



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Winnipeg, MB

Day 3

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EVIDENCE

Witness 2: Steven Setka

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[00:00:00]

Shawn Buckley

Our next witness is Mr. Steven Setka. Good morning, Steven.

Steven Setka

Good morning.

Shawn Buckley

So I'll start by just asking you to state your full name, spelling your first and last name for the record.

Steven Setka

Steven Christopher Setka. S-T-E-V-E-N, I go by Steve, though. Last name Setka, S-E-T-K-A.

Shawn Buckley

Steve, do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Steven Setka

Yes.

Shawn Buckley

Now, my understanding is that you have a business; you are a freight broker in the Winnipeg area.

Steven Setka

That's correct.

Shawn Buckley

And you've been doing that for five and a half years?

Steven Setka

Yes.

Shawn Buckley

So you kind of started just shortly before the pandemic and then, you're still working through that today.

Steven Setka

That's right, we've been doing our business— It's more or less a family business and I won't mention too much about the business, just the fact that it's in the freight and transportation industry. I myself am a sales manager for our company, selling freight services, small parcel services, transportation services for international and domestic shipping.

We started a couple years before the pandemic, and as anyone would know, a new business more or less struggles somewhat out of the gate, so we struggled for sure, for a while. The pandemic actually was a little bit of a supercharger for our business, fortunately. I would never choose to go through a supercharger event like a pandemic in order for the benefits of my business because I was deeply affected by a lot of other aspects of the pandemic. But, yes, that was the career path that I've chosen for the past five years.

Shawn Buckley

Now, you mentioned it as a family business and I want you to talk about your family. But my understanding is that, prior to COVID, you had a sizable extended family in the Winnipeg area and that you were really tied into that. So my understanding is you've got aunts and uncles and cousins and that pre-COVID, I mean, this was a tight-knit family that you were an integral part of.

Steven Setka

Absolutely. I would say we're a pretty tight family. There's a member of my family here today, which is awesome. I really appreciate that. I would say the size of our family, it's medium to large and it is spread across Canada. There was more members of our extended family in Winnipeg up until a couple of years ago, since a few of them have moved away to other areas of the country. My immediate family: there's my mother, father, and my sister and I. Then there's cousins and aunts and uncles, and a few of those families we're very close with. And there were some consequences for my decisions throughout the pandemic that affected those family relationships negatively.

Shawn Buckley

Before you go into that, though, just explain to us how regular your family would meet and for what types of things. Just so that people understand what was normal before things changed.

Steven Setka

It was pretty regular, for sure. There's a cousin I have that I'm very close with that I would spend a good amount of time with. We grew up together. We spent a lot of time together. We had a lot of common interests. Family gatherings would occur, I think, the same as any regular family: maybe every couple of weeks, maybe once a month, maybe once every couple months depending on the season. Summertime, there was definitely a lot more going on. And there would be somewhere between 10 and 20 family members at these events that we would have: barbecues, indoor gatherings, birthdays, Christmas, Easter celebrations, a variety of different things. We all got along really well for the most part. There was some chaos, as there is in any family, for sure, but for the majority of the time it was wonderful. We had a great time.

Shawn Buckley

And you were involved with some sports with some family members.

Steven Setka

Exactly, yes. So growing up, we played hockey. I played rugby with family members. And we were just an athletic family, our extended family. My family, specifically my sister and I, excelled at sports and other members of our family around the city were the same. That was my passion and that's where I really enjoyed spending my time, with family and friends, and that's my community.

Shawn Buckley

And pre-COVID there would be regular phone calls and family group chats and texting and things like that on a pretty regular basis, am I right about that?

Steven Setka

Absolutely, yes. No more, no less than any other family, but we were close. And we appreciated each other's company. I was raised by the phrase that blood is thicker than water and family is very, very important. You can't pick your siblings, you can't pick your family, you can't pick your parents, so you might as well make the best of it.

[00:05:00]

Shawn Buckley

Okay. And we appreciate your enthusiasm. So tell us, as the COVID experience started, what happened and what changed?

Steven Setka

I would say that I was questioning the pandemic. Not necessarily from the start. I started to question it a few months in, before vaccines even came out, before lockdowns and severe

mask mandates and all those different types of things. I have a pretty healthy belief in my immune system, my physical health. That's very important to me: physical, mental, and spiritual health. Therefore, I looked at it from a different lens, right from the get-go, more or less. But I was scared, and I had fear from the get-go. For the most part, my immediate family was very on board. They feel more or less the same way.

