



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Special Standing Committee
on
Members' Services

Monday, November 30, 2020
10:30 a.m.

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Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

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Ellis, Mike, Calgary-West (UCP), Deputy Chair

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Deol, Jasvir, Edmonton-Meadows (NDP)
Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP)
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[Mr. Cooper in the chair]

The Chair: Well, good morning, members. I would like to call this meeting to order.

I'd ask that those joining the committee around the table introduce themselves for the record, and then I will call upon members joining us remotely to introduce themselves as well. We'll start immediately to my right and go around the table.

Ms Rempel: Good morning. Jody Rempel, committee clerk.

Mr. Ellis: Good morning. Mike Ellis, Calgary-West.

Mr. Neudorf: Nathan Neudorf, Lethbridge-East.

Ms Goodridge: Good morning. Laila Goodridge, Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche.

Mr. Williams: MLA Dan Williams, Peace River.

Mr. Long: Martin Long, West Yellowhead.

Ms Bell: Lianne Bell, chief of staff to the Speaker.

Ms McHugh: Ruth McHugh, executive director of corporate services with the Legislative Assembly Office.

Ms Cherkewich: Teri Cherkewich, Law Clerk, office of Parliamentary Counsel.

Ms Dean: Shannon Dean, Clerk of the Assembly.

Mr. Deol: Jasvir Deol, MLA, Edmonton-Meadows.

Ms Hoffman: Sarah Hoffman, Edmonton-Glenora.

Mr. Dang: Good morning. Thomas Dang, Edmonton-South.

Mr. Walker: Jordan Walker, Sherwood Park.

The Chair: Excellent. My name is Nathan Cooper. I'm the MLA for the outstanding constituency of Olds-Didsbury-Three Hills and the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta.

I understand that Member Sabir may have joined us. For the record, Member Sabir. Can you hear the room, Member Sabir? We don't hear you at this point, but we'll proceed if you are able to. If you have ongoing challenges, just send the committee clerk, Jody Rempel, an e-mail, and we'll proceed with that.

I'd also like to note for the record that Member Hoffman is an official substitute for Member Goehring.

I would like to remind everybody of the updated committee room protocols, which require that, outside of individuals with an exemption, those attending the committee meeting in person must wear a mask at all times unless they are speaking. Based on the recommendations of the chief medical officer of health regarding physical distancing, attendees at today's meeting are reminded to leave the appropriate distance between themselves and others participating in the meeting.

Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard*, so members do not need to turn them on and off. Committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. Please set your cellphones or other devices to silent during the committee meeting. We all know what the cost of errant phone calls is.

Before proceeding with the actual meeting, I'd like to discuss the new practice, already incorporated by other committees, of use of video conferencing for remote participation during committee meetings. As members may recall, section 6 of the Legislative Assembly Act permits participation in the committee "by means of telephone or other communication facilities that permit all Members participating in the meeting to hear each other if all members of the committee consent." This committee has already consented unanimously to permit teleconferencing during committee meetings. Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the use of video conferencing could be given to the committee as another option for its work while respecting social distance and health and safety measures.

In order to permit video conferencing, the committee will need to adopt a motion unanimously to that effect. My recommendation, if a member is willing to do so, would be that

for the duration of the 30th Legislature the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services permit committee members to participate via video conference, subject to the proviso that the committee may require members' attendance in particular meetings upon passage at a previous meeting of a motion to that effect.

Is there any member willing to do that? Mr. Ellis, thank you.

Is there any discussion that anyone would like to have on this particular issue?

Seeing none, this motion does require unanimous consent, so I will only ask one question: is there anyone opposed to granting unanimous consent to allow video conferencing to take place? If so, indicate now. Hearing none.

That motion is passed unanimously and carried.

On to the approval of the agenda. Are there any additions or revisions to today's meeting agenda? If not, would a member move its adoption? Ms Goodridge. Is there any discussion?

Mr. Williams: Chair, could you just clarify? I'm seeing two different versions of the agenda. I think that I might have an outdated copy. Just outline the order of the agenda items again for me.

The Chair: A hundred per cent. The initial agenda was sent out with the meeting package. That was followed up by a Thursday afternoon notification from the clerk, Jody Rempel, indicating that no items had been added or deleted, only that the order had changed. So the most up-to-date version of this includes the approval of the agenda, approval of the meeting minutes, followed by interpretive and captioning services, followed by the budget parameters discussion, followed by other business.

Is there any other discussion, questions, or comments? Seeing none, all those in favour of the approval of the agenda, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. That is carried.

Approval of the meeting minutes. Are there any amendments to the minutes from our last committee meeting? The motion would be that the minutes of the March 18, 2020, meeting of the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services be approved as distributed. Is there anyone willing to make that motion? Mr. Neudorf. Is there any discussion required or amendments required? Seeing and hearing none, I'll call the question. All those in favour of the approval of the meeting minutes, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. Having only heard Member Walker on the phone, all those in favour? Hearing none, I declare the motion carried.

Interpretive services. Included in the briefing materials for today is a letter dated July 8, 2020, signed by four members of the NDP caucus requesting that the committee consider providing members

and caucuses with “access to interpretative and captioning services without incurring additional costs to their budgets.”

I would like to call on either Member Dang or Member Hoffman to open the discussion on this particular item. There's also a motion on notice that was circulated with the meeting package last week.

We will go ahead. Member Dang, please.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I think perhaps I will speak briefly to the letter that was sent by our caucus, by myself and other members of my caucus, prior to this meeting, and then I will move a motion and, hopefully, we can get into a discussion around that.

Mr. Speaker, as you know and members know, we sent a letter requesting accessible and inclusive communications policies to be used, of course, during this COVID-19 pandemic but also generally for members as well because I believe that, certainly, we see now more than ever how important it is to have successful communications between MLAs and their constituents and caucuses and the public as well. I think that if there are any questions around that, they can refer to our letter or perhaps myself or some my colleagues here to try and answer some of those questions.

