



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Regina, SK

Day 3

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EVIDENCE

Witness 9: Roxanne Cote

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Kassy Baker

Hello, Roxanne. Can you please spell and state your name for the record?

Roxanne Cote

Roxanne Cote. R-O-X-A-N-N-E C-O-T-E.

Kassy Baker

And do you promise to tell the truth at these proceedings herein? Sorry. Can you please verbally confirm that?

Roxanne Cote

I do.

Kassy Baker

Thank you. Sorry, maybe I missed that. I understand that you're here today to testify as to your experience regarding your termination regarding your employment with a not-for-profit. And I want to be careful how I word this, because you are in the midst of ongoing litigation. Is that correct?

Roxanne Cote

That's correct.

Kassy Baker

Okay. First of all, can you please just give us a little bit of your background and explain your education and the work that you were doing that led up to your termination.

Roxanne Cote

So I worked for an agency that provided crisis for people in distress, and I was hired as their first professional fundraiser, and I worked for them for 13 and a half years. I have an

undergraduate degree in international business, and I hold a lot of other certificates. A lot of them were related to my role and the agency work. And also just continuous upgrading, and also had a certificate in fundraising management.

Kassy Baker

Can you describe what your daily duties involved while you were in this position?

Roxanne Cote

Well first of all, I was part of the leadership team and I was responsible, basically, for bringing in revenue to provide the crisis services to the community. That involved being out a lot socially in events. I was a spokesman for the organization. I did a lot of public speaking, presentations, securing funding, building relationships. Maintaining relationships was probably the key role of my position.

Kassy Baker

And how did you feel about your work?

Roxanne Cote

I loved it.

Kassy Baker

What was your relationship like with your coworkers and your employer prior to COVID?

Roxanne Cote

I had a very good working relationship with all of my people I worked with. I was a very valued employee, and it was a career. It wasn't a job. You know, I took all these courses to be educated, and I had over 20 years experience. So, I mean, I was helping the most vulnerable in the community, and it was just, it was a calling for me to work there. And it was something that I had planned to retire doing.

Kassy Baker

So, when COVID first appeared around March of 2020, what measures did the organization implement to keep the business running during this time?

Roxanne Cote

Well in March of 2020, all of the staff and volunteers were asked to work from home. And there was only some exceptions for some managers. I was one of them that I could go in for one or two days a week because I needed to access, you know, faxing, et cetera, et cetera, for funding applications and donors, and, you know, that type of work.

Kassy Baker

Now you've testified that a large part of your work was finding and obtaining donors and donations to the organization. Were you able to continue doing this successfully during this time that you were working primarily from home?

Roxanne Cote

Actually the year and a half that I was working from home, there was more money raised during that time period than previous years. So it was very effective, definitely effective.

Kassy Baker

And that was largely your job within the organization, was to secure the funding. Correct?

Roxanne Cote

There was a team, but I primarily held most of the funding relationships.

Kassy Baker

When was the issue of a vaccination policy coming into place first raised or discussed within the organization?

Roxanne Cote

Well it started back in, I think it was around September of 2021, and the official policy came out the end of October to all the staff and volunteers. And everybody needed to be in compliance to show that they were vaccinated by December 15th of 2021.

Kassy Baker

Did the policy allow for the possibility of an exemption to be requested?

Roxanne Cote

In the correspondence that came out, it mentioned that there would be exceptions made according to the Alberta Human Rights Act. There was 15 protected areas and they would look at it on a per-person basis on the exemptions. And at that time, I appealed. I sent in an exemption, and it was a religious exemption, and it was denied. And I appealed, and it was denied. And I was told that my file would be closed.

Kassy Baker

Are you aware of whether or not any of your other coworkers applied for any exemptions?

Roxanne Cote

I have no idea. It wasn't something that was vocally talked a lot about within the agency.

Kassy Baker

As far as you are aware, did any of your other coworkers share your concerns regarding the policy or the vaccinations in general?

Roxanne Cote

As far as I know, everybody else was in compliance with it.

