

“This is a mass disabling event that’s taking place”: Canadian mother speaks to the Global Workers’ Inquest on her struggle to protect her children from COVID-19

Dylan Lubao
27 April 2022

Jessica Bleasdale is a mother of two and an advocate for persons with disabilities. She lives in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, with her husband Chad, a carpenter, and her children, River and Rainn.

Jessica has filed complaints against New Brunswick’s Progressive Conservative provincial government for recently dropping all COVID-19 protective measures and endangering her son River, 12, who has underlying health conditions that put him at greater risk in the event of COVID-19 infection. She has also filed complaints with the province’s Human Rights Commission and other non-governmental organizations. New Brunswick is in the midst of a deadly surge of the pandemic triggered by the BA.2 Omicron variant.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Jessica about her experiences advocating for her son and others who are vulnerable, as well as her thoughts on the New Brunswick government’s decision to drop all COVID-19 protective measures.

Dylan Lubao: Could you describe your work with the COVID-19 advocacy group Protect Our Province New Brunswick?

Jessica Bleasdale: These have popped up across the country, in other provinces, where government and public health are abdicating their responsibilities insofar as informing citizens on all public health matters relating to COVID.

So, Protect Our Province NB was started in New Brunswick. It’s volunteer based and includes people from all across New Brunswick of varying backgrounds and reasons for their advocacy. We have been working quite diligently for many months, but in particular, these past couple of months when it was announced that all protective measures were going to be dropped in New Brunswick.

What got me involved is that I have a child with disabilities. The research and data has shown that there are long-term implications from a COVID infection, even if mild or asymptomatic. My child has neurodevelopmental disabilities as well as gastrointestinal disabilities, and he already experiences deficits, physically and mentally, because of his disabilities. The research daily is coming out that shows that cognitive abilities are, both in the short term, medium term, and long term, being impacted by COVID infection, along with various gastrointestinal issues, such as the recent announcement that kids are getting hepatitis all around the world.

These are not things that I am prepared to gamble my son’s or any person’s health for. And if we are being told to live with COVID, we need to be informed of what the risks are. We are not being informed of those risks, and we are being gaslit. We are being told that those risks do not even exist, or that they are minor.

New Brunswick is one of the few provinces in Canada that has zero plans in place for Long COVID. We do not have any Long COVID clinics. The closest one is in Nova Scotia, and they are so inundated right now, they cannot take any patients from New Brunswick. Doctors and physicians across New Brunswick are already handling patients who are being diagnosed with Long COVID, and there is no support, no help for them.

Our premier has really downplayed COVID in general, calling it “the sniffles” or a cold, when international research has shown otherwise. COVID is not mild, it is not over, and it is airborne. None of that information is being provided to the people of New Brunswick. Not from our government, and not from NB Public Health. That is a problem.

So, I wish to see protective measures in place now, not only in schools, which is the angle in which I have been doing my greatest advocacy, with respect to my child. Not only for children with disabilities, but for all people with disabilities. All people with vulnerable health deserve to have protections in society. We cannot say ‘Let’s live with COVID’ and put vulnerable people back into their homes so everyone else can live and pretend that COVID does not exist.

I would very much like to see protective measures in schools, but I would also like to see them in the broader community. That would entail a Vaccines Plus strategy, one that is promoted by the World Health Organization, and our own Doctor Theresa Tam, Canada’s Chief Medical Officer of Health.

What that entails is access to testing, quality masks, isolation, paid sick days to support people isolating from school and work, improving ventilation and air quality, and making sure that there is equity within our policies. Making sure that when policies are being made, that it is through the lens of how this would impact marginalized, vulnerable people, as well as people who are carrying the burden of this pandemic on their backs as primary caregivers to children, and as teachers and nurses, who are predominantly women. We need to ensure that these lenses are taking into account people who do not have the privileges that our policy makers have.

DL: Could you describe yourself and your family, as well as the experiences you have gone through over the past two years of this pandemic? A recent article in the press wrote that your husband actually tested positive for COVID-19 recently.

