



## NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Saskatoon, SK

Day 2

April 21, 2023

### EVIDENCE

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**Witness 12: Bridgette Hounjet**

Full Day 2 Timestamp: 09:36:28–09:56:34

Source URL: <https://rumble.com/v2jlxvm-national-citizens-inquiry-saskatoon-day-2.html>

[00:00:00]

**Louis Browne**

Good afternoon. Can you please state your name and spell your last name for us?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

Bridgette Hounjet: H-O-U-N-J-E-T.

**Louis Browne**

Ms. Hounjet, would you prefer to swear an oath or solemnly affirm?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

Oath, please.

**Louis Browne**

Do you swear that the testimony you are about to give in this National Citizens Inquiry will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

I do.

**Louis Browne**

Ms. Hounjet, what city or town do you reside in?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

Saskatoon.

**Louis Browne**

Okay. And how long have you lived there approximately?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

About 20 years.

**Louis Browne**

And I understand that you worked as a federal public servant. Is that correct? —Sorry, can you say that again?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

Yes.

**Louis Browne**

Okay. Thank you. And how long were you so employed?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

It's been— Going on sixteen years.

**Louis Browne**

Okay, and are you still so employed?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

Yes, I am.

**Louis Browne**

Okay. Ms. Hounjet, in your own words, please tell us from start to finish what brings you to the National Citizens Inquiry, and then we'll ask some further questions after that. The floor is yours.

**Bridgette Hounjet**

So I guess my story starts— I gave birth to my son in 2019 and so I started maternity leave August 2019. And things were great on maternity leave. Come March 2020, the world starts going in a bit of a panic. We don't finish the first swimming lesson. That's kind of when things started to happen: March 2020.

And then fast-forward to August 2020, when it's time for me to return to work. And my first day was— Already, at that time, they had started working from home, so I went into the office to pick up my laptop and kind of ease back into work, and catch up on a bunch of emails and that sort of thing. And then proceeded to work from home from there.

There was not really too many rules in place. We were supposed to stay under a certain capacity in the building. We weren't forced to work from home, we weren't forced to go in the office. Just that we couldn't be more than a certain amount in the office. I personally

chose to work out of the office full-time. I was pretty much the only one who chose that. And then others would just come in as they needed, to do certain tasks or that sort of thing. And then, I believe, that went on for the rest of 2020.

And then kind of at the beginning of 2021, the guidelines were changing, that sort of thing. Masking came into place when you were in the office. And then we were going to start setting up a schedule to do a rotation in the office. Half of us would work from home and the other half would work in the office. And we would kind of do a rotation every month just to kind of allow equal workload type of thing, as only certain duties could be done in the office. So just to kind of share those tasks, that sort of thing.

We did that for a while—well, working from home in general for a year. And then there was some chatter about—as the vaccines were being developed—that there was a possibility that they would be mandated in our workplace. And that’s when my anxiety started to go up. Because I knew, just the little bit I had read and I continued to read, that that wasn’t something I was ready to rush into. There were things unfolding, information was still coming out.

For me, there were a lot of red flags just surrounding the vaccine, so it was certainly something I did not want to rush into, but there came a point where my employer was mandating these vaccines.

I think that came into play, I think, October 19th—somewhere around there.

[00:05:00]

The rules came out that we needed to “attest” to our vaccination status by a certain day and—sorry, my memory on dates is not great, but somewhere around there—there was a date in October that we needed to attest. And from there, there was about a— If you weren’t fully vaccinated or if you did not disclose your vaccination status, you had about two weeks to either get vaccinated or submit a request for accommodation.

Now the request for accommodations were based on either a medical exemption, or a religious exemption, or a human rights violation essentially. I knew I there was medically nothing that would stop me. I knew and I had heard, you know: doctors weren’t just giving exemptions medically willy-nilly, so I knew that that was going to be impossible.

Religious? Yes, I do have a faith background, but there was nothing there that I felt I could work with.

Human rights? I had little knowledge to how that all really worked, but I tried. I tried to go with a human rights discrimination, and so I put in a request for accommodation for the human rights ground of sex: being a female and I had not ruled out having more children. And prior to having my son, I had suffered a miscarriage. So for me, there was nothing that I wanted to do to my body not knowing how it could affect my body. I didn’t want to take a chance that— If I did choose to have another child, I did not want to take the chance that something I inject in my body could have a negative effect. So that is the route I chose to do: discrimination against sex. And, honestly, reading the human rights, and kind of how it’s laid out, I was pretty certain that that’s not what they meant by “sex discrimination,” but I tried because what do I have to lose to try?

So I tried, and I sent my request for accommodation to my manager. It had to go through a process and it then had to go to nationally for the committee to review and that sort of

thing. In that time frame, while it was being reviewed, we continued to work from home, work from the office. And it was taking a little bit longer than anticipated to get a response. It was going to be in December 2021: my turn to work out of the office.

At that time—as the vaccine mandates had come into play—they requested that I test: do rapid tests three times a week, Monday, Wednesday, Friday. Didn't matter if I was at work or not: Monday, Wednesday, Friday I had to test. And I didn't have to show the result. I just had to text my manager and give the result. So I did it! Because—yeah, I did it—I wanted to keep working. I love my job and I wanted to keep working to support my family. So I did it.

And on December 23rd, I got a response that my request for accommodation was not supported. So that was a great Christmas gift that year.

On that letter telling me that it was not supported, they gave me till, I believe it was January 5th, 2022 to either change my vaccination status—and they allowed, I believe, two-ish weeks to then again either go get vaccinated so that my status has changed, in that I could go to work, continue going to work—or I would be placed on unpaid leave starting January 19th.