At this time I'd like to move a motion that is giving notice under Standing Order 52.041, and it's motion 17 on the committee website. I'll give you a moment to get it on the screen as well.

Mr. Speaker, would you like me to read that into the record?

The Chair: Yes, please.

Mr. Dang: Thank you. I would move that

the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services direct the Legislative Assembly Office administration to prepare: (a) draft guidelines for the use of interpretative and captioning services and American Sign Language services for communications by private Members as it relates to their parliamentary and constituency duties, (b) a draft order that would amend the Members' Services Committee Orders to provide that the costs of interpretative and captioning services and American Sign Language services are reimbursable expenses under the Administrative Services Order, and (c) a cost estimate in respect of the provision of the services in accordance with the draft guidelines prepared under clause (a).

And if I may speak briefly to the motion?

10:40

The Chair: Please do.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think, certainly, when I put in this motion the intent was to create a policy that would work for all members and all caucuses. It's not a partisan issue. I think it's something that we can agree we need to have, accessible communications. We've seen in the daily briefings – when they were daily and now that they are daily again – from the chief medical officer of health as well as the government, the Premier and the Health minister, when they give briefings, extensive use of American sign language services, and I think that having those services available to constituents in this manner would be beneficial for all Albertans.

I look forward to hearing from some of my other colleagues on what their thoughts are, and I think that we're open to working on this motion to make it as productive as possible.

The Chair: Excellent. Members, just as a way of assisting in a good discussion today and otherwise, if there are members who are video conferencing, please indicate to Ms Rempel your desire to speak. I am creating a list.

I would like to just provide some introductory comments on this particular issue, as I think that they are important and informative

to the overall discussion around interpretation services and ultimately looking for some clarity from the members of what they're hoping to do. I think it's very important that we ensure that all members of the committee as well as members of the public know that interpretive services are an allowable expense at present, and each member of the Assembly has a budgeted amount through their member's services allowance, MSA, that pays for communication between a member and members of the community. So if a member needed interpretive services to best meet the needs of a constituent, they are already able to do that and have their MSA pay for that.

Just the same as some constituencies have a higher percentage of certain populations – whether they require second-language translations into Punjabi, Mandarin, Filipino, whatever the needs of those constituents might be – the member's services allowance, or MSA, is in place for members to be able to provide those translation services to their constituents. As such, all members make their offices or should be making their offices accessible to all members of the community, in particular those with mobility challenges. Those expenditures also are considered for when the MSA allowance has been drafted. I think it's important to note that these expenditures are already allowable under our guidelines, but if there is a will for the committee to make some changes, I also understand and appreciate that.

With those introductory comments, Member Williams has asked to speak.

Mr. Williams: Yes. Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to speak, and thank you to Member Dang for bringing up the motion. I have a few questions for Member Dang for a better explanation. I do hope for a genuine conversation surrounding it, because I know I make it a priority in my own constituency to make my offices as accessible as possible. I have two offices, one in the north and one in the south, at added cost, but happy to do so because of the very vast size; it's about 100,000 kilometres.

I also know that in the past my office has used translation services for a number of very prominent second languages, mother tongues, where they do not speak English even as a second language in a number of these communities. They include Low German, which is very, very prominent. It's the highest number of mother-tongue-only language speakers in my constituency. French, as everyone knows, in the Région de la Paix is very prominent, settled by French settlers. Dene, obviously, not new Canadians, very, very long-time Canadians, before the rest of us arrived: they also have a very prominent number in their community of first-language only-Dene speakers. Cree as well. Sometimes the Cree and Dene will speak each other's language – the elders will – but it will be less common of them to speak a third language. English and then Tagalog is very, very prominent as well for all of the hard-working Filipinos I have in my constituency, as many of the other members do.

My first question. I'm very happy and understand very clearly that in the current orders these services are covered by my MSA. I've had them used in my constituency in the past, will continue to do so when needed. I appreciate the importance the we put on folks who are in the American sign language community. They almost always already can use these services provided by the Legislature, when we talk about the Legislature proper, for closed captioning. Is this exclusively in your mind, Member, for services in the constituency that you want to use the service for, for communicating, or is it broader than just communicating to your constituents?

Thank you, Chair. That's my comment right now, but I'm hoping to have a bit of engagement on that.

The Chair: I'm not sure, Member Dang, if you want to respond.

Mr. Dang: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that some of my colleagues will have additional things to add in here. Certainly, when we look at these services and how we want to deliver these services – I mean, of course, I've used my own MSA to pay for ASL interpretation as well in the past, for example. I think that when we look at the current evolution of how we're communicating with constituents and the realities of how, for example, we are doing a lot of our work online, services such as live broadcast captioning can be the difference between being able to communicate with somebody or not, right? I mean, I think certainly these are protected grounds. There are protected grounds here against discrimination, and we need to make sure that we are providing the best services here.

I think that having those services available in the constituency is certainly key but also when caucuses do their work, for example, if there's a Facebook Live or some sort of town hall as well. I think town halls reach many Albertans across the province. Albertans deserve to have those services and, I think, have the right to have those services provided to them. I think that when we look at the parliamentary duties of MLAs – for example, of course, myself, I am the Infrastructure critic. If I'm speaking to infrastructure stakeholders across the province, those services should also be available.

I mean, I fully understand that the Speaker has already mentioned that it's available as part of the MSAs and under caucus expenditures as well, but I think that, certainly, if we're going to do this meaningfully and have a real service provided around this, it could become cost prohibitive for some offices to do that for sustained periods of time, so I think that if we're looking for some sort of additional order that would provide interpretation services and live captioning services – sort of my intention is to try to create a framework that would be reasonable in terms of both the costs but also being able to ensure that we have an allowance for this type of service.

I think that my colleagues will have more to say as well.

The Speaker: Member Williams has one quick follow-up, and then we'll proceed to Member Neudorf unless there are others. Member Williams.

