



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Winnipeg, MB

Day 3

April 15, 2023

EVIDENCE

Witness 5: Leigh Vossen

Full Day 3 Timestamp: 02:47:50–03:17:55

Source URL: <https://rumble.com/v2idi8y-national-citizens-inquiry-winnipeg-day-3.html>

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Kassy Baker

Good morning. Ms. Vossen, can you please state your full name for the record and then spell your full name, as well, please?

Leigh Vossen

Yeah, my name is Leigh Elizabeth Granelli Vossen and that's L-E-I-G-H, V as in Victor, O-S-S-E-N.

Kassy Baker

Very good. Now, Miss Vossen, do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth today?

Leigh Vossen

I do.

Kassy Baker

Very good. Now, I believe we've actually had some reference to you already this morning, as Ms. Schroeder mentioned you during her testimony. I understand that you're here today because you're one of the founders of a non-profit organization called Students Against Mandates, or S.A.M. for short. We're going to get into the circumstances that led to the formation of that group. But just to give us a bit of background, can you please explain to us your qualifications and your education and your employment as of the pandemic, at the start.

Leigh Vossen

Yeah. So when the pandemic started, I was working as an in-house graphic designer, and at the time as well, my friend and I were actually planning on opening a small business. So we

just finished doing a business plan and we were looking at spaces to lease. The two weeks to slow the curve hit and I said, "Let's take a pause on this," and it ended up being a little bit longer than two weeks to slow the curve. So that small business was put on hold, but that's where I was at, at the beginning.

Kassy Baker

And you were continuing to work throughout the pandemic, at that point. Your current employment was still continuing at that point, is that correct?

Leigh Vossen

That's right. It was moved to all online, so I was able to work from my apartment. By December of 2020, I decided to leave my position there and go back to school, to take business administration, accounting. I felt that it would be good to make use of the pandemic and that education could be put towards opening my small business.

Kassy Baker

Very good. Where did you enroll for these classes?

Leigh Vossen

It's at Red River College, here in Winnipeg.

Kassy Baker

And just to confirm, that was in December of 2020 that you enrolled in those classes. Is that right?

Leigh Vossen

It started in January of 2021. So my last day at my graphic design job was in December, and then January is when I started business administration.

Kassy Baker

Very good. And at that time, how were classes being conducted?

Leigh Vossen

So they were all on Zoom.

Kassy Baker

All of them, 100 per cent of your classes.

Leigh Vossen

All of them, yeah. And there was no mention of mandates. No mention of vaccine passports. Hadn't heard of them at the time.

Kassy Baker

Very good. So I understand that you were able to complete your first and second term, in fact, of your business administration program.

Leigh Vossen

And third term.

Kassy Baker

And your third term, as well, all via Zoom, is that correct?

Leigh Vossen

That's correct.

Kassy Baker

Now, how long was your program? How many semesters in total?

Leigh Vossen

It would have been four terms. I had one term left.

Kassy Baker

All right. So at what point were you preparing to start your fourth and final semester?

Leigh Vossen

I remember that the mandates hit in August of 2021 and I was still in my second term. The mandates actually didn't affect me because I was online and it wasn't moved to in-person. But any staff or student who needed to be on campus—say, nursing or there's a lot of construction programs at Red River. It's a very hands-on college, so there's a lot of programs that required students to be in-person. At that time, it didn't affect me.

It wasn't until the end of my third term, going into my fourth term, I was notified that my classes would all be moved to in-person and that I would need to submit proof of vaccination. I contacted my school and said, "You'll need to provide an alternative." And I guess I can just say, they provided one online class per course. But for some reason, a number of students'—including mine, another unvaccinated student, I don't know about the rest of them—but our registration portals were frozen until all of those classes were filled. So I don't know why that happened, but I was unable to register for any online classes. They were taken up, and I decided to drop out because I didn't want to support the college.

Sorry, I'm going ahead. I'll let you ask questions.

