



19 January 2021

New survey reveals widespread injuries among Parliamentary interpreters

Ottawa – A majority of official language interpreters employed by the Translation Bureau to work on Parliament Hill have suffered auditory injuries and almost all agree that the quality of interpretation available to Canadians has suffered since the work of Parliament migrated to a virtual setting.

Among the findings of the survey conducted by the professional association representing interpreters, AIIC-Canada:

- Seven-in-ten (70%) respondents have experienced auditory injuries serious enough to force most (88%) to take time off work to recover.
- Quality of interpretation services in Parliament and for Canadians is suffering as a result with the vast majority (97%) of respondents reporting that they are never (16%), rarely (30%), or only sometimes (51%) able to do as good a job when doing distance interpreting as they would during an in-person meeting.

AIIC-Canada conducted the survey to get a clear picture of health and safety incidents among staff interpreters. Given that there is such a shortage of interpreters this wave of injuries could interrupt Parliament. Already, there are meetings of MPs and Senators that the Translation Bureau can no longer cover because of the shortage.

“Interpreters have labeled what they hear over ZOOM as “toxic sound”. Now that all meetings on the Hill and everywhere else are virtual, we are learning that most interpreters cannot tolerate a constant stream of low quality and compressed sound without getting hurt,” says Nicole Gagnon, speaking for the Association.

Many (43%) respondents report that the injuries they have suffered continue to linger, creating a large group of walking wounded among interpreters at the Translation Bureau. In spite of this, 78% report that they have not been assigned to other duties to rest their ears.

According to CSA Research, a language services market research firm, heads of interpretation services around the world recommend that institutions like the Translation Bureau put in place policies to safeguard interpreters by increasing team sizes, limiting exposure to compressed sound and modify scheduling to allow interpreters to recover between shifts. These recommendations have been echoed by the House of Commons Committee on Procedure and House Affairs.

With its thinning ranks, the Translation Bureau is turning to freelance interpreters in greater numbers to work on the Hill. At the same time though, the TB is floating trial balloons about taxing new working

conditions that would prolong interpreters' exposure to toxic sound on a daily basis, require freelancers to be available for 15.5 hours a day, eliminate pay for some currently paid duties, and require interpreters to work into their second language during televised and webcast events, a practice that has not been encouraged until recently because generally it undermines quality.

"There are only about 80 accredited freelancers in all of Canada who have the right clearances to work on the Hill. With the TB burning through their own staff, for the life of me, I can't understand why they are hinting at these changes when they are desperate for freelancers to work for them, especially when they must know these changes will drive down quality further," says Gagnon.

As freelance suppliers, contract details are decided upon by the government with approval by the political decision-makers. The contracts are not subject to negotiation with interpreters or their association.

AIIC-Canada is the only national professional organization representing federally accredited interpreters.

-30-

The full survey report is available here

<https://aiic.org/company/roster/companyRosterDetails.html?companyId=11987&companyId=26>

For further information contact:

Jim Thompson
613-447-9592