Mr. Williams: Okay. Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Member Dang, for the answer. I actually found that very helpful. I appreciate you informing us as to sort of some of your thoughts and answering particularly surrounding the scope and purpose of it. I understand that you currently use your MSA to the end of paying for ASL. Is there something that you think is insufficient about that now? It seems to me that it works very well for me in translating for my own constituents in different languages. It strikes me that it seems like an appropriate use of those funds.

I guess the second part of that follow-up would be – maybe this would be directed to the dias. I'm not sure if the Speaker or Ms Rempel knows. Is there any reason caucus is prohibited from using funds for translating in ASL or any other language right now?

10:50

The Chair: There is nothing that would prevent caucuses from utilizing translation services, be it on Facebook Live or other ways in which members and caucuses might like to do that.

Mr. Williams: Well, thank you. That, again, makes clear to me. I'm grateful that we have the administration that we have and the Members' Services Committees that have gone before us because all bases seem to be covered. From what I can tell, engaging with the member, the very fact that he is currently using his MSA for translating ASL shows that it does work, and the very fact that caucus can continue to do so when caucus communicates, as it

should, shows that it works as well. It strikes me that there are a lot of resources out there currently.

The Chair: The current speakers list is Member Neudorf, followed by Member Hoffman.

Mr. Dang: Mr. Speaker, if I could just reply quickly to the question directed to me.

The Chair: You bet. Quickly, please.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that, certainly, that ignores the fact that, as I had mentioned, currently with things like live-casting services and extensive reaching out, it's going to become cost prohibitive in the future, so an additional order that would allow these services to be reimbursed separately is the intent here. I think that, certainly, Mr. Williams does a disservice when he speaks about how the current system is structured to do this fine because I think that we do need to have accommodations and services and additional resources in place because it is going to become cost prohibitive in the future if we are to sustain this type of service level.

Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you, Member Dang. Member Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just want to go to the motion and have some questions about particularly (b) and (c). For (b), part of the motion, just for clarification: is this asking for additional funding under the MSA, or is it asking to move it somewhere else in the budget? Given your comments that it was already included and covered, I am unclear on the intent of that. Maybe if Mr. Dang would speak to that.

On (c), the cost estimate, I agree that cost estimates would be very good in understanding what we're doing, but I am concerned that it being put in the motion to proceed with it before we know what that estimate is might be putting the cart before the horse. I just have questions with those two parts in particular of that motion, if he would be able to speak to that possibly.

The Chair: Member Dang or otherwise.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't want to jump ahead of the queue here, but I think that certainly my intent is that we can find some additional monies to provide these services and to create an additional resource for members and caucuses to utilize.

The Chair: Thank you.

Just for clarity's sake, it would appear that the motion is that ASL interpretive services would no longer be an allowable expense under the MSA because the expenditure would be then incurred by administrative services orders, which isn't necessarily a problem but just in terms of the process. The other thing that is already paid by administrative services orders are the closed-captioning services that committee and the House enjoy. "Enjoy," perhaps, is a poor choice of words, but benefit from, use, utilize. That is already a service that is paid from that.

Let's go to Member Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: Thank you very much, colleagues. I'm doing multiple cameras here and multiple screens, so bear with me. I do want to take a few minutes to respond to some of the comments so far. First of all, the primary language for education in the Philippines is English. That doesn't mean that everyone does speak English, but it is the primary language in the education system, and

in my experience everyone that I've had the honour of interacting with who speaks Tagalog speaks excellent English.

In terms of office accessibility, there have been media reports of MLAs choosing to locate their offices in spaces that aren't physically accessible, so I wouldn't say that the opening comments reflect the reality around accessibility of all MLA offices. I think that is something where individual MLAs either make their offices accessible or not.

I think that the big difference here in terms of questions raised by our colleague from Peace River is around access and protected grounds under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as well as the human rights act. I would say that the ability not just to receive but also to be able to communicate in a giving way for members of the deaf and hard of hearing community is something that I absolutely believe is – as members of this Assembly we represent all of the electorate, including those who are deaf and hard of hearing, and they should have the opportunity to be able to communicate with us other than having to do it through writing.

While I appreciate that the captioning services for the House and for committees are exceptional, they don't allow for two-way communication. I certainly have used my own resources through my MSA – and our caucus has as well – when I've been having consultations. Particularly this came to a head in the spring when I was consulting with folks around the elimination of RCSD, regional collaborative service delivery, funding. There were members of the deaf and hard of hearing community who wanted to communicate with me specifically around their concerns about their supports being taken away. The only way we could do that was by having a meeting that included captioning services, and for us to contract that out was \$125 an hour, and then ASL interpreters were \$55 an hour. You typically will have two so that they can switch off because it is exhausting doing that much direct translation, as you would with any language service.

My proposal, since it sounds like there is a willingness to consider this but that there is a desire to reduce MSA compensation consistent with what people have been paying out, would be to simply do an analysis, an audit of what people have been paying and if it is the will of the Assembly to reduce, if we bring this in-house, if we bring this in line with services available through the LAO consistently, that the average MSA be reduced, by the average amount that people were spending on ASL and captioning services over the last, I don't know, one or five years. You can pick the range that you think is fair.

But this is something that has absolutely become a barrier for a large portion of the population that already goes unheard. It's something that at the beginning of the pandemic the Premier and chief medical officer of health made clear that there was a commitment to be able to speak more directly with the deaf and hard of hearing community, and it's something that I think is long overdue, for us to say consistently that you shouldn't have to hope that your member has saved an extra \$55 to be able to hear from you in a real-time way, that you shouldn't just have to write letters back and forth, that there should be more authentic engagement with Members of the Legislative Assembly.

I think that the proposal that's been brought forward by my colleagues is a way to demonstrate that we respect people's Charter rights, that we respect their human rights and that we respect their voice and that we're going to find a way to hear and engage with them.

Thank you.

The Chair: Member Walker.