Kassy Baker

That's okay, I understand. I'm just going to circle back a little bit here and just try and get a little more detail about some of what you've told us here.

So you've advised that you were told in August of 2021 by your school that a mandate would be coming into effect shortly. What, specifically, were the terms of that mandate? You have said that only those that were required to attend classes on campus,

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at first, were required to be vaccinated and that this did not affect you as an online learner. Is that right?

Leigh Vossen

Yeah, that's right.

Kassy Baker

At what point did the mandate, then, affect you? And what did the mandate require?

Leigh Vossen

Yeah. So again, it was at the end of my fourth term— I can't remember the exact date of when that was. Or sorry, the end of my third term going into my fourth term, that's when I was informed. I received an email saying business administration classes were going to return to campus, and in order to step foot on campus, you need to provide proof of vaccination.

Kassy Baker

And so, this policy was only coming into effect on your fourth and final semester, in fact.

Leigh Vossen

Yes, so the mandate was still in place, but then they were moving my program to in-person. The mandate actually started during, maybe, halfway through my third term. So I felt like I'd be able to get through my whole program without having to go through this.

Kassy Baker

Right. Now, you did say that you expressed some concern regarding the mandate to your administration. Can you just describe, generally, how you communicated those concerns?

Leigh Vossen

Absolutely. So I remember I was driving with my family to Toronto, sitting in the backseat of the car, and I received an email from the President of the College announcing the implementation of vaccine mandates and passports for all staff and students who wanted to step foot on campus. And again, didn't affect me, but I felt so strongly against this—and I guess, throughout the whole pandemic, I'd felt that a lot of the treatment towards the unvaccinated was very unjust—and I decided to do something.

So I wrote an email to the President expressing my concern. I said, "On behalf of a huge group of concerned students—" It was just me but— I just explained I'd like to see the data. I followed that up by posting that email into an anti-mandate group on Facebook that I

joined the day before. There was about 5,000 people in that group. I said, “Could you guys send this and bombard the President of my college?” which a lot of them did.

A few days later, the College announced— I should add, they had said no exemptions were allowed for students who are unvaccinated to step foot on campus. They said, “Actually, we will allow exemptions for unvaccinated students.” And then I messaged the President and said, “Would I be able to meet with you in person to discuss the data?” I mean, it’s a very nerve-racking thing to do. I’m not comfortable with that, but I felt like we needed to push back on this. And he ignored a number of emails and voicemail messages and then, eventually, they said something along the lines of, “We’re against discrimination and segregation of any kind, but these are our policies, and that’s the end of the discussion.”

Kassy Baker

Now, you said that the school did, at some point, advise that there would be exemptions made. Were there any conditions that you had to meet in order to qualify for an exemption?

Leigh Vossen

Those weren’t stated. And once I started my organization, Students Against Mandates, I started receiving messages from people saying, “My religious and my medical exemptions are all being denied.” You’re hard-pressed to find a student who got an approved exemption. I think it was just sort of a, “Look we’re offering this; it needs to be approved,” and none of the exemptions really met the criteria. I think there’s a couple of students, but very few.

Kassy Baker

So did you ever receive any direct communication from the administration, specifically with regard to your attempted communications?

Leigh Vossen

I got one email saying, “We’ll respond to you tomorrow,” and then they didn’t. So then I kept emailing them and leaving them voicemail messages. And then I did get that email, that one email, saying, “This is the end of the discussion,” essentially. “This is our policy. We stand firm by it. We’ll not be meeting with you.”

Kassy Baker

Very good. Now, I understand that it’s, perhaps, been implied to this point but has not been directly stated that you either were not vaccinated or were not willing to disclose your vaccination status. Is that correct?

Leigh Vossen

Yeah, I’m unvaccinated.

Kassy Baker

Okay. Prior to COVID, had you ever experienced any hesitation with regards to obtaining vaccinations?

Leigh Vossen

No, not at all.

Kassy Baker

So this was, essentially, a first instance of concern for you. Is that right?

Leigh Vossen

That's correct.

