

Testimony of Catherine Coleman Flowers

To the House Oversight and Reform

Subcommittee on the Environment

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Thank you, Chairperson Khanna, Ranking Member Norman, and all of the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify. My name is Catherine Coleman Flowers. I serve as the rural development manager for the Equal Justice Initiative and the founding director of the Center for Rural Enterprise and Environmental Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. I also serve as a practitioner in residence at Duke University, a member of the board of advisers for the Center for Earth Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, as well as the boards of the Natural Resource Defense Council and the Climate Reality Project. In 2020 I was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in Environmental Health and I authored the book entitled *Waste: One Woman's Fight Against America's Dirty Secret*. In this book I uncovered the extent to which rural America has been denied access to sustainable and resilient sanitation infrastructure.

I am a proud native of Lowndes County, Alabama, a rural area located between Selma and Montgomery. Like Montgomery, the cradle of the modern-day civil rights movement, or Selma known for its voting rights history, Lowndes County too has a proud history of fighting for equality. In addition, in the early 1900s, sharecroppers organized for jobs and justice. Many of its sons and later its daughters including my father,

three brothers and myself served in the United States military. We have a deep legacy of holding up core democratic values, even when they failed us.

That failure is exemplified through health care disparities, low wage jobs, unemployment, unsafe mobile homes, high electric bills, straight-piping of raw sewage, or failing wastewater systems. I have often taken policy makers and philanthropists to Lowndes County to see the inequalities that exist and to hear from local people what is needed to address them. At the height of the pandemic, Lowndes County had the highest death and infection rate per capita in the state of Alabama. Sadly, as one travels through Lowndes County now, the fresh graves of victims of covid are a constant reminder of what happens when poverty, failing or no sanitation infrastructure, and climate change come together.

Because I am country girl, I like to speak in plain English like I would if I were at home speaking to local people, my relatives. In the town of Hayneville, Alabama, for more than twenty years, Mrs. Charlie Mae Holcombe has been telling people about the sewage from a nearby lagoon that is backing up into her home. Yet, the failing infrastructure continues to fail, and she continues to cry for help. She is paying a wastewater treatment fee. Yet all the town can provide is a pump truck to pump sewage out of her yard from time to time.

And now, a similar design of what we know is not working is planned for the town of White Hall. This sewage lagoon will sit next to an elementary school. A member of their water board said that liability for the septic systems that are being placed in the forty homes that will be connected to the lagoon. Yet it begs one the question, how can federal money be used to buy equipment that does not come with any service or performance warranties, especially when we know they fail not only in Lowndes County, but throughout Alabama and the nation?

In nearby Montgomery, Alabama, we recently learned that numerous older black neighborhoods are not connected to the sewer, yet they pay a flat rate for water and sewer. Many are on failing septic systems that are deteriorating even more frequently because of rising water tables.

This is indicative of the sanitation inequity that exists throughout the US. I have seen more raw sewage on the streets in Centreville, Illinois that I have seen in Alabama. In Mount Vernon, New York, people are crying for help. And in Martin County, Kentucky they are asking for sanitation justice and good paying jobs as well.

The American jobs plan provides an opportunity to deal with the forgotten in rural, Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities that are

experiencing the most severe job losses, untimely deaths, poor living conditions, health crises, and climate injustice. It is an opportunity to right some wrongs and make America a model of ingenuity where we have clean air, clean water, resilient infrastructure, and good paying jobs for everyone.

With this funding should come guardrails that will ensure that Mrs. Charlie Mae will not get more sewage in her yard and home, lagoons are not built next to schools, and each onsite system or any technology sold come with the same performance and parts warranty we have come to expect from a car, a hot water heater or a heating and cooling system. The guardrails should include stringent enforcement so the people of Alabama will get relief.

I did not set out to become a climate activist, but neither did all the Civil Rights leaders I grew up around that bent the arc towards justice. We all have the power to change our communities for the better, and we should. But I also implore our leaders and policymakers to recognize the areas outside of urban centers that do not have the privilege to “flush and forget.”

I thank you for this opportunity to speak before you today. It is an honor and I look forward to continuing conversation about environmental justice and functioning wastewater systems for ALL Americans.