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to Member Dang for bringing this motion forward. As Member Williams spoke of, I think, you know, this is a noble thing to debate, and we're having a fruitful, civil debate here today. So I'm glad to put my name on the record speaking to this.

Just some questions for Member Dang or anyone else on the opposition side or whoever would like to respond. I do a lot of multicultural work as well as with other communities who might be having communication issues or impediments, including in the Edmonton area. I know many on the opposition side do as well, Mr. Chair, including Member Dang. I'm just curious. Generally speaking, Member Dang, do you have any, even just broadly speaking, examples? You talked about the Facebook Live town hall, which was informative. Any further ones where you have experienced there being ASL or ESL interpretive issues from groups or communities?

Furthermore, speaking on the seniors angle: I live with my mother-in-law. She's 85, Japanese; she, of course, doesn't speak any English. So I deal with these issues every day myself. I'm just wondering if you could speak at all to seniors with perhaps communication issues, if they are ASL or ESL challenged. Could you speak to that? Finally, I would just like if Mr. Dang could clarify. He's asking for an increase to the MSA and the caucus budget? Is that what I'm hearing? Thank you, Mr. Chair.

11:00

The Chair: Member Dang, should you choose to respond.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, just getting my video on here. Well, I think, certainly, when we're talking about the funding here, what we were looking for is not to increase the MSA or caucus budget. I don't think that's the intent. It's to create an additional allocation of monies that would be specifically for interpretive services and captioning and ASL services. I would think that it creates a sort of protected area. We know that there are certain services that need to be provided, but we don't want it to be just a blanket giving to constituencies and MLAs and caucuses of more money for this. I think that it should be targeted and allow for those resources. I think that it's something that is very important, and you had mentioned things like seniors that have language barriers and whatnot. I think that those certainly are areas where this is extremely valuable.

For example, I work quite extensively, obviously, with the Chinese community, and many people from the Chinese community have language barriers. Additional services for interpretative services would allow us to be able to better communicate with people, particularly immigrants, whether they be new immigrants or otherwise. I think that in this case having the ASL service provided and interpretive services provided under new monies would mean that we'd be able to expand the scope in which we actually communicate with Albertans. For example, when caucuses do town halls or pressers or new announcements, having the ability to have a live interpreter provided would have significant benefits, I think, for Albertans and wouldn't be able to be covered normally under the existing budgets because it would simply be cost-prohibitive.

The Chair: I have Member Williams again. Is there anyone else prior to going to him again?

Member Williams.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Chair. I just wanted to add my last thoughts here. When it comes to languages that we need to translate within the constituency, I'll reiterate that I think there is a plethora of them. There are a huge number of languages. We're a very diverse province, whether we're talking about First Nation

languages, Cree and Dene in my constituency, or we're talking about new Canadians coming here. Yes, members, there are first-language-only Tagalog speakers that come from the Philippines – and they're often the elderly – that come with their families. It is important that we communicate with all of them, as Member Hoffman and Dang made the salient point about.

I think that when we look at this from Members' Services, our responsibility is to oversee the LAO and its budget, and we have to look at it from the perspective of what is the best way to make sure that we're communicating with all of our constituents as equally as possible while considering the protected grounds under the Charter, as Member Hoffman put forward. That's why I do think that we have a system that is very flexible and robust right now. If there is a concern in the future about it not being sustainable, as Member Dang alluded, that's, again, something that this committee in its form should address then, but up to now I do believe that it is sustainable, have found it to serve my constituents well. I appreciate the flexibility I have.

When it comes to budgeting, it's not a hope that members just budget enough; it is the expectation of this Assembly that members use their MSA budgets wisely and thoughtfully, that they do budget contingencies. It is true for any of the services I provide, whether it be translation for ASL, another language, or any other means of communication, that I need to make sure that I'm considering that. I know that every member I speak to does do that. I'm sure the members opposite also consider those contingencies. With that, I really think that there are a lot of good points here. I think that it's a valuable conversation to be had but nonetheless is one where I personally feel like the current situation is serving us well. But I do look forward to more debate on it. It might be more than just what we have time for today.

The Chair: Member Hoffman has requested to speak again to the motion.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. Thanks so much. I do want to reiterate that this is around discrimination, and it isn't about communicating equally; it's about communicating accessibly and equitably. No matter how clearly I speak, there are people who won't be able to hear if they can't hear, and it is so important, I think, that we say that we respect human rights and that we do so through a commitment of the Assembly to ensure that anyone's desire to speak with any member of our Assembly is done in a way that enables them to have their voice heard and also to communicate in real time.

I have to say that the captioning services that we used when we had a community meeting, using a Microsoft suite of services, was not sufficient. It was very frustrating for members of the deaf and hard of hearing community to not be able to engage in a way that they could see people's faces and also communicate. But we're not starting from scratch. We know what works because the community has told us. They want access to ASL services universally, and they also want the ability to have real-time captioning, like they do with the Assembly and with the committees.

We know that it's important for people to hear what we're saying in those environments; I think it would be prudent of us to demonstrate that we care what they're saying as well. I think that this motion is fair and reasonable, and I think that it definitely has been highlighted, the need for hearing from the community during the pandemic particularly.

I think that I want to share just a few comments from one person that I did communicate with on this specifically, who said that her experience with Microsoft Teams around the captioning piece has been unpredictable and has caused her anxiety and frustration with

the unpredictability of access to captioning and being able to see the person and have their speech heard. It resulted in poor computer acoustics as well. Fortunately, we were paying for ASL interpreters, who were able to provide access for those who were able to understand ASL, but that's not enough in terms of the disability community. Disability is a grounds for protected rights against discrimination.

I would say that I think the point that has been raised and the need for us to increase universality in this way is enough for us to move forward with this, do the work of making sure we speak to the community and that the community can speak to us.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Member Hoffman. I just have one question because I am unclear about your perspective. Can you help me understand how the issue of discrimination arises given that all of the parameters are already in place in which needs of members of that community can be met? I'm just unclear as to the difference between what you're asking for and what's available.