JB: My husband is a blue collar construction tradesman. So, there is no working from home. There is no paid sick leave. There are no vacation days. There is nothing of the sort. He tested positive recently for COVID after attending a work safety meeting where clearly someone was COVID-positive and people were not wearing masks, other than my husband and

one other person. So, he got infected at that meeting and then had to stay home.

The rules in New Brunswick say he does not have to stay home. He could have gone to work the very next day, without a mask, and infected even more people. We do not believe in that. We believe in protecting others. He works with lots of people who also are in the same position of not having paid time off or sick days. That puts us in a very precarious position, given that my husband is our sole income earner.

Prior to the pandemic, I was a gig worker taking on a few odd jobs here and there to supplement our family income, because carpenters are not paid exceptionally well here in New Brunswick. Trades in general are looked upon as being “less than” white-collar jobs here, particularly in a government town like we live in. Unions in the trades are not very strong out here in New Brunswick. So, all of that leaves us in a precarious situation.

When the pandemic hit and I was no longer able to do gig work because it just dried up and would place me in a position of COVID infection, I was able to access CERB [Canada Emergency Response Benefit, a temporary federal financial aid program for workers] and that was beneficial to keep our family going. But as the pandemic continued, there were less and less supports, and less and less care from government officials to ensure that all people were protected. It was one thing that white-collar jobs could be done from home and get paid time off when they were feeling a little under the weather, but those are not privileges that everyone has.

If someone gets COVID and only gets the sniffles, I am glad that that is their experience. They do not know what the long-term ramifications will be from those infections, because our government officials and public health are not indicating those. I have two children. One is a child with disabilities, and we are not prepared to gamble on the health of our children, especially as we are increasingly becoming aware of the medium and long-term implications of COVID and how it ages a person and creates other issues within the systems of the body. Everything from diabetes to possibly hepatitis to damaging T-cells, meaning that people will become more susceptible to other diseases. It is awful. Really awful.

DL: Could you provide some more detail on your son River’s condition, and what prompted you to file the complaint with the Human Rights Commission of New Brunswick?

JB: My son River has neurodevelopmental disabilities. It is kind of a big word, but basically what that entails is he has cognitive deficits, he has memory deficits, he has processing deficits. These are all things that I, as his mom, left the overall workforce for. I cannot return to my professional career because my new career, so to speak, is as an accidental disability advocate. I never thought that is what I would need to do, but that is where I am.

My son already does not get the support he needs for his disabilities. I spend just about every day having to take him to meetings, taking myself to meetings, making phone calls to this department or that department, or this school or that person. It is, frankly, never-ending how much advocacy I need to do with very little reward. I am often turned away, I am often told they cannot help, or there just is not the funding. It is nonstop.

So, I know, as a parent to a child with disabilities, how hard it is to get support. If my child gets even more disabled, where am I going to get support for that? They already do not exist. Or they are already taking years to access. My child has significant disabilities and I have been waiting since last August for a referral to a paediatrician. And I need that paediatrician to give a referral to a gastroenterologist, so my son can get referred to a hospital in another province, because we do not have those services here.

I am very much aware of how much advocacy it takes for children with disabilities. I am glad that most parents do not have to do this level of advocacy. But what I am asking of our policy makers, our public health,

and the general population, who are tired of COVID and tired of taking measures to protect one another, is for them to care. I know that many more parents will be joining the ranks of having to advocate for their children with disabilities, as COVID impacts more families, not just in New Brunswick, but across the globe.

This is a mass disabling event that’s taking place with this “let it rip” strategy that too many provinces, including New Brunswick, are doing. New Brunswick does not have any isolation time. It does not have any masks. There are other provinces that at least have some small measures. Not enough, but some. A Vaccines Plus strategy will help protect not only my child with disabilities, but hopefully, prevent other parents from having to become disability advocates for their own children.