Kassy Baker

And what, specifically, was concerning for you?

Leigh Vossen

Well, I don't know why this is for me, but I never felt any fear when I heard about the pandemic. I just listened to what our politicians, our leaders were saying, and I started to notice that they were not uniting the country; they were dividing. And to me, that didn't make sense and I felt like there might have been an ulterior motive.

And then as things proceeded— My sister, actually, has a degree in microbio and immunology and she was saying, "You know, these headlines don't make sense; this is not what a virologist would say."

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And I'd have a lot of really great conversations with her. In addition, my family, I would say they really push critical thinking and listening to both sides of the conversation. So I was always willing to listen to people who had a different viewpoint.

I am very against groupthink and cancel culture. I've been cancelled for my view on cancel culture before. So yeah, I didn't like what I was seeing and I didn't see what the leaders of the country were doing as true leadership.

So as I said, I didn't have really an issue with the vaccine, necessarily, at the beginning. I just thought, well, there's no longitudinal studies. We don't know what this will do and they're not being honest about that. They're saying it's safe and effective and they have no way of knowing that without longitudinal studies, so I chose to hold back.

Kassy Baker

Right. Now, you've advised that you created an account, I believe it started on Instagram, is that right, for Students Against Mandates?

Leigh Vossen

That's correct.

Kassy Baker

Can you tell us about the early days of the creation of that account?

Leigh Vossen

Yeah. I feel being ignored by the President pushed me to create this Instagram account to share the policies that Red River College was implementing. It started focusing with Red River College. I have the graphic design background, so I felt this is something that I could do.

And then, to my surprise— I have to say I was very isolated prior to the pandemic. All of my friends, all of my social circles, did not agree with my viewpoint. I hadn't really told most of my friends. But my family, half of them are vaccinated. I have five siblings, half of them are vaccinated, but they all supported us making our own decision.

So I made this Instagram not expecting much back. I remember I was surprised when I got 25 followers, that there were 25 like-minded people at Red River who agreed with me. But then I just started getting hundreds, now thousands, of messages over the past three years. But hundreds of stories from students, staff, administration, professors, doctors, lawyers. There's underground networks of paramedics and lawyers in Winnipeg.

It opened my eyes to just how many people there were being affected by this, and the degree to which they were being impacted. And it just kept me going and pushing back and speaking up.

Kassy Baker

Can you describe some of the more memorable messages that you received from some other students who are similarly impacted by vaccines or vaccine mandates?

Leigh Vossen

Absolutely. So at the start, a lot of the messages from students, sort of surrounded, feeling isolated, scared that they couldn't speak up. Essentially, there was a lot of messages saying, "Thank you for making this platform because I felt alone and it's been impacting my mental health."

I started saying to anybody who is in Winnipeg, "I will meet up with you. I'll have coffee if it's legal to go to a coffee shop right now. Or you know, we can go for a walk." So I was starting to do that multiple times a week and then it started to get to be a lot. So I started hosting potlucks at my house to get these people to meet each other and form a community. I felt like, if you have people behind you, you're going to be more likely to speak up. And I know I have my family behind me, but these people didn't have anyone. So I started doing that.

But one student I met up with for coffee, she's from China: she's a resident student. She said, "If I don't get vaccinated, I'm going to go back to China, and if I don't get my Canadian passport before then, I'm not going to be able to come back." And she said, "We wouldn't be able to have this conversation in a coffee shop where I'm from, so I'd really like to stay here."

And then I had a message— It really shocked me at the time because I was anonymous up until the Freedom Convoy. On S.A.M., a former teacher that I had had before the pandemic, one that I'd see every day, in person, she messaged me and said, "Can you help me? I got one dose of the vaccine. I'm terribly injured. I can't—" Essentially, like, all the symptoms of Parkinson's: like shaking; couldn't walk well; sleeping most of the day. She said, "I'm having difficulty picking up a cup of coffee." And I ended up saying, "It's me. I'm a former student of

yours.” And she was going to testify, I believe, but she’s not well, so she wasn’t able to follow through with that. So that was pretty hard.

