

Hydro Quebec Fails the Language Test

Montreal, Wednesday, July 13, 1999 – Alliance Quebec's Executive Committee is shocked and appalled over Hydro Quebec's treatment of English-speaking customers who called their emergency 1-800-790-2424 line for assistance during the recent power failure.

The issue was first brought to AQ's attention on July 7, 1999 when a Hydro Quebec customer called Alliance Quebec to complain that she was unable to get service in English when she called Hydro Quebec on July 6th to get information on the power failure. In fact, she received no service at all when she used Hydro Quebec's automated telephone system. On her second attempt, she opted to by-pass the automated telephone system in an effort to speak with someone directly. Imagine her disgust when the person who answered her call hung up on her because she did not speak French. After a total of four attempts to get service in English she was forced to speak to a Hydro Quebec emergency line operator in French.

The issue was brought to the attention of Alliance Quebec's Community Action Committee. The Committee decided to conduct a test to determine whether this was an isolated incident or a regular occurrence.

"The Committee's findings are alarming," reported Community Action Committee Co-Chair Josie Ricciotti. "In almost every instance individuals calling Hydro Quebec for information were immediately asked if they spoke French or were told by the Hydro Quebec employee that they did not speak English."

Ms Ricciotti's own experience with Hydro Quebec employees left much to be desired. After getting through to a Hydro Quebec employee, Ms. Ricciotti was dismayed when the employee outright refused to speak English and did not offer to transfer her call to someone who could assist her. Frustrated by the lack of service in English and the rude manner in which she was treated by the Hydro Quebec employee, Ms. Ricciotti tried the 1-800 line once more only to find that the employee she spoke with this time refused to acknowledge the fact Ms. Ricciotti was speaking to her in English and proceeded to answer all her questions in French. Obviously the Hydro Quebec employee understood English well enough.

"I seem to recall Premier Bouchard once saying that when someone goes to the hospital they may need a blood test but they don't need a language test," observed Alliance Quebec President William Johnson. "Unfortunately, it would appear the same does not hold true for tax-paying Quebecers in need of electricity."

We urge all those who have experienced difficulty receiving services in English from Hydro Quebec or any other government institution to call Alliance Quebec.