Other members of our extended family probably didn't really feel that way. They went right into the so-called fear-porn response, I would say, and watched too much television. That affected the relationship that we had. I was not overly outspoken in the family, but I was most definitely comfortable telling them what I felt in a polite and respectable manner, what I thought. And they didn't really like that a whole lot.

Shawn Buckley

And then was there also some disapproval that you would be going out when, perhaps, the government did not want you going out?

Steven Setka

I was a rule breaker. I'll leave it at that.

Shawn Buckley

Okay, but how did that affect family dynamics?

Steven Setka

Again, the immediate family, there wasn't any issues necessarily, per se, but if we're going to jump ahead and talk about the whole vaccination process and my decision not to get vaccinated, there were a fair-few members of our family that didn't approve of that. Just the fact that I didn't do it and that I was still attempting to participate in everyday life as I normally would. Of course, I wasn't able to for a variety of reasons. As most people that do know me, they would understand that I'm quite a gregarious and outgoing individual. I have a lot of energy. I need social engagement in my life. And being locked down and being isolated in a house or home on my own or with a partner, at the time, was very, very difficult. So it wasn't received very well in my communities, in both family and friends.

Shawn Buckley

Right. And then you told us you chose not to get vaccinated. What types of things happened within the family and your access to the family with that decision?

Steven Setka

There's a few households that I was not able to attend. I have not been back there since. I won't go too much into depth on that, but the relationships of being around those family members has definitely changed. And I would say that it's uprooted some deeper hurt that has been long-standing, maybe, within the family. Our family, I believe, like others, struggles with issues and challenges and relationships. Especially the larger that they get, the more difficulty you can experience. COVID, the pandemic, the vaccines, the lockdowns—our difference in views definitely affected that negatively.

Shawn Buckley

So my understanding is you're not invited to birthday parties and there's some of your nieces and nephews you're no longer allowed to see, right?

Steven Setka

More or less. I would say it's more— Currently, it's just the association, the discussions, the participation in family has been very limited and minimal. I would say our immediate family has been ostracized and excluded from events. Specifically, I'll tell a really quick story.

Members of my immediate family that were vaccinated are and have been invited to events. And then the ones that aren't, aren't invited to anything anymore, and that's really been the case for a couple of years now. I don't know if that has to do with the vaccination status or with the fact that there's other things going on. To be honest, it doesn't bother me as much any longer. It did affect me really negatively and my mindset for a long period of time, though.

Shawn Buckley

Now, I want to segue to church because you had an experience with church. My understanding is that you were going to Oasis Church when the pandemic hit. Can you share with us what happened there?

Steven Setka

For sure. This is something that I have a friend that I discuss with regularly. Because I was in a Zoom group or more of like a family-care group with this individual. A couple of years ago,

[00:10:00]

Oasis Church was concerned about the pandemic and vaccination requirements, and whatnot. And I brought it up with the leadership of the church that I was concerned about that, the fact that they were going to separate individuals, bring in a vaccination pass or something of the like. And I had met with the leadership of the church to express my concerns, to no avail. Whenever it was that the vaccine pass came around—that would have been 2021, end of summerish, going into the winter—it got really severe and really heated. Oasis Church brought in a vaccination pass, and they had it right around Christmas time. And I made the decision to go— They had a section for undeclared individuals for Christmas Eve. I decided to go to that.

Shawn Buckley

I just want to stop you. So this is Christmas Eve service which, in a Christian church, is one of the two major celebrations.

Steven Setka

Absolutely. Christmas Eve's a big deal. It's a wonderful opportunity to spend time with your family. I decided to go on my own, in the section of the church that was declared for individuals who did not want to declare their status. And I'm walking in and I go into the church and I go into the theatre, which was separate from the main congregation, for the

regular vaccinated service, I guess you could say, on Christmas Eve. I was the only one in that separate theatre at the church. And I was shocked that there was, first off, no one else there. But it didn't surprise me that nobody else showed up: if they didn't want to declare, they just wouldn't go. I just put myself on the line, and that was more or less the straw that broke the camel's back for me when it came to not attending that church anymore because of that decision that they had made. Which brings me to changing churches and going somewhere else now.

Shawn Buckley

Right, so basically, they were accommodating people that were undeclared, but they were in a different theatre. And I guess, the idea would be, you'd watch it on a screen?

Steven Setka

Right. Absolutely.

Shawn Buckley

But when you show up, you are the only one in that room.

Steven Setka

Exactly. There would have been—I would put my number on it at, maybe, 1,000 people at the service in the main area. And then myself as the one individual who went undeclared.

