



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Red Deer, AB

Day 3

April 28, 2023

EVIDENCE

Witness 10: Darcy Harsch

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[00:00:00]

Wayne Lenhardt

Could you give us your full name and then spell it for us? And then I'll swear an oath with you.

Darcy Harsch

Full name is Darcy Linden Richard Harsh. First name is D-A-R-C-Y, last name is H-A-R-S-C-H.

Wayne Lenhardt

During your testimony today, will you tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Darcy Harsch

I so swear.

Wayne Lenhardt

You have been working in Kelowna with a government job since about 2018, which is prior to the COVID pandemic occurring. Can we start you at 2018, and tell us what you were doing and what had developed at that point when COVID came along?

Darcy Harsch

Sure. I had just reinvented myself and switched careers. I moved into working with adults with disabilities. I went from working directly with individuals, and then moving into management of the house. I was working as manager just before the pandemic began. I was, I guess, looking squarely in the eye of a lot of unknowns, a lot of fear, a lot of changes in what we were doing with the individuals. So I had to adjust.

Wayne Lenhardt

And you are at least mildly disabled yourself. I believe you had a stroke at some point. Am I correct?

Darcy Harsch

Well, it's late in the day. I am a storyteller. If you want me to put together the whole thing in a package, I can.

Wayne Lenhardt

No, I think we just want to get a snapshot of your life and your jobs.

Darcy Harsch

I had reinvented myself because I had had a stroke in 2016. I was landscaping. My stroke was caused by high blood pressure, and so it was an unknown, came out of the blue. I lost my landscaping business. I looked at what other skills I had, and I knew that I could work with people. And so I switched into a career working with adults with disabilities.

Wayne Lenhardt

Okay. So what happened as COVID came along in 2019, 2020?

Darcy Harsch

Lots of rumours about lots of fears: We didn't know exactly how to handle the whole situation, working so closely with individuals. Sometimes they were less than cooperative, and so we had to find ways to accommodate that.

We ended up hearing that there was a vaccine being developed, that it was going to be released. So many of my colleagues were looking at that. But because of my history with how I went through my stroke and was misdiagnosed, instead of getting appropriate treatment, I had gotten sent home, and that's where I lost the use of my left arm, my left leg, my speech was inhibited. And so I was very reluctant to go along with what was going on without an extreme amount of caution.

That's why I was watching how my co-workers were interacting with each other. How they seem to be motivated more by fear than common sense. And so I kept looking at the data. When they rolled out the vaccine initially, I was part of a training program. And some of the people who were part of that Zoom training program, as everything was back then, they told us that they were leaving for an hour to go get their shot and then come back. So I was able to witness what was going on. They took an hour break; they came back. They were all proud of getting the shot. And within the next hour after they returned,

[00:05:00]

they were both taken back to the hospital.

So I was seeing things like that. It was enough to make me investigate further. I didn't want to get the shot. But then the rumours began about— We were going to be mandated in our segment of that industry.

So I approached my employer, and I said, “I’d like to negotiate a different way for myself. Is there any way that I could do remote work from home? Is there any way I could do a different—” There was Novavax that was being tossed around. It was a different type of vaccine: one that I was more familiar with. So I tried numerous times to work with my employer. They just kept putting me off and saying they haven’t made a decision yet. And so I continued working. And closer to November-ish, they said, “We are going to mandate.” And then they did. And so the mandate came down.

We were told that we had to reveal our vaccination status by December 10th or be put on unpaid leave. I refused to disclose my medical information, and they assumed that it was because I was unvaccinated, which is indeed the case. So then, I was put on unpaid leave as of December 10th.

Wayne Lenhardt

Are you still on unpaid leave?

Darcy Harsch

Amazingly, yes. I don’t know how that works. I have not been contacted directly by my employer, but I am still on unpaid leave. I still can access my payroll account and see nothing happening because they haven’t paid me for over a year.

Wayne Lenhardt

In the meantime, you move from Kelowna to Alberta. Correct?

Darcy Harsch

I attempted once again to reinvent myself. My wife is actually highly trained as a cook, but that means that she could actually get jobs like cooking in a senior’s residence or hospital or someplace else. She and I both struggled extremely, looking for work, trying to find gainful, meaningful, appropriate employment, and it just was not working. We were in financial dire straits. So we opened up the scope of where we were looking, and we ended finding something in Alberta. So that’s why we moved.

Wayne Lenhardt

Did you try to apply for employment insurance?

Darcy Harsch

I had been told when I was put on unpaid leave by my employer that there was no employment insurance. I was unaware that two weeks after I was put on unpaid leave, they had submitted a ROE [Record of Employment]. They didn’t inform me. They didn’t send me a copy. They didn’t do anything. I assumed—and because I’m somebody who gets up when I get knocked down—I just assumed that I had to go out and make my own way again. I didn’t apply for EI [Employment Insurance] until I heard that others were successfully making claims, that were in the industry that I was in. That was late in September of 2022. I had to get it backdated to then, but I didn’t apply until November of 2022.

Wayne Lenhardt

So you did get some EI?

Darcy Harsch

I did get some EI.

Wayne Lenhardt

Has your search for work been successful?

Darcy Harsch

I am presently employed in a totally different industry in Drumheller, Alberta.

Wayne Lenhardt

At this point, I think I'll ask the commissioners if anyone has any questions for you.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

I'm just wondering what kind of disabled adults? What were the issues that would put them in a group home?

[00:10:00]

Darcy Harsch

There was a wide spectrum of diagnosis. I was in a forensic home, so these were individuals that had extreme issues that would have resulted in run-ins with the law. They were not cooperative individuals, most of the time. But we learned how to work with them and how to find ways to help them understand what was going on.

The ironic part was that, as a worker there, one of my tasks was to continually teach them their rights and freedoms. That was something that I had to, on a regular basis, monthly record that I had actually gone over one of their rights, one of their freedoms. And then, I was denied that myself by my employer.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Were they allowed to leave with those rights and freedoms, or did they have visitors? Just trying to get a feel for how the group home worked.

Darcy Harsch

They were accompanied everywhere they went. And so we, as staff, actually were able to take them out into the community, but they were accompanied by us at all times.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

And did they have visitors or family?

Darcy Harsch

The residents that did have family that were still connected were able to go visit their family, and they were able to have family come visit them. Yes.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

And do you miss that interaction with disabled adults?

Darcy Harsch

I am able to adjust to whatever, working with people. The job I have right now is managing an RV [Recreational Vehicle] resort. And so I'll be dealing with people all summer. I'll be happy to be around people. That's one thing that I like. So I can do that in a group home. I can do that where I am, even construction and owning my own landscaping business. It doesn't matter. But I like to be around people. This situation definitely cut me off of a lot of friends, a lot of family. Mean things were said. Done. It doesn't matter because I've got tomorrow and today.

Commissioner Kaikkonen

Thank you very much for your testimony.

Wayne Lenhardt

Are there any more questions? No. On behalf of the National Citizens Inquiry, thank you very much for coming and telling your story today. Good luck.

Darcy Harsch

Thank you.

[00:13:09]

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