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Testimony before the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Good afternoon Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking member Ruiz and Members of this Subcommittee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding my experience with the COVID-19 vaccine mandates imposed by employers under the influence of the federal government and the harm they caused to individuals and families across the country. Today I will share my personal story and experience, but I do so fully aware that my ordeal is not unique. I only hope to carry the message of the countless Americans whose lives were turned upside down and whose rights were trampled on in the name of "public safety."

For a decade from 2011 to 2021 I lived out my professional dream working for ESPN as a reporter and host, primarily covering college basketball and college football. I was, to the best of my knowledge, a dedicated and valued employee. In fact, I worked nearly every weekend of the 2020 football season which was the height of the COVID pandemic, before a vaccine was available, traveling to games and reporting in a safe and effective manner. As a vaccine for COVID-19 became available, ESPN and its parent company, The Walt Disney Company, encouraged employees to be vaccinated. While their position in support of the vaccines was evident, on April 1st 2021, Disney sent an email to all employees stating that "getting the vaccine is a personal decision for each of us."

That position would prove temporary. A few months later, I received notice from ESPN that effective August 1, 2021, a COVID vaccine would be required to attend all "remote" events. This included all games and remote studio shows. There would be absolutely NO exemptions to this rule. Shortly thereafter The Walt Disney Company extended this mandate to all employees regardless of travel unless a religious or medical accommodation was approved.

While this mandate wasn't entirely a surprise, the reality was still hard to fathom and incredibly difficult to process. As a consequence of this mandate, for the first time in 14 years I would not be reporting from the sidelines of college football in the fall of 2021. Regardless, I retained hope I could still remain an employee at ESPN and work in my capacity as a studio host. This hope hinged on receiving an accommodation on either medical or religious grounds.

During this time my husband and I were working with fertility specialists in the hopes of having a second child. An already stressful and emotional period exacerbated by the impending uncertainty of my job status. I contacted my doctor in July and shared with him my concerns regarding the vaccine and my employers demand I receive it to continue working. Given my good health and our current calendar for conception, he supported my decision to forego the vaccine. He agreed to provide the necessary documentation to apply for a medical accommodation. I notified my reporting manager that I would be doing so and we began the process through the human resources and legal counsel for ESPN.

Unfortunately, in my follow up correspondence with my doctor's physician assistant, I was notified due to the large number of medical exemption requests received that they were having a clinic wide meeting to discuss how best to handle them. After said meeting, I was informed that as a clinic they would not

be providing any medical exemptions for any patients. Instead, I was referred to the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology and the CDC. Despite my doctor's acknowledgment that this medical intervention was unnecessary for me as an individual patient, a blanket approach was taken for all patients disregarding our individual needs and risks.

I subsequently notified ESPN that I would be modifying from a medical to a religious accommodation request. While I had a valid and sincere opposition to this injection in regard to my scheduled IVF transfer, I also have valid and sincere religious objections to the COVID-19 vaccine. The extent and basis of my beliefs were questioned and discussed at length with the human resources representative from ESPN. The sincerity of my religious beliefs was acknowledged, but it was determined that I could not continue to be employed without creating an undue burden upon the company. I was given one week to comply and get the injection or be "separated" from the company. I did not receive the vaccine as my beliefs did not change in that week and therefore was terminated as an employee with ESPN in October of 2021.

Just like that, newly pregnant, I was stripped of my job, my health insurance and having my personal and medical decisions the topic of national news. It is hard to explain what it is like to have so much taken from you for doing what you know in your heart and mind to be the right thing for you and your family. The financial toll it took on my family and so many others like us was significant, and still enduring. The lost wages and sacrifices made by families like mine who stood up to the overreaching, unjustified mandates to preserve their autonomy and health can never be fully recovered. But the impact wasn't just on our livelihoods but on our lives. We were bullied, vilified, slandered and ostracized. Nights were sleepless, days consumed by doubt and worry. Thankfully, my resolve strengthened with constant prayer, faith in God and the support of loved ones. As I, like so many others, tried to come to terms with my new reality and reconsider how to provide for my family, our own elected government officials shamed us. Anyone who didn't obediently follow orders to get in line and roll up their sleeves was portrayed as the enemy, a threat. No regard was given to natural immunity, personal convictions, religious beliefs or individual health and medical history, all valid reasons for declining this injection.

If you were unvaccinated, you were part of the problem.

And that's why today I hope to be part of the solution. To make sure this type of tyranny never happens again in this great country. That we acknowledge the misguided directives and unnecessary harms done to countless Americans. Harms caused not by the virus but by the response. If we are truly the land of the free, the only thing that should be mandated is that we will never trample the civil liberties and bodily autonomy of our citizens again.