[00:10:00]

January 19th came and I received another letter saying, “You are being placed on unpaid leave.” January 20th: I meet my manager outside our office. I hand over all my work, computer, and that sort of thing. Really felt like a criminal handing over everything; you know, it didn't feel great. And, yeah: I was on unpaid leave for five months, until June 20th, when the federal government decided to get rid of the mandates.

It was really bizarre. I mean, our provincial government had already done away with mandates—I don't remember the exact time, but certainly months prior. So why it took that much longer for ours to be lifted, I don't know. But those five months was the worst time of my life. I was in a really dark place, and it was really hard.

June 20th came around and I messaged my manager saying, “Okay, I see in the media that the federal government is doing away with mandates. When can I come back?” And she had not seen that quite yet. There was no kind of communication that had come out for her to be able to reach out to me first. But anyway—so we made that communication and I did return to work shortly thereafter. I had taken a few weeks off just due to family commitments but I did go back to work.

I am still at work. I forgot to mention: As part of my request of accommodation, I did express to my employer that I am willing to continue testing as I had done—it had been working and there was no reason why all of a sudden it would not be acceptable—or continue to work from home. I was still so very willing to continue working. And it just wasn't good enough, and I was placed on unpaid leave for those five months.

### **Louis Browne**

Thank you, Ms. Hounjet, for that account. I wanted to ask you a few follow-up questions. You mentioned that you put in an application for an exemption and you were denied ultimately.

Are you aware of anyone at your workplace—and I mean, personally aware of anyone at your workplace—who was granted such an exemption?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

I am aware of one person who was granted a religious exemption.

**Louis Browne**

And are you able to advise, or do you know, what religion that person belonged to?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

I cannot 100 per cent say which religion. No.

**Louis Browne**

Okay. That's fine. I'd like to ask you about— I mean, even though you're back to work now, nonetheless, you were on unpaid leave for a while. How has that affected you still today? In terms of, let's just talk— Let's start with mental stress. How's your mental health doing today, even though you're back at work but yet you had that L-walk?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

It's not great. I still have a lot of anger and bitterness, resentment. I see my counselor a whole lot more regularly. And I have breakdowns, I would say, quite regularly. I mean the greeter was nice enough to greet me here today and I broke down, so it just it doesn't take much. I break down at work. It's kind of embarrassing, but it is what it is. It's my reality right now. But yeah, my mental health is not great. I'm working on it.

I guess to add to that, in 2021— I play adult rec hockey and I had signed up for the 2021 season and that usually starts in September. I played two games. They made us mask while we played, skated on the ice—it was the worst thing ever—and then shortly thereafter the mandates came into play so my season was cut short.

And that, for me, is a big— That's what I do for my mental health. That's my physical activity to help with my mental health.

[00:15:00]

So that was taken away. So yeah, things were taken away: those kind of supports. But thankfully, between my family and some friends I was able to get through it. But yes, my mental health. And finances— obviously, I depleted my savings to try and support my family during this time. And I continue to have to pay back my pension, some benefits, so I'm still financially hurting from it.

**Louis Browne**

Thank you for that, Ms. Hounjet. And because the Commission doesn't necessarily know you from how you were before, I just want to be clear: When you say that you break down, and even the greeter was nice and you broke down: just to be clear, that's different than how you were prior to all of this? Can you just clarify that?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

Yes certainly. I did not break down near as much. I know, after having a child, things—your hormones—are different, so yes. But like weekly, every other day, something triggers me. I

could be driving in my vehicle and tears start flowing. It doesn't take much to— At work, certain conversations will trigger me and I sometimes have to remove myself to go have that moment. And that was not the case before that.

**Louis Browne**

Thank you for that clarification. Can you advise, Ms. Hounjet: Has this experience impacted your trust in government and public health authorities?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

Yeah, certainly. I've lost a lot of trust in some of those institutions. Just yeah, simply lost a lot of trust. I question a lot of things—which doesn't feel great to question some of those things you used to place a lot of trust in. But yeah, sadly, I do question a lot of things.

**Louis Browne**

And how about your impact on relationships and, you know, all manner of relationships—family, friends, workplace. Has this impacted your relationships at all?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

Yes, it certainly has. As I explained, I have anger and sometimes—unfortunately—that gets taken out on my family, my close friends. When you have your friends and family tell you that you're different, that you've changed, it's hard to hear.

**Louis Browne**

You're doing great and we're almost done. Let's just hang in there. At this point, I just want to invite the Commission members if there are any questions.

Two more questions, Ms. Hounjet. And for those who have been around a while, they know what they are. In summary, in about 60 seconds or so: What would you like this Inquiry, and Canadians at large, to take away from your evidence today?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

I guess, and I was one of these people, like: Read for yourself. Do the research. Be open to other views. Don't just be quick to take what is thrown at you through media, or friends or family even, for that matter. Sadly, until it affects you directly, we don't fully understand. It's hard that it has to get to that point. But just have an open mind, and let's be there for one another, so that we don't repeat this sort of thing.

I think of myself as a high-functioning person in life. If it has affected me this much as a high-functioning person, I can't imagine those who were affected medically and in other walks of life. I can't imagine what our society as a whole is going through. And let's try and move forward in a positive direction and not let this happen again.

**Louis Browne**

Thank you for that. Last question: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us today?

**Bridgette Hounjet**

I don't think so. I just want to thank everyone. This, for me, is part of my healing—to be able to tell my story. So I thank everyone for being inviting, welcoming, and open to hear my story.

**Louis Browne**

On behalf of the NCI, we thank you very much for your evidence today. Thank you.

**Bridgette Hounjet**

Thank you.

[00:20:06]



***Final Review and Approval: Jodi Bruhn, August 21, 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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