Ms Hoffman: Yeah. The difference is that they aren't universally accessible, including the physical offices of MLAs. Some MLAs have offices on a second floor only accessible by stairs. That is a separate and distinct item from the one we're discussing today, but I know that rationale was given at the beginning, so I just want to underscore that that is – I remember reading newspaper stories about that shortly after the last provincial election.

The other piece is around consistency and being able to access those services. If, for example – and I don't think the motion is dictating how it be done, whether it's the LAO that outsources this and does a contract basis or the LAO hires somebody on an internal employment agreement, but that there be consistent access to be able to have these services.

Right now if I am proactive and I know that somebody who is registering for something that I'm having requires translation services, I can go into my budget, I can explicitly seek out somebody to be able to provide these services, and I can take it on my own initiative to find a way to make that fit within my budget, which already is, of course, quite tight.

I imagine that if we did an audit of other MLA offices, some don't use any translation services and some use them far more than others. I think that this is something, if we want to talk equity, where we say: no matter where you live in Alberta, if you are deaf or hard of hearing, consistent with your human rights and the Charter rights to be able to fully participate in democracy, you will have access to somebody who can do translation services or somebody who can do real-time captioning for you. This is something that we shouldn't be continually fighting for. I know that members of the deaf and hard of hearing community feel like they have to all the time. I think they expect that their government, just like we have the requirement for WCB to be accessible, and all MLAs will be accessible as well.

To have to always be proactive, to always have to fight, to always have to make sure that those services are available – whereas if the LAO consistently made them available, if there was some kind of agreement between the LAO and individual members about how you request those services or how caucuses request those services, I think that we would be better stewards of both the public purse and – I would say that Members' Services has more than just the budget to be concerned with. I'd say that Members' Services has the execution of democracy, to how our constituents engage with it and individual MLAs, as a priority that it should be addressing as well.

11:10

The Chair: Member Deol, followed by Member Ellis.

Mr. Deol: Can you see my video? Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for the opportunity. I just wanted to thank all the members for your invaluable input into this. What I want to say is that being the member from one of the most diverse ridings in the province and having the opportunity to be able to speak more than one language, not only myself but some of my staff can communicate in more than one language, and given the situation, the number of communities we live in, that we still often find a challenge to within our limitations be able to communicate effectively with a number of cultures and communities that are living in my riding.

As a member, being an MLA with a critic portfolio, what I would say on what we have seen, specifically in the last nine months in the way that we have been moving to Facebook Live and Zoom meetings to communicate with our constituents and stakeholders across the province, I will say that there's a large number of people, a large community that exists in the world that does not hear; they're deaf, they're hard of hearing. To my comments on this – you know, by having the mechanism that is specifically dedicated to be able to effectively communicate with the community that require these certain services that the government is already providing, you know, wouldn't harm anything. If, for the MLAs in different ridings, it may seem to be, you know, not an emergency situation, not the kind of requirement for right now, then that's fine. If people don't use this; that's fine. Looking at this, we have a large number of people – there's a large community – so having the mechanism in place to be able to effectively serve those people and communicate with those people would do no harm.

So that's the basic reason that I really wanted to support this motion.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ellis.

Mr. Ellis: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to thank all of the members for their comments. I would like to thank Mr. Dang, actually, for bringing this motion forward. You know, I've said this before, and I'll say it again: any form of discrimination should never, ever be tolerated. I stand by that. You know, I was really hoping that this would be a motion with the intent to help those who are, I would say, in the most vulnerable categories.

I think that many of you know my history and my background and what I have done to help the vulnerable community. So for that, of course, I'm not opposed to ensuring that people are allowed to, as was said earlier, have a right to communicate with their elected officials. I will say that the Speaker and the Speaker's office, for as long as I've been here, not only in this session but in the previous session and even the one before that, unless there are some radical changes that I am completely unaware of, have respected human rights. The people were already able to access these services, not only for the deaf, of course, but also interpretive services for people that speak other languages. I thank Mr. Walker for his story in regard to his mother-in-law, who doesn't speak any English. I'm sure that there are challenges that she faces, especially when she wants to communicate with an elected official as well. We need to provide those options for those people, and I would say that the Speaker's office in this session and, I would say, the Speaker's office in the 29th Legislature also provided those services for our community members.

Although I do understand that COVID has taken a bit of a, you know, turn and caused a lot of chaos in everybody's lives, I will say that because of that, we have to make sure that we are still providing those services to our constituents. Again, I'm certainly supportive of we'll call it guidelines and, you know, ensuring that we are providing those interpretive services, which I think has been stated

already, that we have been doing this. Nobody that I'm aware of and even as I take my other hat off – I am the chief government whip – of the 63 members that essentially technically fall under the whip's office, I haven't had any complaints saying that there were some inadequacies or some inadequacies even with the Speaker's office being able to provide those services.

I am curious as to, you know, what the costs are on this or even what the requests have been for interpretive services that have occurred that maybe have not been able to have been fulfilled or that there have been challenges in fulfilling by other members for interpretive services. I know that it was said that this is cost prohibitive and will potentially have some issues regarding – I won't say spiral out of control – being cost prohibitive if we continue to go down this path. That may or may not be, quite frankly, Mr. Speaker. That certainly is speculation, and I certainly would like to know if there are some numbers and if there is a feasibility opportunity or a cost opportunity when it comes to this.

I think there may have even been some interpretations, you know, which would be big for this committee. Would we be looking at reducing people's MSA budgets? I don't know. That may or may not occur. Is that something that we may have to consider? I mean, unless the opposition is in some way proposing that we increase MSA budgets or if we go down the road to where we would have to ask for increases to the Speaker's office budget – again, these are great questions and I think as indicated by Mr. Williams might be worthy of a further discussion on this issue.