I had a professor—actually, this is about three weeks ago—message me. She said she just wants to share her story with me, that she held out as long as she could. She didn’t want to get the vaccine. She loved her job and she’d worked there her whole career. And they said she’d lose her job if she didn’t get vaccinated. And she said, “If I didn’t, I would lose my house; I wouldn’t be able to pay for my mortgage payments. So I went and got vaccinated, but I was bawling hysterically when I went into the clinic saying, ‘I do not want to do this,’ and no one said anything. They looked sheepish and uncomfortable, but they vaccinated me.”

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And about two weeks later, they dropped the mandate and she said, “I was raped when I was younger and this is akin to that. But I can’t get the substance out of my body and I’m afraid of what’s going to happen to me.” And she said, “I’m crying right now writing this email to you.”

So a lot of messages like that. It’s been pretty hard, sometimes, to see all this. And I realize I’m very lucky because my situation is a unique one where I was never at risk of, like, not being able to put food in front of my family or a place to sleep. I always knew I’d have a family who’d be able to support me. But a lot of these people are not able to speak up and they don’t have the ability to. But I do. And the fact that this is rare—for you to be able to speak up—is very upsetting.

I also had an administrator from a university contact me and say that the university decided to give students an extra week—sort of like an extra study week or reading week off. And they said the real reason they’re doing that, it’s known internally, is that the suicide rate for students is going up, so they’re giving them a mental health week. And that was due to lockdowns and whatnot.

Kassy Baker

If I can just interrupt you for a moment here.

Leigh Vossen

Yeah, of course.

Kassy Baker

Sorry, you’ve referred several times to students or a professor. Were these all students and professors from your school, Red River College, or were they from—?

Leigh Vossen

All across Canada. The majority of the ones I’ve told you are ones that I’ve met with in person that are from Winnipeg. There’s one story—the one where she emailed me—that was from Alberta.

Kassy Baker

Okay and how many messages did you receive from students and professors, do you think?

Leigh Vossen

At this point, I've received thousands. I've had to bring on more people to help me answer the messages and I can't answer all of them. But I've received hundreds of stories where they're explaining their story and a lot of them are just— They need someone to talk to.

Like, I had one girl say, "Every time I come downstairs, my family pretends I don't exist, and I'll say, 'Hi. Hi, guys. Morning,' and they don't look at me. They look through me and they keep talking to each other." So she had to move out. So she's someone I've met up with in person and talked to because people are being abused.

Kassy Baker

Now, what was the response from the public, generally, to your creation of this group?

Leigh Vossen

I mean, from the freedom community? Very good.

From non-freedom community members? Not so great. I had an article written about me. I received death threats. I was called an alt-right extremist leader of a pro-convoy youth group, which, I guess, fair. It brought members of my family into it, saying, "Look, her mom supports her." I was called a nazi. People said they were going to push me off the top of a building and my family members off the top of a building.

Yeah, I don't advise people to read the comment section. I read that about two or three times over and I'd just be shaking, reading it. It's very weird seeing your name written over and over again. There were hundreds of comments between Reddit, Twitter, Facebook. Former friends commenting, saying, "I used to be friends with her and I distanced myself as soon as I realized what her views were."

And all of my friends prior to pandemic stopped being friends with me; they cut me out. So not good on that side.

Kassy Baker

Right. So if I can just bring us back to the start of your fourth semester.

Leigh Vossen

Absolutely.

Kassy Baker

Again, I think you've touched on this already, but you advise that classes moved back to being in-person and I believe you reached out to the administration and encouraged them to offer some online courses. But I believe you've testified already that you and a number of other unvaccinated students were unable to register for any of the online sections. Is that right?

Leigh Vossen

That's correct. And I reached out and said, "For some reason, my registration portal is grey. I can't click on any of the buttons to register." And they said, "It seems like a number of students are having this issue. We'll contact you when it's fixed." And four hours later, I got an email saying, "Should be good to go." And I go on and all of the online options were gone.

