will have to work more than four hours per session.

Mr. Ball said that you were consulting with the European Parliament. According to the European Parliament's definition, a meeting is a distance meeting if only one witness is not in the room. Since you are in consultation with the European Parliament, are you ready to adopt the same definition and apply it to the work of the interpreters in order to protect their health and safety here in Ottawa?

Ms. Lucie Séguin: Thank you very much.

The definition you are referring to was introduced for the first time in a contract document, a request for information, published by Public Services and Procurement Canada on February 5. It is intended to gather feedback like you have just provided. We will be gathering that information.

Tomorrow evening, there will be an information meeting to gather feedback from people in the industry, such as representatives and freelancers. We expect to receive a lot of feedback on the matter and on other aspects of the market we are trying to put into place.

That said, I thank you for your feedback. We heard it loud and clear, thanks to the good headsets.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Séguin. Thank you, Mr. Boulerice.

That is all the time we have for questions to the witnesses. I see two hands raised, from Ms. Lattanzio and Mr. Beaulieu. The time will be for something other than asking the witnesses questions.

Go ahead, Ms. Lattanzio.

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

We had a shorter session this evening. I found an article that actually talks about the Zoom platform and I would like to share it with my fellow committee members. First of all, I can give you the

title of the article, which is available in French and English. I would like permission to produce it for the committee so that I can share it with my colleagues.

The article was written by an expert in Europe, a European Union accredited freelancer. The title is *I would normally trust a German expert...*

With my colleagues' indulgence and your permission, Mr. Chair, can you tell me how to produce this article so that it can be shared with the members of the committee?

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lattanzio.

I am going to hear what Mr. Beaulieu has to say, and I will get back to you about that.

Go ahead, Mr. Beaulieu.

Mr. Mario Beaulieu: On February 2, I tried to make a correction. I used a quotation that I read in a document from the Board of Internal Economy and that was picked up by the interpreters. It was that 86% of francophone witnesses appeared in English. Actually, it's 86% of all witnesses who appear in English.

The correction I made on February 4 could not be accommodated because the committee was sitting in camera. So I propose it once more.

The Chair: Noted.

As for your article, Ms. Lattanzio, you would have to send it to the clerk in both official languages so that it can be distributed to members. The analysts will be able to see it too.

Mr. Beaulieu, we are not currently in camera, so we will take note of your comment.

Let me thank the witnesses for their testimony this evening; it was very enlightening. Let me start with Lucie Séguin, the CEO of the Translation Bureau. My thanks also go to Michael Vandergrift, the associate deputy minister and Matthew Ball, who is the director of interpretation and chief interpreter at the Translation Bureau.

On behalf of all members of the committee, I also want to thank the entire technical team, the interpreters, the clerk and the analysts for helping us this evening in holding this very important session.

Without further delay, I declare the session adjourned.

(The meeting is adjourned.)

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