Shawn Buckley

Were there other things about being unvaccinated, other restrictions that affected you?

Steven Setka

Absolutely. There were work repercussions in terms of events and networking and social engagements. That was severe. I also love to travel. I have family all over the country. I enjoy travel for business, family, and leisure. I have not been able to do that for a long period of time. I can now, of course. But I was not able to attend work conventions in the United States, work conventions in Canada. My business partner and I actually drove to Toronto right near the end of the flight mandate—it was about eight to ten months ago—which is a long drive, especially in the wintertime, to get to another city in order to attend a mandatory work event. So we were not able to fly there. Instead, we had to drive 24 hours and take time away from the day-to-day operation of our business in order to do that. And that was very difficult and very challenging.

Shawn Buckley

How has this affected you mentally?

Steven Setka

Tremendously, I would say. As I stated, a very outgoing and gregarious individual, I felt feelings of sadness, loneliness, anger, depression, anxiety, a variety of different things. I would say I utilized my family and my friends as an outlet to talk about them. Was it sufficient? I have beautiful people in my life and I was very happy to have those people

there. And those support groups, the aforementioned ones that Cassie said about S.A.M. [Students Against Mandates] and other groups that I affiliated with. But the readjustment of my social scene and social circle was extremely difficult. And it's ongoing. When you lose friends, when you lose opportunities, miss out on a variety of things and aren't able to do anything for fun, per se, for eight months, that takes a toll on your mental health.

Shawn Buckley

Especially, for a large period of that time, you were living by yourself, weren't you?

Steven Setka

Correct.

Shawn Buckley

So you know, lockdown for you meant just being isolated.

Steven Setka

Exactly. I was living with a partner for a period of that time, but, more or less, probably half of the pandemic I was living on my own.

Shawn Buckley

Now, do you have any ideas how we could have done this better?

Steven Setka

Depends how much time we have to talk about it.

Shawn Buckley

Yeah.

[00:15:00]

Steven Setka

I have a belief that, in this world, we live with a lot of risk every single day. I would have liked to see the government, or those-that-be, allow us to choose which risk we wanted to take in our life and the ability to have autonomy in our own decision-making. If you wanted to get vaccinated or stay at home or wear a mask, or whatnot, that's great. But if you are willing to take the risks associated with daily living, along with going out when there's flu season, sickness going around, that would have been how I would like to see the response.

Now, that response was done in other areas of the world—Florida, probably, being the one that we're most familiar with. Bodily autonomy, personal autonomy, and individual responsibility. That's just what I believe in and how it should have been done better.

Shawn Buckley

Thank you. I'll ask the commissioners if they have any questions for you.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Good morning. I'm glad you decided to find another church, but I'm just wondering how the new church did things differently with regard to the mandates and lockdowns.

Steven Setka

So I'll share that I'm a member at Springs Church, and there's other people around here that I see that are there as well, too. I felt more at home there. A little short anecdote about the reason why I ended up there is because of this experience at the previous church, the vax pass, and then being accepted elsewhere. Also, members of the community that I was becoming involved with were there. And I never really knew much about it, but it felt more like home. I went to the church, to Springs Church, for that reason.

I stayed because of the pastor, Leon Fontaine. God bless his heart, is no longer with us. And I'm continuing at that church, and I will be for a long period of time because of the communities and the associations that I've built there. Springs definitely pushed the envelope. They allowed people individual autonomy and responsibility. They were in the news and in the media more than, definitely, many others. They stood up for the Charter freedom that we have to practise our religion or our faith, and I appreciated that because that's exactly how I felt in regard to the human rights we all have as citizens of the world.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Thank you.

Commissioner Massie

I'm most tempted to ask you a question about what you experienced in the church. I guess you must have had conversations with people over there. I'm wondering whether the question about, what would have Jesus done under those circumstances with the unvaxxed? Was that ever raised?

Steven Setka

I believe so. I have these conversations with my father regularly. He reads the Bible on the daily. We are very biblically focused, and we have a lot of faith, and I don't necessarily know, I don't think there's any— I don't know if in the Bible there's anything to do with vaccination specifically. But Springs teaches us this little acronym that many people are familiar with, and I believe this is what Jesus would have done. He would have loved and accepted and forgiven people for the decisions that they made. Love people for where they're at, accept people for the decisions that they have made, and forgive those who have potentially wronged you. And that's just the spirit that I live by.

Shawn Buckley

Thank you. There being no further questions, Steven, on behalf of the National Citizens Inquiry, we sincerely thank you for coming and sharing your experience with us.

Steven Setka

Thank you for having me.

[00:19:05]

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