I will indicate that, you know, we have had the opportunity, all of us as members – and we each have unique and individual ridings. I know that Mr. Williams quite passionately speaks of the very diverse community in northern Alberta. I know that Calgary has a diverse community and Edmonton has a diverse community, all with unique needs that we as elected officials have to ensure that we meet. That is important. I think that it's incumbent upon all of us as elected officials to ensure that we communicate effectively, which I think is why the Speaker's office has respected human rights with a very broad brush to ensure that we communicate effectively with all constituents, including those who are of the deaf community, which is vitally important.

11:20

We've seen with even some of the government messaging when it comes to COVID that we have an interpreter there. Even when I look in this room, I see that we have closed-captioning on the screen to ensure that people who might be deaf are able to read what is going on in this committee, which I think is fantastic. It is important that we communicate with those people.

You know, I would argue that the substance of this motion, which is to "direct Legislative Assembly Office administration to prepare . . . draft guidelines for the use of" interpretation, would be something that is important for us to have, but there are, I think, maybe more questions right now than there are answers on this.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I think that this is probably worthy of further discussion and further debate, and I'd like to make a motion to

adjourn debate on this motion.

The Chair: Hon. members, having heard the motion as proposed by Member Ellis to adjourn debate on this item of business, all those in favour of the motion, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. In my opinion the ayes have it.

That motion is carried.

Debate is adjourned.

Moving to item 5, parameters for the Legislative Assembly Office budget estimates 2021-22. Before I open the floor for

discussion on the proposed budget parameters, I would like to provide the committee with an overview of the Legislative Assembly Office budget. As noted in the budget parameters document, this meeting will allow Members' Services Committee to provide direction to the LAO for the preparation of a draft budget for the committee's consideration. By way of background and using the current fiscal year numbers, the LAO budget is approximately \$65 million and is comprised of three main components: (1) the LAO branch budgets, approximately \$23.8 million, (2) MLA administrative expenses, approximately \$33.4 million, and (3) the caucus budgets, which account for the balance of the LAO budget.

I have given the LAO administration some preliminary direction to plan for no increase to the LAO budget, including the budget for the office of the Speaker, with one exception of a \$300,000 increase to the parliamentary services budget, noted in the budget parameters to address the anticipated additional costs in the forthcoming fiscal year arising from increased sessional hours.

As noted in a document that I sent to you last week, the 10-year average for sitting hours is 286 hours per sitting year. In 2019-2020 the Legislative Assembly sat for 253 hours. On November 8 in this fiscal year, as included in the budget parameters document, we had sat 424 hours. That does not include the last five sitting days or whatever sitting days remain in this session, presumably five to 10 more of those. It does not include the 10 to 25 sitting days that will follow in February and March of the next calendar year, which will account for somewhere between 650 and 750 sitting hours, a significant increase from even last year, which was a high in the last 10 years. The proposed budget parameters include a hold-the-line budget on the other two elements of the LAO budget, namely MLA administration and caucus budgets.

In summary, the LAO branches committed to a reduction, which was achieved, of 5 per cent, or \$1.225 million, in 2020-2021. This reduction continues to be reflected in a hold-the-line static budget for the continuation of the existing operations of 2021-22, with the exception of the previously mentioned adjustment for parliamentary services budget to address the increase in the additional sitting hours.

I will now open the conversation to the floor if anyone has a brief question or comment with respect to the budget parameters document or require any additional information for the LAO. If not, I do have a draft motion that a member can move.

Member Williams followed by Member Dang.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Chair. I just wanted to better understand the increase in hours. So we're at 400-odd hours year-to-date right now – I missed the total number – and you expect another 650 to 750 more hours?

The Chair: Currently, excluding whatever hours we sat last week, we have sat 424 hours.

Mr. Williams: Okay.

The Chair: I anticipate another 150 to 200 hours, including the five days last week, whatever is remaining in this session, and whatever will be in February and March of next year.

Mr. Williams: So it sounds like a near tripling of hours from the 10-year average, and I was just wondering the difference between hours sat versus days sat, sitting days. Are we very high above an increase in a number of days sat, or does that stay more flat?

The Chair: Well, one of the big challenges with respect to budgets, in particular in this budget, is that the lion's share of the costs are included in hourly wage employees. Particularly if you look at the

document that was circulated a number of months ago on hours, no, we don't see massive increases in days, but the number of hours that we sit and then sitting hours past midnight are also a significant contributor to the costs because of the increased costs in overtime that's paid, particularly to LASS, *Hansard*, and other hourly employees. While we might not see, you know, going from 50 days to 300 days in terms of having triple hours and, obviously, not sitting 300 days, it's because we had a day this year in which we sat 46 hours – right? – because the calendar doesn't change until the House adjourns. We won't see necessarily a massive increase in days, but we will see a significant increase in hours.

Ms Dean: If I may supplement the Speaker's comments by way of statistics, in the 2020-2021 fiscal year alone we've exceeded the number of evening sittings by 44 per cent, and we've tripled the number of evening sittings that go past midnight.

The Chair: Mr. Williams.

Mr. Williams: No. That is all the questions I had. I very much appreciate that.

The Chair: Member Dang.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to thank you, your team, the Clerk, and the Clerk's team as well for the work done on this document. I think that it is commendable that they were able to find a hold-the-line budget again in the next fiscal year. I think, certainly, that as we look at the amount of sitting hours – I just want to clarify again perhaps, that when we talk about parliamentary services, that means that we're talking about an increase in services such as LASS, pages, and other types of services like that as well as things that would increase our costs. Is that correct?

11:30

The Chair: Yeah, I am happy to have Ruth or Shannon speak to the types of items that come out of parliamentary services. Essentially, you have hit the nail on the head, but if you're looking for more detail, I'm happy to provide.

Mr. Dang: No. That's good. Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. Are there others wishing to speak to the budget parameters document? Member Hoffman.