DL: Prior to the emergence of the Omicron variant, the Atlantic provinces, including New Brunswick, had for a time, especially during the first year of the pandemic, been touted as a model for how to handle COVID-19. Cases, hospitalizations, and deaths, at least compared to the rest of the country, were comparatively low. How were conditions for River and your family during this period?

JB: There is no question that the New Brunswick government and public health did an excellent job managing the pandemic for the first year. I gave kudos then, I continue to give kudos to those measures. We went, here in New Brunswick, from being a pandemic hero, to being a pandemic zero. It is night and day how things were handled.

Just today, the Child and Youth Advocate [Kelly Lamrock, former New Brunswick Liberal Minister of Social Development] released a report saying that Public Health could not provide any evidence that they based their decision to drop all protective measures on anything. It was hopes and wishes and prayers and, frankly, copying Alberta, who we all know has very poorly managed this pandemic from the beginning.

I wish that we could go back to being a society that said, “we’re all in this together,” like we did three-quarters of the way through 2020. I always had concerns about my family getting COVID. We have followed all the rules. We have gotten vaccinated to the level we could. And we will continue to follow these rules as though the government still had them.

What is happening right now is unconscionable. Today, a news article came out saying that just in eight weeks alone, last September and October here in New Brunswick—this was just after Public Health dropped all measures the first time—423 excess deaths happened, compared to the 70 that our government let us know about.

In what world is that okay? Here in Canada, when the Walkerton Water Crisis took place in Ontario, there were criminal charges laid against government officials for nine deaths. Where are the consequences for our elected officials and government officials, who are allowing this mass death to take place in our province and our country? If anyone else were to be responsible for the deaths of 423 people, they would be called a mass murderer and put away in prison for the remainder of their lives. These are peoples’ lives. These are our neighbours. These are our community members. Where is the accountability?

DL: Are you familiar with Dr. Tara Moriarty, who has published estimates of the true infection, hospitalization, and death rates?

JB: Yes, I am. In fact, she is the one that the CBC article that came out today, indicating the 423 excess deaths, was based on.

DL: Her projections are that undercounts of deaths are massive, on the order of two or three times at least versus the official government death count. Certainly orders of magnitude larger than what the public is being led to believe.

JB: And for New Brunswick, she says it is even worse. An undercount of four times. That is how bad things are here. She also indicated that it would be even worse with Omicron, especially now that there are zero measures.

Once the Freedom Convoy honked through town, it changed everything.

It really did. Our own premier admitted that is why he removed the measures, because he was tired of the pandemic and people were tired of following rules. As if it is two equivalencies—people who need protection for their health and long-term wellness, versus people who are kind of inconvenienced a little bit by masks. I mean, in what world is that how you set public health policy?

DL: Can you speak more to the government response to your complaint? You are quoted as calling the government's dismissive response to your complaint "curt" and "nonsense."

JB: I actually filed three complaints. The first complaint that I filed was against Dr. Jennifer Russell, our Chief Medical Officer of Health, and I filed a complaint with the New Brunswick College of Physicians and Surgeons. The registrar did end up accepting my complaint, although he said that while he agreed, that things would become a mess once all the measures were dropped, everybody actually did not follow what we are supposed to be doing. And yet here we are. But he also stated that it might not be the most appropriate mechanism to get my complaint heard. In the end, he did accept the complaint and it is under investigation.

I put a bit more thought into what other route I should consider, and I sent a complaint to the Child and Youth advocate, Kelly Lamrock.

The other complaint I filed was with the Human Rights Commission of New Brunswick on behalf of my child with disabilities. I filed it against Premier Blaine Higgs, Chief Medical Officer of Health Russell, Health Minister Dorothy Shephard, and Education Minister Dominic Cardy. Essentially it argues that the removal of all protective measures in school is discrimination against my child with disabilities.

The Commission also stated that they would accept a second complaint from me against the city of Fredericton and Mayor Kate Rogers and city council for discriminating against people with disabilities and vulnerable people by removing all protective measures from public facilities and spaces.

