

Advisory Group on Disability Issues (AGDI)

Meeting Summary November 24, 2020

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1. Meeting Summary

Elections Canada (EC) convened the Advisory Group for Disability Issues (AGDI) for a one-day meeting on November 24, 2020. The goal of the meeting was to inform and obtain AGDI members' feedback on the conduct of an election in a pandemic context. The CEO also obtained input on his recommendations to Parliament, particularly as they related to potential adaptive measures required to make voting services more accessible.

The meeting was co-chaired by Susan Torosian, Executive Director, Policy and Public Affairs, and Denis Bazinet, Senior Director, Operations and Field Governance. It was facilitated by Alain Rabeau (Intersol).

2. Introductory Remarks by the CEO

Presenter: Stéphane Perrault (Chief Electoral Officer [CEO])

The CEO opened the meeting. He noted that the pandemic and minority government context have significantly affected Elections Canada's operations and priorities. As such, EC made some adjustments to its timelines and accessibility projects to cope with the current realities. Additionally, in September 2020, Elections Canada delivered a Special Report to Parliament with recommendations on measures to adapt voter services in a pandemic context. A second Recommendations report is expected to be delivered in the Spring of 2021 and the CEO stated the potential need to consult with AGDI members prior to the submission of this report.

M. Perrault stated that there were a number of technical changes to the Canada Elections Act that it is considering recommending to Parliament including an amendment to rules surrounding electors requiring assistance at the polls. Specifically, the CEO is considering the recommendation of removing the distinction between family, friends and other assistants, as well as the limitation on how many electors can receive assistance from one helper. The CEO reassured Advisory Group members that they would be consulted on specific changes being recommended to the Act. He also reiterated a commitment to pilot assistive technology to allow blind electors to verify their ballots at the polls, making progress on improving the accessibility of Elections Canada's election services such as piloting assistive technology for blind electors, and ensuring EC's public facing and internal systems are fully accessible to meet the needs of voters, candidates, and workers with disabilities.

Advisory Group members posed a number of questions to clarify how EC would administer the vote in a pandemic context with respect to phone and electronic voting and lessons learned from other jurisdictions. Questions were also raised on the issue of masks, which pose a barrier to electors who are deaf and hard of hearing. The CEO clarified that EC is not considering phone or electronic voting. He also noted that EC has engaged with Electoral Management Bodies from other provinces, in particular

Elections BC, to learn about their electoral experience. He also noted that EC is adapting its service offering to ensure that Canadians can cast their ballot safely.

On EC's ongoing priorities, there were questions on how it would engage people with disabilities in the roll-out of assistive technology at the polls. EC assured Advisory Group members that they and their communities would be engaged when it is ready to pilot assistive technology.

3. Pandemic Election

Presenter: Mario Lavoie (Acting Director for Voting Operations), Annabelle O'Keeffe (Acting Assistant Director, Polling Location Management Services) and Sophie Martineau (Acting Director, Alternative Voting Methods and Operational Outreach)

Mr. Lavoie stated that Elections Canada has been in the process of implementing adaptive voting measures in an ever-changing public safety environment, with the aim of offering safe voting services. There are two sets of measures required for the conduct of the next general election: a series of measures that require legislative changes, and a series of measures that could be implemented without legislative changes. Adaptations that require legislative changes include the shift from one to two election days (on Saturday and Sunday instead of the traditional Monday), which the CEO has recommended to Parliament. The CEO also recommended a change to advance polling days, from Thursday until Sunday. A General Election Pandemic Intelligence Task Force (GEPI TF) has been created to monitor, plan, and coordinate the agency's operational response to public health-related situations and incidents. Mr. Lavoie also noted that health and safety measures EC is preparing to implement will not require changes to the legislation.

Regarding voting by special ballot and the community relations programs, Elections Canada's recommendations to Parliament included a request for greater flexibility in how and when the voting in long-term care facilities can be administered in response to the rather high risks associated for these electors. Returning officers will continue to have the opportunity and be encouraged to hire Community Relations Officers (CROs) for any of the target groups (seniors in LTC, youth, electors with disabilities, official Languages/ethno-cultural, Indigenous, and electors who are homeless).

Advisory Group members offered feedback about how to enhance the voting experience for people with disabilities in the pandemic context, while highlighting some of the barriers faced by people with disabilities. On health and safety, EC was encouraged to procure clear masks for workers as well as unscented sanitizer. On voting assistance, there was a question on whether an elector would be able to enact power of attorney and have someone from their family vote for them or send their ballot to their power of attorney representative in order to assist them with voting. EC noted that federally, power of attorney is not permitted for voting. It was also noted by committee members that people with accessibility issues are also limited on how much distance they can cover in going to a voting poll which can be a considerable challenge. It was advised that all EC staff working at polls do not carry the

assumption that everyone is able bodied. It was strongly suggested to have pop-up voting locations in long term care locations and exploring what accommodation measures could be put in place for those persons who are not able to remain standing for lengthy periods of time.

4. Vote-by-mail and Application Process

Presenter: Steven Tyrie (Assistant Director, Alternative Voting Methods directorate) and Brenda Sandelin (Voting Procedures Officer)

Mr. Tyrie spoke about current registration processes and the vote-by-mail kit. He noted that while all electors must be registered to vote, to vote by mail a person must also complete an Application for Registration and Special Ballot in the prescribed form and provide copies of acceptable proof of identity and address before the sixth day before polling day. Elections Canada encouraged all electors who want to vote by mail to apply as early as possible to allow the elector to receive and return their ballot to EC before the polling day deadline.