I don't know all of the students that this affected. It could have been vaccinated, unvaccinated, I don't know. But it's very hard to meet people over Zoom. I had met one girl who was unvaccinated and she had the same problem, but I don't know about the rest.

Kassy Baker

To your knowledge, were the online sections reserved for unvaccinated students? Or could anyone register?

Leigh Vossen

Anybody could. They just said, we will provide one per class. You got to make sure you get it in time, basically.

Kassy Baker

Okay, and I understand that you're unable to complete, of course, your fourth semester because of this. What is the current status of your education or completion of that degree? Have you been able to go back and complete it or where do things stand now?

[00:20:00]

Leigh Vossen

No, and I have no intention of doing so because I felt, like, I couldn't give another penny to an academic institution that discriminated against me and segregated me from my classmates. So although I do have to forfeit the money that I put into it, the time and effort, I have no interest in finishing that. It would have been great to have that diploma, but as I said, I'm lucky I did have education beforehand that I can use to get a job. I completed a graphic design program. I didn't need it, but it would have been nice to have gotten.

Kassy Baker

So when it became apparent that you wouldn't be able to complete your degree, did you set about trying to find new employment?

Leigh Vossen

Yes, and I applied to many different places, about seven places. At the time, it was, like, different serving jobs. I just thought, in the meantime, until I can find something else. I was also doing a bit of freelance graphic design, thankfully, I had that. But every place that I applied to, they either start the interview with, "Are you vaccinated?" and I'd say, "No." They'd say, "Are you planning to?" and then I'd say, "No." And it'd either be a really uncomfortable interview, or at the end of the conversation, then they'd ask me.

I had one interview where it seemed to go really well and they're saying, "We're so excited! This is going to be great! What's your schedule like?" and I said, "Completely open. I can

take as many shifts, as few shifts; I can work at any location.” They’re, like, “Great,” and then they said, “Are you vaccinated?” and I said, “No.” And then, the next day, they said, “Our schedules don’t line up, so this is not going to work out.”

Kassy Baker

I understand that you are employed now, is that correct?

Leigh Vossen

I am, yeah. A family member of mine recommended that I apply to where they work and I was able to get employment as a marketing specialist.

Kassy Baker

Very good. Did you experience any other negative impact of your involvement with Students Against Mandates or your general position and outspokenness about the vaccine mandates, generally?

Leigh Vossen

Honestly, I would say, overall, creating S.A.M. is the thing that helped me through the pandemic. I don’t know where I would be if I hadn’t. But there were definitely negative things that came with it, in terms of losing all of my friends, having my friends or people attack me. I was harassed by a doctor for a while, calling me transphobic for posting Jordan Peterson posts.

A lot of not great things happened. But I have such a good support system that, you know, you take it in stride and it didn’t seem so bad.

I’d say the worst thing was losing my friends, losing my ability to get my diploma, and the article— Especially in terms of how it impacted one of my siblings because she’s a part of S.A.M. too. I know it caused her extreme stress. It did for me, as well. It made going to work very uncomfortable, but, nonetheless, it is what it is.

Kassy Baker

Did you ever fear for your physical safety at any point through this experience?

Leigh Vossen

I didn’t initially when I saw the death threats because I just thought people on Twitter are rude. But then someone broke into my house shortly after that article came out. They had actually posted where you could find my house address in the article. I was home alone and I heard someone come into my house. Just the way that I am, I paused the Matt Walsh episode I was watching. And I then figured maybe it’s just my cats making a huge amount of noise and I went upstairs. And later, I came downstairs and the door was open, the mat was flipped over, drawers were open, and the door that I had locked was unlocked. So I ran out of the house; I called the police, and they said, “Has anyone said they want to hurt you?” And I was, like, “Well, actually, yeah. People have threatened my life.” So then, I was not able to sleep there for four days comfortably. I was too scared to go back home.