It has been something else these past two months since I have been pursuing these complaints. I have been harassed, I have been targeted, I had to pull myself off of Facebook because I could no longer keep up with the deleting and blocking. I was getting hundreds of comments and messages a day.

Then they found me on Instagram, so I had to close that up as well. The hate and vitriol has just been unlike anything I have ever experienced. I have had white nationalists send me hate mail, basically as a threat that they know where I live. I have been targeted on Twitter, being told that all my goings-on are being captured, and that there is a private group on social media that are following me and keeping tabs on everything I am doing so that they can have social development take away my children.

I want to be clear that everything I'm doing—I have nothing to gain from it. I have nothing to gain financially. We're a lower middle class—probably these days with inflation a lower class—one-income family. My husband is a hard worker. He does construction because it is something he enjoys, and it pays our modest bills. I do not want to get into politics, I do not have any jobs to get, or whatever people might think I am trying to do.

I have to spend my time as an advocate for my son. Whether there are protective measures or not, he still has disabilities, and as I mentioned, I spend all my time trying to advocate for education and health supports that he doesn't get. My goal is to support my son's health and long-term wellness, and my family, and my community.

That I have become such a target of hate, not only from strangers, but from people I know, has been tough.

DL: With all the backlash you have gotten, what support have you gotten?

JB: I do get messages of support from other families and from some medical professionals. I did not do any of this for accolades, that is for sure. But it does help during some very dark times to get support from

people. I received a message this morning from a woman who asked for things to stay private, but who just wanted me to know that her 97-year-old father was able to recuperate, and they were able to keep the rest of their family safe because she had been following a lot of the measures that I had been recommending and calling for our government to support.

I have had other people who work within the health and education system, who are unable to publicly advocate because of their jobs, reach out with support. I have people who send me their own stories asking me to publicly share them via social media. Be it a worker who is being told to go back to work even though they are COVID-positive, to people who have children in classrooms with maskless, COVID-positive teachers or students. They want that story out there, but they know what kind of backlash they will get.

I am prepared to share those stories because their stories matter. These are human beings. These are people in my community. These are people! These are New Brunswickers. Their lives matter. They do not have the same privileges as our elected officials who have higher incomes and have more pensions and benefits than most of us will ever see in our lifetime. People matter, and I am okay to share their stories. I am okay to share my own stories. I just hope that people will listen, and other people will see that my son matters.

DL: Why do you think all COVID-19 measures have been dropped?

JB: I understand our governments are under incredible pressure. I know that it costs a lot of money to have health measures and financial support for people. But at the end of the day, people matter more than corporations. Corporations are not people. It is a business structure that is intended to make profit off of people.

I know that where we are at in society is not okay. We have immense wealth gaps, and privilege gaps, and ableism, and ageism, and racism, and sexism. I wish that as a society, we could come together, not unlike what we were in the first year of the pandemic of being all in this together, at least in Canada and certainly in New Brunswick. There was an understanding that what is happening in a microcosm and globally is not okay.

We all saw, here in New Brunswick, that the Irvings [a billionaire oil and land-owning family] added billions of dollars in profits in very short periods of time during the pandemic. We were all applauding our frontline heroes, calling grocery store clerks and convenience store clerks heroes for putting themselves out there on the front lines while people were getting sick and dying of a virus we did not know very much about. They got a couple of extra dollars an hour, justifiably.

Then those things began to erode, taking away a few extra dollars so that corporations and shareholders could get extra profits. Taking away the financial support of CERB, so that budgets could be better balanced and that somehow this would improve labour shortages—which it did not. Instead, it made people go to work sick and infect more people.

I cannot believe that the Freedom Convoy people would be fighting against measures that protect all of us, instead of fighting against a system that actually holds us all back, that does not care enough about all of us. We should be seeking equity, and that means a Vaccines Plus strategy. It means paid sick days. It means not working when sick, and that being the norm. That we all look out for each other.

