



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Red Deer, AB

Day 3

April 28, 2023

EVIDENCE

Witness 9: Suzanne Brauti

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Wayne Lenhardt

I think I see Suzanne. Yeah, there you are. Can you say something so that we can be sure that we've got you on audio?

Suzanne Brauti

Hi. Is this Wayne?

Wayne Lenhardt

Yes.

Suzanne Brauti

Hi.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay, I think we're on hookup. Could you give us your full name, and then spell it, and then I'll do an oath with you?

Suzanne Brauti

Okay, sure. My name is Suzanne Brauti. It's spelled S-U-Z-A-N-N-E. And my last name is spelled B-R-A-U-T-I.

Wayne Lenhardt

Do you promise that the evidence you'll give today is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

Suzanne Brauti

I do.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay, perhaps let me just take you back to the beginning of the pandemic and just tell us the story of all the problems that you had. I'll prompt you if we need to.

Suzanne Brauti

Okay, well first if I could give you a little background about myself.

Wayne Lenhardt

Yes.

Suzanne Brauti

I've been a single mother of three children for the past 12 years. Prior to that, I was a stay-at-home mom for 11 years. After my separation and divorce, I struggled to find adequate work, so I decided to go back to school and get a college diploma in holistic nutrition. Unfortunately, one year later, I suffered a severe neck injury where I was paralyzed on my left side for seven months, and that took two full years to recover where I could actually work again. So during that time, I had to use all my savings to pay my bills and continue to support my family and myself.

Once I was able to, I applied for work with the federal government. I was very grateful when I was finally offered the position 18 months later, which was July of 2019. To me at that time, I felt it was just the best job I could have gotten as I was just starting over in career life again. And because it offered security and stability that I needed to support myself and my family and to hopefully put me in a decent retirement situation in 15 years' time.

When the COVID policy came into effect, well, I was working for the government since 2019. When the pandemic hit, I was still training in a new department. I had actually just started a month prior, when the pandemic was declared. So I did all my training through COVID. And because the office is shut down, shortly after, I did all my training from home. So it took longer than usual to get my training done. And then, I worked at home for about a year before the offices reopened.

Then this COVID policy came into effect on October 29, 2021, for all federal employees. I'd been working for the government, at this point, for two and a half years. I was just six months shy of becoming a permanent employee with them. I had also received a six-month performance review at that same time, in the same month, and it had been the best one that I had had. So I felt confident that my employer was happy with me and wanted to keep me.

But due to my spiritual beliefs, I requested an accommodation under this new policy, and I submitted all the required documents requested by my employer, including an eight-page affidavit explaining my background, my beliefs, and why I couldn't take the vaccine. However, that didn't seem enough for my employer, so they requested additional information. I had two additional meetings, and I provided a second affidavit a month later in November, further explaining why I couldn't get vaccinated based on my beliefs. Two months after that, they denied my request in January of 2022 but offered, under their Duty

to Accommodate policy, an opportunity to submit further information. So I did. A month later in February, I submitted a third statement offering additional information to support my beliefs.

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I want to state, too, that I followed every rule, guideline, safety protocol and procedure, COVID training, and policies during the entire pandemic. Like I said, I was already set up and working from home for the past year.

When our offices reopened and I had to start working some shifts in the office again, I did the rapid testing three times a week, regardless of whether I was scheduled at home or not. So while I was still waiting for a final decision on my request, I got notice from my employer that they were putting me on leave without pay on February 25th of 2022. But I hadn't received their final decision. It was two weeks later, March 7th, when I finally got a decision that they denied my third submission.

Because of the timeline, though, this is how I ultimately, eventually, won my EI claim. I applied a week after I got put on leave and I was denied. So based on the fact they said I voluntarily left my employment, I requested a reconsideration. And then they changed their decision on my claim and accused me of misconduct under the *EI Act [Employment Insurance Act]*. I persisted and appealed that to the Social Security Tribunal. And finally won my case nine months later due to the fact that my employer did put me on leave without pay prior to any decision being made on my request. So in my opinion, it was their misconduct, not mine.

I was really curious, though, how and why my employer came to that conclusion that they could not accommodate my request. So I submitted a request through the *Privacy Act* to see all the correspondence regarding their decision-making process on my file around this new policy. I just didn't understand why or how I could have possibly been denied. And I finally received all that correspondence, 800 pages, six months later.

In the correspondence that I sifted through, I was quite disappointed to find a lack of due diligence, I thought, a lack of care and attention from my employer in considering my accommodation. They advised me one way, and then they would change it and advise me a different way. I was given misleading information about the timelines of my request being processed.

I was initially refused an extension from my director because I had been sick and couldn't submit on time. And only received an extension once I went up further to her supervisor and explained the situation. I also found an email in that correspondence from my manager dated less than a week after my original submission in October telling my team leader that I would likely be put on leave without pay. Yet it took them four months to make a final decision after three submissions of mine. But yet my manager already had a feeling I was going to be put on leave without pay. So I started really seeing that they didn't have, seemed to me, not good intention of giving me an accommodation. I also have reason to believe from these documents that I was discriminated against. So I have, therefore, filed a human rights complaint as well.

