

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 457-18(3): FRENCH LANGUAGE SERVICES AUDIT

October 26, 2018

(Questions Delivered in French)

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le president. Merci, Monsiuer le Président. My questions are for the Minister of Education, Culture and Employment. An October 5 news release from the department says that there has been a significant improvement in French language communications and services, according to an independent audit. However, there are a number of deficiencies identified in the audit. First, what formal mechanism will be used to address and improve upon the services identified as being deficient?

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Education, Culture and Employment.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would just start by clarifying that I am struggling with French, but I am going to try to do the best to answer appropriately as per the interpreter. Thank you for the translation on the mic.

My understanding is that we want to know what formal mechanisms can be used to address and improve on the services identified within the audit. The audit looked at four different areas. It looked service delivery, how we deliver our programs; active offers, do we even offer people to be able to have service in French; our signage; and our display of public information or our publications.

I was quite impressed, actually, when we got the results from the audit that we have made some improvements. That is a good sign, but we still have work to go. Just because we have done improvements doesn't mean we stop now.

We need to work closely with the francophone community, and we are committed to doing that. We are going to be looking at a monitoring and evaluation and accountability plan that will track the changes that are needed and the ones that are recommended in the audit, and we will keep on top of them to make sure that we have not only adequate but the best services that we can provide in French as possible to the residents of the Northwest Territories. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: One of the issues noted is that French language training is shorter in duration than training offered by other orders of government. I have been told, for example, that there is one group of employees taking 30 hours of coursework over 10 weeks, while in the federal government groups take up to 120 hours for the same period. The audit recommends that our training hours be aligned with those used by other governments. Can the Minister explain how she intends to respond to this audit recommendation?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: I have been assured by my department that, actually, our training is meeting the needs of employees, but I also take heed, and I think that we need to challenge that because the audit is saying that we need to do better with our

training.

I am committed to actually looking at the employees that are taking that training and actually doing a survey of them and asking them personally, "Is that training enough? What would you like to see implemented?"

I will take that on, and depending on what the employees say, we will adjust our training. Like I said earlier, we want to provide the best service possible in all of our languages in the Northwest Territories, and my commitment is to make sure that we do that and that we are working towards the needs of the employees.

MR. O'REILLY: Another area addressed in the report is emergency alert messaging to the general public which is not available in French. Obviously this is a very important matter. Can the Minister explain how our official languages are going to be incorporated into emergency services, including in alert messages and 9-1-1 services moving ahead?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Like I said, when I first got the audit, I was actually really impressed with the progress that we have made, but when I read the audit and it said that we need to do better with our alert messaging, that was a concern. Health and safety has to be our priority.

We are working closely with MACA. My understanding was that they did, actually, when they did the testing of the alert messaging, the radio station did have the French translation, and it was missed. It didn't happen. That is not okay. That is not an excuse. What I am saying is that we need to work closer with MACA. We need to make sure that our alert system, when it broadcasts that there is an alert out there, that people understand and can evacuate or do whatever they need to make sure that they are safe.

That is an area that we need to make sure that we bump up, and again, my commitment is that is a priority for me because that is about emergency services. That is not just asking, "Do you want a French translator?" That is life or death.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral questions. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. Finally, there seems to be an imbalance in the amount of money being spent on translation—very large—and the amount of money spent on training, which is much less. It seems obvious that if we improve training, we won't need to spend as much on translation, and we can enjoy the benefits of all of our official languages at the same time. How will the Minister put greater emphasis on training, in keeping with the recommendations from this audit?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: I want to start by saying that translation services is not as easy as just speaking a second language. It is actually a profession. It is actually formal training to be able to do that. It is an expensive profession, as well, but a very necessary one within the territories.

The training that we are looking for more with our employees to whom we are offering the French languages is more on the active offer. It is being able to notice when somebody needs translation services, be able to say that, hopefully, in their language,

and be able to transfer them over. It is more condensed training that we are looking at.

I agree with the Member. If we can get more people trained in speaking French fluently, then we won't need as many translators. However, I do have to say that not all of us have that capability. I went through high school here. We didn't have an option of Indigenous languages back then. We learned French, and Mr. Speaker, I struggle with saying "hello," "goodbye," and "how are you doing?" today.

Not everyone can get there, I recognize. I am going to try again. Until then, we will need professional translators to be able to provide the service, and we need our employees to at least be able to say, "Bonjour," and I can't say the rest, but "do you need a translator?" That is what we are focussing on, but like I had noted before, our training, if it is not meeting the needs of the employees, then we need to find out what their needs are and work on strengthening it. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.