Ms Hoffman: Thanks. I just wanted to clarify. I think I heard the Speaker say that after midnight and the length of days is a specific cost driver, and I'm just wondering how the number of morning sittings compares to previous iterations of the Legislature and if we had more morning hours instead of post-midnight hours, if that would also impact the budget in a positive way, and if so, maybe that's something for consideration by the Government House Leader and others who help determine the schedule.

Thank you.

The Chair: Noted. The number of morning sittings was not broken down in that document, just total hours and evening sittings, so I don't have the answer to the first half of your question, but it is noted, and I'd be more than happy to pass along some of those comments to the House leadership.

Is there anyone else? There is a draft motion that includes that the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services approve the 2021-2022 budget parameters as distributed for the Legislative Assembly of Alberta presented to the committee at the November 30, 2020, meeting and direct the Legislative Assembly Office to prepare the 2021-2022 budget estimates according to these parameters.

Is there anyone wishing to move that motion? The hon. the Member for Lethbridge-East, Member Neudorf.

I am prepared to call the question unless there is further discussion on the motion. Hearing and seeing none, all those in favour of the motion as proposed by Member Neudorf, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. On the phone?

That motion is carried and ordered.

Item 6, the LAO travel, meals, and hospitality expenses policy. On January 20, 2020, this committee reviewed the draft LAO travel, meals, and hospitality expenses policy, and there was significant discussion about that policy at that time. Adjustments have been made to make the policy slightly more clear with respect to how it impacts the Speaker's office. That input was considered, the adjustment was made, and the new draft policy was circulated. Is there anyone wishing to provide question or comment on that? Perhaps Member Dang?

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to thank you and the Clerk's team for the work on this. I think it does address many of the concerns that we had raised at our last meeting.

Thank you.

The Chair: Are you willing to move the following draft motion – I'm not putting words in your mouth; you can decide – that the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services approve the policy for the reimbursement of travel, meals, hospitality, and other expenses incurred by the Legislative Assembly Office and its employees in carrying out Assembly business as distributed.

Mr. Dang: Sure. I would move that, Mr. Speaker.

The Chair: As moved by Member Dang. Are there any additional questions, comments, or discussion on this?

Seeing and hearing none, all those in favour of the motion as proposed by Member Dang, please say aye. On the phones? Any opposed?

The motion is carried.

Hon. members, on to other business, item (b), caucus expenditure guideline. I would just like to put a little bit of information on the record with respect to how this particular item arrived before us today. There has been significant conversation amongst a number of members of the Assembly around caucus expense guidelines, how the LAO and those guidelines interact. I suggested that it may be worth while having a brief discussion about this at MSC. It is important to note that the LAO delivers on the guidelines and policies that this committee sets out for it and that the previous committees that have gone before us have set out before them as well. If there is a desire to make some changes, we have the ability to do so.

I'd like to turn this over to Member Williams. You have some comments and questions as there's also a proposed draft amendment. The hon. Member Williams.

Mr. Williams: Yes, a proposed draft motion that, I believe, was circulated in the documents beforehand, submitted before the date last Wednesday, which I hope everyone has and has read. I think it would be very productive for this committee to strike a subcommittee to discuss how to modernize and make more effective and better serve Albertans and our constituents with the Members' Services orders and the caucus and member expense guideline documents. I think that it's paramount that the Members' Services Committee take responsibility for those documents and make sure that we are considering all the different ways that they reflect the needs of our constituents and how those needs are met. To that end, I would like to move the motion that has been prepared in advance and circulated.

The Chair: We'll get the motion on the screen.

I see that Member Ellis has indicated that he might like to speak to the motion as well. It's a bit lengthy, so we don't need to read it. Member Ellis.

Mr. Ellis: Yeah. I'm not sure if you would like to read the motion first. However, I would like to make a constructive amendment to this motion. I'm not sure if this is the appropriate time in which to do it or what process you'd like.

The Chair: Okay. Why don't I go ahead and read the motion into the record now that it's here, and we can either get a general consensus from committee members – it sounds like the amendment wasn't proposed. Of course, a majority of the committee can allow an amendment to be moved, but there might be consensus anyway, and we'll see how we travel here. That the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services

- (a) establish a subcommittee to
 - (i) meet, from time to time at the call of the chair of the subcommittee to review the Members' Services Committee orders, the members' expenditures guidelines, and the caucus expenditure guidelines, and
 - (ii) present to the committee, from time to time, recommendations based on its review, and
- (b) approve the following requirements that apply to the subcommittee and its membership:
 - (i) the presence of two-thirds of the subcommittee is necessary to constitute a quorum;
 - (ii) the subcommittee is to be composed of
 - (A) a chair, being a member of the government caucus,
 - (B) three additional members of the government caucus, and
 - (C) two members of the Official Opposition;
 - (iii) substitutions from the membership of the committee be permitted on the subcommittee.

With that, Member Ellis.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would like to make a very simple amendment here. It's just to put a bit of a time period behind this so that this is not something that, we'll say, becomes indefinite. What I would be proposing is that the motion be amended in clause (a)(ii) by striking out "present to the committee, from time to time, recommendations based on its review" and substituting

- (ii) present recommendations to the committee based on its review within three months after commencing its review, and

I think that just gives the committee a bit of a timeline. I think it's important, especially as we've had a lot of our discussion today on communications and impossible, maybe, modernization of what we would like to do in co-operation with our friends in opposition to ensure that we, again, can more properly and effectively communicate with our constituents. I believe that having a bit of a time frame to get back to this committee would be, certainly, prudent.

Thank you.

11:40

The Chair: Thank you, Member Ellis.

Now, as per the communication dated November 23, 2020, with instructions to all members of the Special Standing Committee on Members' Services with respect to amendments, the deadline for filing proposed amendments to proposed substantive motions is 3 p.m. on Thursday, November 26. Obviously, we're past that point. This seems to provide some more clarity to the motion, and perhaps

members of the opposition caucus and members of the government caucus here would be happy to proceed with such a motion. It either requires unanimous consent or a majority vote to propose an amendment like this.