Kassy Baker

How do you feel that this situation could have been better addressed by, for instance, your administration at the school?

Leigh Vossen

I don't think mandates should have been in place at all. I don't think you can segregate people. I don't think you can coerce people into taking an experimental, novel injection.

I think we need to look at this on the individual perspective, rather than a utilitarian, collectivist perspective. We heard a lot during the pandemic that, you know, "Do this for the greater good; do this for the collective." But that comes with harm to the individual, and at the end of the day, it's the individual that makes up the collective. So if you're harming the individuals that leads nowhere good.

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We've seen in history that that's not the way to do it. And how can you really quantify it being a worthwhile sacrifice for the collective. I just disagree with that, fundamentally, and mandates should never have been implemented in the first place.

Kassy Baker

Thank you. That concludes my questions, subject to any questions that the commissioners may have.

Commissioner Massie

Well, thank you very much for your testimony.

I heard you say that one of the responses you got from university is that— In their corporate HR environment where DIE, diversity, inclusion, and equity, is such a high, important aspect of the way they want to manage people, discrimination in their view is kind of a cardinal sin. And it's probably true, also, in other corporations where DIE is so important to push as a way to manage the human resources.

So what's the, sort of, moral standard that justifies the kind of discrimination you've been through with the vaccine mandate, as well as other people that have been submitted to that? What's the justification one can propose or one can oppose to this notion that discrimination is bad except in this case?

Leigh Vossen

Yeah, it's so funny. It was so hypocritical to start the full paragraph saying, "We're against all these things, but we're doing it anyways and we're not talking to you about it anymore." Their justification— I mean, they didn't say this, but I'm assuming they're suggesting to protect the vaccinated students and for the health of the students and staff. But again when you ask for data supporting these mandates—

I would understand implementing measures to protect students and staff. Maybe there's a pandemic and you say, "We're going to give everybody the opportunity to do online classes if you want to." Give them that option, but— Oh, I've lost my train of thought. Yeah, they refuse to even discuss the data.

And actually, this is interesting: a lot of students screenshotted their responses from their universities all across the country, asking their university, “What data do you have supporting your measures?” And a lot of the responses are the exact same thing: other universities are doing it; we’re not discussing this; this is the end of the communication we’re having with you. No university that I can find has presented data to support it.

And that’s the same thing, as I said, I just got that diversity, inclusion, equity response; it looked like a copy and paste response. And then, “We’re not talking to you. We don’t want to talk to you. You’re not going to hear from us again.” So they can’t justify it. They can’t justify their discrimination.

Commissioner Massie

Thank you.

Kassy Baker

Are there any further questions? Okay.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Thank you for your testimony. It sounds more like the pedagogy of the oppressed is at Red River College, but I know it’s consistent with other universities and colleges across the country. Red River College in about, I’m going to say, 15 years ago, was well known for PLAR, for Prior Learning and Assessment Recognition.

Given all the experience that you have, do you think the President of Red River College, who is not a doctor—I’m going to assume he’s not a doctor; maybe I’m wrong there, but I’m going to assume that he or she is not a doctor—would be willing to take all that experience, the professional experience and knowledge that you have, and finish your fourth semester under the PLAR criteria? Do you think that’s possible? I’d hate to see you lose your education.

Leigh Vossen

Yeah, I doubt it. I don’t think they’re going to be making any allowances for me or helping me. They haven’t at this point. So there’s no reason for me to believe that they would do that now.

I should add, you were saying— This is for just Red River. It started with Red River and we’ve expanded. I have a huge team working with me and hundreds of members. This organization serves all of Canada, so we have people on the leadership team who live in BC and Ontario. It’s a Canada-wide non-profit.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Thank you for taking up the torch.

Leigh Vossen

Thank you.

Kassy Baker

Thank you very much for your testimony on behalf of the National Citizens Inquiry.

Leigh Vossen

Thank you for having me.

[00:30:05]

Final Review and Approval: Margaret Phillips, August 10, 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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