The reason I feel discriminated is because the documents for my privacy act request seem to reveal that although I stated in my affidavit that I am Métis, but since I didn't indicate to them that my relatives suffered from residential schools, my file did not progress for further consideration. I think that this is quite absurd since my family did indeed suffer

from the residential school system, as I would say, all, if not all, the majority of Indigenous people did. The employer proclaims to want reconciliation. But for some reason because I did not make mention of residential schools, my name was dropped off a list. While others who did state their family suffered

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from residential schools got a checkmark by their name and processed further. At least, that's what it seems. So I'm requesting Human Rights to look into that.

I also have another obstacle to contend with. First, I was told I have to wait until my union process is complete before Human Rights looks into my complaint. Unfortunately, my union has not been completely on my side during this. And so, not surprisingly, my second-level hearing was unsupported. And I've not heard back from them since. So I reached out and asked what the next steps were. And now I've been told I have to wait for a third-level hearing, which could take another year or more.

And so on another note too, I'd like to mention that after the mandates were lifted for federal employees in July of 2022, I reached out to my team leader about getting rehired. And she said, personally, I would be welcome back. However, my manager told her that I have to go through the rehiring process all over again if I wanted to work there. So once again, my manager showed me that they didn't really care about me.

So when I think about how this has affected me, I have to say that since our Prime Minister Trudeau announced his intention to implement this policy in August of 2021, it's been very stressful on me. I've used up all my available sick days, vacation, and family days while waiting for their decision to be made. Four months is a long time to wait, wondering if I'm still going to have my job or not. I've had ongoing mental, emotional, physical, and financial burdens and repercussions from this. And it seems far from over, as everything I've done has been delayed and these processes take a long time. So it's been energy draining, to say the least.

That was the best paying job I have ever had. So I had to ultimately give up my property to lessen my expenses. I'm unable to afford extra health care that my daughter needs. And I continue to go into debt. I'm disappointed in my employer. And though I've never had much faith in the government to look out for my best interests because that is ultimately up to me, but I did expect a higher level of engagement and respect from them since that is all they expected from us.

And before I finish here, I just want to say thank you to everyone here volunteering at the National Citizens Inquiry for your time and your efforts, and to everyone else supporting this. Because I feel this is an opportunity for me to be heard and supported for standing up in truth, and for everyone else, including my Indigenous community and my fellow federal employees whose accommodations were also denied. So thank you.

Wayne Lenhardt

If there was one or two things that you could change, what would they be?

Suzanne Brauti

About my employer and the situation?

Wayne Lenhardt

About the whole situation.

Suzanne Brauti

Well, for one, they could have easily given me an accommodation to continue to work from home. I know co-workers of mine who at the beginning of the pandemic easily received accommodations for their health issues to work from home due to their fear of getting COVID. And they're still doing so, the last I heard, even after our offices reopened. I feel that they should have had to prove that it would have caused them undue hardship. Which is the only reason, I believe, under their own Duty to Accommodate policy for not accommodating my request.

Also, once they lifted the mandates, they should have easily offered me my job back. Especially since they still allowed me to work during the four months it took them to review my request. And after having all the time and money and resources spent into training me, it sure wasn't easy for me to get that job and to get trained and become proficient at it. And yet they willingly let me go and then turn around and hired a bunch of new staff just to repeat the whole process of training again. So, to me, that affects every Canadian

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who relies on the government for good service and accountability, in my opinion, anyway.

They also could have set a better example of themselves for their own promotion of inclusivity, respect, and fairness for their staff. They promoted that daily in emails. And it's just so ironic to me that it was their actions that actually made me feel uncomfortable and labelled and discriminated, just for asking my beliefs to be respected, when I wasn't even putting anyone at risk by working from home and continuously testing when I was at the office.

Nothing makes sense to me at this point when it comes to dealing with them and the government. I feel rejected: I feel mistreated. I can't express enough the disappointment that I feel. Sadly, it has affected my family in many ways. The whole pandemic has affected my family. It's definitely caused division amongst friends, relatives, and family members.

Losing my job over this, it just puts an even darker light on that, with them, with my family, relatives. And puts them all into more worry and fear. I just refuse to stay quiet about it. And I'm grateful for this opportunity to speak my truth because I feel that so much injustice has been done, not only to me, but many, many others.

Wayne Lenhardt

At this point. I'm going to ask if the commissioners have any questions. No. I think there are no questions. So I want to thank you very much for your articulate testimony today. I thank you very much on behalf of the National Citizens Inquiry.

Suzanne Brauti

Thank you. You're welcome.

[00:17:46]

Final Review and Approval: Anna Cairns, August 30, 2023.

The evidence offered in this transcript is a true and faithful record of witness testimony given during the National Citizens Inquiry (NCI) hearings. The transcript was prepared by members of a team of volunteers using an “intelligent verbatim” transcription method.

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