Mr. Dang: Mr. Speaker, may I comment briefly before we vote?

The Chair: Yeah. Go ahead.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that it's prudent to have a timeline in place for Mr. Ellis's motion. My only concern is that, especially as we enter into December and January here, having chaired a subcommittee of a similar nature before, the three months may not be sufficient time to do the work, so perhaps we'd be looking at five or six months instead, if Mr. Ellis would be willing to change the time line just slightly.

The Chair: Member Ellis.

Mr. Ellis: Yes. Thank you very much. As I consult with my colleagues here, this is obviously an amendment to Mr. Williams' motion that is currently on the floor. I think that it would be agreeable that we change it to five months. Does that sound good to you, Mr. Dang?

Mr. Dang: That sounds good. Thank you.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you.

The Chair: To be clear, that doesn't preclude the committee from reporting prior if they happen to get done their work. Can we make that change? Do we need to vote to make this amendment happen, or can we get unanimous consent? Okay.

I'm just going to briefly request unanimous consent for Member Ellis to be able to propose this motion. I will ask only one question. Is there anyone opposed to this motion being moved at this time? If so, please indicate now. Hearing and seeing none, unanimous consent is granted.

Now we are on the actual amendment to the motion for a timeline of reporting back in five months. I believe that the actual date is probably there, or did you just say "five months"? Is that fine with you guys? Five months? Okay.

Are there any other questions or comments on the amendment?

Hearing and seeing none, I'm prepared to call the question. On the amendment, all those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no.

The amendment is carried.

Is there anyone else wishing to speak to the subcommittee motion?

Mr. Dang: Mr. Dang here.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Maybe I would seek the consent or advice of the committee. My only comment – and I apologize for not catching this in advance and submitting a motion in advance – is that I note that in the very last line of the motion there substitutions for the members on the subcommittee are permitted. I wonder if the committee would be amenable to allowing it to be "substitutions would be permitted" so it wouldn't have to be the membership of the committee. I mean, obviously, in the main committee here we also have substitutions. For example, my colleague Ms Hoffman is substituting today. If we'd be able to allow members to choose any member designate as their substitute:

that's basically the question I had. If it would be generally amenable, I would request consent for that motion.

The Chair: Okay. Is there any concern? Member Williams.

Mr. Williams: Thank you, Chair. Member Dang, I'm open to the idea. The only concern I have would be sort of a sense of continuity. Subcommittees are meant to go into things at depth. If the intention is to substitute where it makes sense so that we can keep one or two members there long term, I think it's important we start this subcommittee off on a good foot collaborating. My suggestion is that we're open to it, but I'd ask that as much as possible all members of the subcommittee make a serious attempt to be there regularly. That would be my thoughts on it, but I'm not in principle opposed to it, and if Member Dang feels similarly to the sense of continuity, then for sure he'd have my support on that.

Mr. Dang: Mr. Speaker, if I may.

The Chair: Member Dang.

Mr. Dang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, I one hundred per cent agree. I mean, as I said, in the 29th Legislature I chaired a subcommittee to this effect, and we did allow substitutions from the general caucuses. My view would be that, where possible, it should be the same members there every single time. Sometimes it may make sense to substitute out with, let's say, a House leader or something, if there is something that needs to be changed there. Otherwise, I think that normally everyone should be trying to attend. With that, I would perhaps request unanimous consent of the committee to strike out the words "from the membership of the subcommittee."

The Chair: Member Neudorf has a comment prior to voting.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I just wonder if the Clerk or the committee clerk could speak to how other subcommittees are set up. I understand that in this committee you can have a substitution for that. Would that not overrule this subcommittee, where if somebody was substituted onto this committee, they could also fill that subcommittee role? Maybe they could speak to that. I'm just trying to understand how other subcommittees are set up. This question must have been asked before. If they could provide some clarity on that.

Ms Dean: There have been a variety of different approaches, but some of the subcommittees that have been established haven't had a specific provision in their mandate that's set out in this motion, that precludes membership from the larger number of members.

The Chair: Member Ellis.

Mr. Ellis: Thank you. I think it will be brief. Certainly, if it's the will of the committee and members of the government side as well as members of the opposition, I think that this is – I'm seeing some consensus here that we can agree, just ensuring that we have input from all members – entirely possible. But I agree with Member Williams, and I actually agree with Mr. Dang as to comments he made. We'd like to maintain the continuity. I think that's just more effective to ensure that we get a better result, hopefully, in the end. However, there are always unforeseen circumstances that come up in people's lives. Having that option available for them would be fine.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: I concur. I think we do have some consensus here, so I'll ask only one question. This is a request for unanimous consent to remove the words "from the membership of the committee" from the proposed motion. I'll ask only one question: is there anyone opposed to allowing unanimous consent for the proposed to happen? If so, indicate now.

Unanimous consent is granted, and that change is made.

We are back on the motion for the subcommittee. Is there anyone else that would like to provide a brief question or comment?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call the question. Hon. members, on the motion as proposed by the hon. Member Williams as amended, all those in favour, please say aye. Is there any opposed? Please say no.

That motion is carried and so ordered.

Members, given the nature of the committee, the next steps are for each caucus to submit the names for the members for the subcommittee to the clerk and my office as the chair of MSC. The government members would also indicate who will be the chair. I

don't see any reason why this couldn't be done, certainly, by tomorrow, Wednesday at the latest. Is that agreeable for members?

Mr. Ellis: May I recommend noon tomorrow, Mr. Speaker?

The Chair: Noon tomorrow: that's good with me. Members of the opposition caucus, is that a possible pathway?

Mr. Dang: I think that's fine, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

Is there any other business?

The next meeting date will be at the call of the chair. It will likely be to approve the budget estimates that the LAO is now preparing for us.

A motion to adjourn, please. Ms Goodridge. All those in favour, please say aye. Any opposed, please say no. We are adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 11:50 a.m.]