Kassy Baker

So you had testified previously that you had really loved your career and that you had derived a lot of satisfaction and joy from it. At this point, how were you feeling with regard to your position within the organization and the requests for exemptions that you were making and the replies that you were receiving?

Roxanne Cote

Well I actually felt quite alone and unsupported, and I knew that my morals and my religious beliefs wouldn't allow me to comply. So I knew that I was going to have my job terminated had I not taken it.

Kassy Baker

On that note. You've made a note of something that happened on December 15, 2021. Can you just clarify your employment status at that point?

Roxanne Cote

Well, that was the last day that I worked. I went and cleaned my office out and knew that I never, ever would return. I was highly stressed, and prior to that, I went on a month's stress leave. The doctor wouldn't provide me extra time, even though I knew mentally and emotionally and psychologically, spiritually, that I wasn't well enough to go back. But he would only allow a month's position or a month's stress leave for my position.

Kassy Baker

And what happened when your stress leave was completed?

Roxanne Cote

Well, I went back to work. I was working from home still, and it wasn't easy.

Kassy Baker

Do you believe there was any reason why you could not have continued to work from home?

Roxanne Cote

Well, that option wasn't there. Their goal was to have all of the staff and volunteers back into the agency by a certain timeline. And, yeah, there just wasn't any options given to me to work further from home, do any testing. It was pretty cut and dry. You either comply and get vaccinated or you're terminated.

Kassy Baker

So when you received your termination, was there a reason given for the termination?

Roxanne Cote

It was misconduct.

Kassy Baker

In other words, you were terminated for cause. Is that—

Roxanne Cote

Oh, with cause. With cause. And the reason was misconduct. So even at that time, I even appealed through EI and, you know, I put in my regular application, and it was denied. And then I appealed, and then I didn't have the mental capacity to pursue further with the EI.

Kassy Baker

So you found yourself without employment. What did you do at that point?

Roxanne Cote

Well.

Kassy Baker

Did you try to find other work in your field?

Roxanne Cote

Yeah, I did. This is hard. I just didn't have confidence in myself anymore. I had no self esteem. I didn't feel I was worthy. I gave 120% in my job. I had no independence, had no significant other. All I had was my work. It was my whole purpose. And I didn't have a reason to get up in the morning, and I didn't even want to be here. And I had a plan. And if it wasn't for a couple of really close friends, I probably wouldn't be here today.

Kassy Baker

We're glad you are here today. Were you able to find any other work in your field? Were there jobs available that you were aware of?

Roxanne Cote

Well in my career in fundraising, I applied for only a few because about 90% of them required the vaccine. I did have some interviews where I went into my second and third interviews and wasn't successful. I felt that there was a stigma around this whole having to be vaccinated. And it's a small community of fundraising professionals, so I didn't feel that there was any more any opportunities for me, any hope, even to gain employment at that time. So I just started applying for anything and everything and to take some small menial jobs. But with a mortgage and being the breadwinner, it was hard to make ends meet, for sure.

Kassy Baker

And so how did you make ends meet?

Roxanne Cote

I ended up selling my home, and I moved to my hometown, back to Saskatchewan where my roots are.

Kassy Baker

Why did you want to testify at this hearing?

Roxanne Cote

Well, I think the hardest thing for me is working on forgiveness and healing for myself for not feeling guilty and shameful and even selfish for not taking the vaccine, and that I am enough. And there's a verse, John 8:32, that says, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." And it has been a heavy burden for me. Every day I get triggered. I'm getting stronger every day. And I also hope this story will inspire others that you need to see the light. You're not alone. You're worth it. And there is support, places like the NCI, for sure. And I'm just so privileged to be able to have been given the opportunity so I could finally, somebody could hear my voice.

Kassy Baker

Thank you. Those are all of my questions. Are there any questions from the commissioners? On behalf of the National Citizens Inquiry, we'd like to thank you very much for your testimony here today.

Roxanne Cote

Thank you.

