

31 March 2022

Commissioner Kasari Govender  
BC Office of the Human Rights Commissioner  
999 Canada Place, Suite 536  
Vancouver, B.C. V6C 3E1

**By email to: [engagement@bchumanrights.ca](mailto:engagement@bchumanrights.ca)**

Dear Commissioner Govender,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on behalf of the retail industry on hate during the COVID-19 pandemic as it has related to retail workers. Retail Council of Canada (RCC) is a not-for-profit industry-funded association that represents retail businesses in every community across the country. We proudly represent more than 56,000 British Columbian storefronts in all retail formats, including department, grocery, pharmacy, specialty, discount, independent retailers and online merchants. Over 317,000 British Columbians work directly in the retail industry. In addition, about 200,000 other jobs in transportation, warehousing, security, information technology, accounting and finance rely upon retail.

Retail workers have been on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic from its outset, dealing with customers day to day. While we are grateful that the majority of British Colombians have been respectful and kind to our frontline retail workers, there have unfortunately been many cases where these workers have been subject to negative interactions with customers as they try to go about their duties and keep the customers and their fellow employees safe. These interactions have included most prominently confrontations with customers who do not wish to wear a mask or who wear their mask improperly, but also management of lineups (including capacity control and at points-of sale), particularly earlier on in the pandemic, asking for proof of vaccination (in those limited retail settings where this is required), and while enforcing quantity limits on items, again most prominently early in the pandemic and again when dealing with the flooding impacts of November and December 2021.

There has also been a rise in violent retail crime throughout the pandemic that has placed even more stress on retail employees and retail employers who want to keep them safe. One major chain reports a 300% increase in violent crime from 2019 to 2021 nationwide. 70% of this increase came in three western markets including the Lower Mainland.

One notable result of the rise in violent retail crime has been the introduction and expansion of de-escalation training for a wider segment of retail staff. Where this training was once reserved for store security guards or management level positions in high-risk areas, the increase in negative customer interactions during the pandemic has necessitated that this training be offered in many cases to *all* retail staff members, including part-time employees and those who do not generally interact much with the public, such as employees who work back-of-store. In turn, management level employees have in many cases begun to receive even more intensive de-escalation training. What we have heard from retailers is that this training is being offered to enhance the safety and security of their employees.

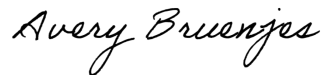
We do not have empirical data of these interactions, as retailers are not willing or able to share employee's personal information for privacy reasons, but we do know from widespread conversations with retailers across different segments in BC and examples that have been shared including in the media, that the abuse and vitriol that some customers have shown has disproportionately impacted retail employees of colour, female retail employees, and those employees who are older or very young and new to the industry. This is unacceptable. Retail cares for our front-line workers and have worked to afford them protections throughout the pandemic, particularly in our advocacy for mask protections before they were widely used or ordered. These protections have helped workers feel more secure as they deal with members of the public, but unfortunately have resulted in some confrontations that have had serious and lasting consequences, such as a case where an employee was severely assaulted after asking customers to please wear their masks while shopping.

Now that the masking order for indoor public spaces has been repealed, these instances have unfortunately become more prevalent. Some retailers have chosen to keep mask mandates in place for their employee safety, which has led to some confrontations with disgruntled customers, though most retailers are no longer requiring customers to remain masked. There have also been increased instances of negative interactions between customers who chose to go maskless and those who wish to remain masked since the order was repealed, resulting in many cases where employees must intervene in some way, at risk to themselves.

While we do not share data on these instances, for reasons related to privacy and the protection of personal information, we are concerned for every employee who is affected. We have seen a general rise in anxiety through the pandemic, people are more on edge and in some cases, unfortunately have chosen to take this out on retail employees who are just trying to do their jobs while keeping customers and themselves safe.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission in support of our oral presentation last month, and hope this information is helpful to the Office of the Human Rights Commissioner.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Avery Bruenjes".

Avery Bruenjes  
Senior Manager, Government Relations and Regulatory Affairs