I have no idea how we went from "We're all in this together" to personal risk, but not really telling you what those risks are. From "Don't work when you're sick and stay home for at least ten days or more and here's some financial supports to help you do that," to "Oh well, who cares, go to work sick you minion." I feel like I am living in a dystopia, and I am on a daily basis being gaslit by our government telling me that I am the one saying it is wrong.

DL: Could you describe the work you do with PoP NB, and what its goal is, as well as any advocacy groups that you are involved with?

JB: My attention at the moment is geared towards advocacy through

PoP. However, I also do advocacy work for my son in general, not only for his needs, but I'm an ambassador with RADLD, Raising Awareness of Developmental Language Disorder. That is a disability that my son has. So, I spend quite a bit of time doing advocacy work with RADLD, both on a provincial, national, and international level.

However, at the moment I have to make sure that my son goes back to school safely, because he is not getting the support that he needs. He needs interventions and support from his resource teacher and specialists at school. My son has a wonderful resource teacher at his middle school. He connects with my son every morning for ten to fifteen minutes to help him with a little bit of math, and just to make sure he is okay. I'm incredibly grateful for that.

But I think we can all agree that this is not school. That is not getting an education. That is not connecting him with his peers. He needs all of those things and the only way he can get that is by being in school. But he cannot be in school safely because COVID is so rampant, so it is just an impossible situation that I am in as his parent.

I am not alone, and I am vindicated by the Child and Youth Advocate's report today that was just released prior to our conversation. The report says these decisions to remove all protective measures were not based on any evidence. None was supplied to the Child and Youth Advocate that would have shown that it was acceptable to remove these measures, and that measures need to be in schools to protect not only the entire school population, but in particular students with disabilities and students who have vulnerable family members at home.

We do not live in silos. Our hospitals are overwhelmed. Our health care workers are overburdened. Our long-term care homes have outbreaks all over. We are all connected. You cannot remove all protection measures in society and expect everything else to just be stable, no matter how much our Premier, our medical officer of health, and our health minister tells us they are stable. They are not. It is remarkable that it is taking this volunteer effort to do the jobs that we pay people very well to do.

I know that there are systems in place in society to help protect our most vulnerable, such as the Child and Youth Advocacy Office and the Human Rights Commission. These things are there to help ensure that our policy makers take into account those who do not have the privileges of not having to worry about many things in life. But those processes take an extraordinary amount of energy, time, money, and everything I have is dedicated to that right now, working those processes to help ensure our most vulnerable citizens are protected.

I am grateful that the Child and Youth Advocate took a serious approach, made sure that all bases were covered, and 23 pages of recommendations were released. I have confidence that the Human Rights Commission will also protect the rights of persons with disabilities. It is a process.

In the meantime, my son has not been able to go to school. Vulnerable people in our community are having to stay at home because it is no longer safe for them to be out in the broader community. There are people undergoing cancer treatment, who cannot send their kids to school, because their kid will very likely bring COVID home. Where is the mental wellness for that child if they were to infect their sick parent and that parent died?

These are the realities we are facing. There is no point in New Brunswick, or Canada, emulating what is happening in the United States. Almost a million people there have died from a virus that research is increasingly showing creates long-term ramifications. That is not good for society, and quite frankly, it is not good for the economy, if we are speaking about things that are most important to our policy makers.

If you thought labour shortages were happening, what is that going to look like with a million less people working? What is that going to look like in New Brunswick, where we already have 26 percent of our population being disabled? We already have a higher than national

average. What is that going to look like when we have more and more people disabled, and more and more health care workers having left the system because they have completely burnt out?

These are things I am thinking of all the time in my advocacy, even when people are screaming at me. Even when people are being hurtful to me. Even when people are making fun of my child with disabilities. I keep my eye on what matters most: my child with disabilities, my family's wellness, the wellness and long-term health of my community members, and of humankind in general. Because I care, and that as what we're supposed to do in a society.

It is a long battle, but I think it is worth it. It is worth it to change society for the better, and the only way we are going to do that is to protect everyone and to hold accountable those who have been responsible for harming and killing members of our society.



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