Ms. Sandelin stated that Elections Canada was making changes which would allow electors to register to vote by mail using the Online Voter Registration Service due to EC expecting an increase in the demand for vote by mail applications. In order to ensure the continued accessibility of the service, there is a plan to engage technical specialists to test the new features and flow and provide EC with feedback and guidance. A brief walkthrough was provided of how the registration process would work in order to answer some questions and concerns that were brought up during the AGDI pandemic consultation.

AGDI members raised questions of clarification about the process for applying and voting by mail. It was noted that 40% of Canadians have literacy problem and therefore mail-in ballots could pose a problem with some electors.

5. New Poll Worker Training Methods

Presenter: Gordon Baird (Associate Director, Field Personnel Training)

Mr. Baird updated Advisory Group members on changes to training of poll workers under the current pandemic circumstances. AGDI members were introduced to four training methods Elections Canada has been developing for the next general election: a classroom training session (trainer-led, physical format); remote training session (trainer-led, digital format); training workbook (self-paced, physical format); and an online training module (self-paced, digital format). AGDI members were asked to comment on the training options that EC is considering, thinking of the needs of the communities they represent.

In terms of training, members advised that whatever fonts are used, it was important that they were adjustable for people with dyslexia and visibility issues considering people may find a lot of printed documents challenging. A request was made for the training materials to be sent to people so that they can familiarize themselves with the contents before the training sessions and that all materials be accessible for all disabled people. It was recommended that Elections Canada should develop a workbook guideline on accessibility for the training of the trainers.

Suggestions were also made to improve the current Elections Canada website including the enabling of a chat live function, the ability to search the website with key words, and the implementation of two separate versions of the website with one being laid out in plain accessible language. It was also noted that while the website is accessible, it can be an overwhelming experience with an amount of frustration when information takes an undue amount of time to track down. Ultimately, the website should be made more accessible with clear and direct links.

6. EC Website Renewal

Presenter: Anne-Marie Lalonde (WEB Manager) and Annie Crombie (Project Officer, Web Renewal Project)

Ms. Lalonde gave an overview of the Elections Canada Corporate website and the planned renewal. EC has aimed to deliver information on the electoral process to a wide variety of audiences, both during and outside of a general election, in a manner that is usable, accessible and mobile friendly. Currently, the agency is defining the vision and direction for the website, identifying required changes, and developing an implementation plan. The following phase would consist of implementing the required changes, thus ensuring that Elections Canada offers a modern and accessible user experience, while also supporting its corporate, business and communications needs.

Ms. Lalonde spoke to recent engagement questions given to AGDI members as part of a consultation process concerning the website renewal and how members felt about the information available on the site and its overall accessibility. A number of committee members felt that the content on the website was very dense and technical; that there was a need for more plain language content and easy-to-understand summaries information. As well, Elections Canada should try to make the content available in more alternate formats in addition to the recommendation that graphics and photos could be used along with text in order to help tell a story or to make information easier to understand. EC also needed to make the information on the services and tools that are available to electors with disabilities easier to find and then easier to understand.

AGDI members were asked if there were any further comments they would like to express on EC's web renewal at the current meeting. Suggestions included: implementing a sort of a chat live function on the website; a resource page where all relevant electronic files would be available for download; an online form that gives a deaf member of the community an opportunity to video themselves in terms of a

response and attach and upload that video to EC; a necessity to use headings more effectively when it comes to coding website headings; and the inclusion of more direct links.

7. Forward Calendar

Presenters: Susan Torosian (Executive Director, Public Affairs and Civic Education)

Ms. Torosian concluded the meeting by outlining upcoming priorities that will necessitate AGDI members' engagement including further consultation through the Bang the Table initiative, the national recruitment campaign, online registration testing, and the CEO's second recommendations report to Parliament.

AGDI members suggested that further engagement items should include an update on accessibility with political parties as there had been perceived interest from parties in expanding accessibility factors such as usage of ASL interpreters, etc. In addition, the necessary health and safety considerations during a general election have created new barriers for those with disability issues in addition to regular barriers and should be discussed further between Elections Canada and AGDI members.

Ms. Torosian concluded the meeting by thanking members for their involvement in the Advisory Group for Disability Issues.

8. Appendix: Meeting participants

AGDI representatives:

Name	Organization
Frank Folino	Canadian Association of the Deaf
Simon April	Comité d'action des personnes vivant des situations de handicap (CAPVISH)
Christopher Sutton	Canadian Hard of Hearing Association
Jewelless Smith	Council of Canadians with Disabilities
Roxana Jahani Aval (observer)	Council of Canadians with Disabilities
Diane Bergeron	Canadian National Institute of the Blind
Duane Morgan (observer)	Canadian National Institute of the Blind
Kory Earle	People First of Canada
Shelley Fletcher	People First of Canada
Gary Birch	Neil Squire Society
Laurence Parent	Independent
Mike Ciarciello	Independent

Technical experts:

Elections Canada staff present at all or part of meeting:

Brad Darch; Juan Melara-Pineda; Lisa Drouillard; Cyntia Henley; Jannine Atkinson; Stéphane Perrault; Susan Torosian; Denis Bazinet; Sylvie Jacmain; Annabelle O'Keeffe; Sophie Martineau; Mario Lavoie; Dan Fischer; Anne-Marie Lalonde; Alan Bristow; Annie Crombie; Diane Brydon; Brenda Sandelin; Steven Tyrie; Gordon Baird; Sinisa Sindik; Karo Séguin; Mariann Canning; Dawn Borutskie; Robert Sampson; Jean-Marc Collin; Jean-François Lefebvre; Patrick Therrien; Matthew Gossack-Keenan; Serge Caron.

Meeting facilitators:

Alain Rabeau & Patrick Valois, Intersol