

6/20/2010

Written Testimony of Helene M. Pierson, Executive Director, The Heart of Camden, Inc.
www.heartofcamden.org

To the:

Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works

@ 2:30pm on 6/22/2010

Good afternoon:

My name is Helene Pierson and I am the Executive Director of The Heart of Camden, Inc. A non-profit community development corporation dedicated to improving the quality of life in an old, formerly booming, industrial neighborhood called Waterfront South in Camden, New Jersey. The industrial boom left many environmental hazards behind after the decline and eventual shutdown of a variety of industries in our neighborhood.

In Waterfront South, we have two active superfund cleanups to my knowledge. They are known as the Welsbach Gas Mantle site to our south and the Martin Aaron site to our north. In addition, we have 28 other contaminated sites in the area.

In a sense, I feel like this is the most childlike and brief report that I have ever written as an adult, which is appropriate, because it is for the children that I am here.

I'm here today not from a scientific perspective, not from a time, nor money perspective as I certainly have been around debates over best cleanup practices, I certainly feel that cleanups take too long missing entire generations of people growing up near cleanup sites, and certainly take much money.

What I am here for is to say that cleanups should not stop and should not slow down. And I am here to say that from the perspective of working in an urban City environment, there is much cleanup needed and many people living near cleanup areas and that will not change.

Our overriding mantra for our neighborhood is that we are part of America, that there is money and there is capacity here in America to ensure that no one is living in a substandard environment. We all just need to work hard to get the money and the capacity in the right place to ensure the balance.

We have worked closely at times, with the professionals assigned to both cleanups, both United States Environmental Protection Agency employees and their consultants. From our experience, the process has been transparent, professional, and careful.

What I will say, to an oversight committee from a neighborhood perspective, and this is a recommendation for more than just the Superfund process, please focus the oversight on examining the length of time, problems or inefficiencies, during the phases where no actual cleanup is taking place. There is nothing more exciting than when actual cleanup work is occurring. After all, isn't that the point. Government intervention too often becomes more about the jobs that it creates and maintaining their need versus the original intent for which the jobs were created.

Julian, Dayonnie, Octavia, and Arties to put some children's names to the point, are part of Waterfront South's current generation of children that have a right to improved conditions. Most certainly, being born into a lower-income family has challenges of its own. They don't need the government to fail them.

My understanding of this committee is that it is to examine the EPA's progress in cleaning up Superfund sites and its effects on the economy, environment, and public health.

The work is not done. Examining this system and all systems is prudent and constantly required, but if there is anything that I came for today, it is to urge you to not stop the work when there are places, like my neighborhood, where the most exciting part—actual cleanup is taking place, finally.

Addendum: The Heart of Camden has a scientific advisory board (SAB) to help us decipher all that goes on environmentally in the area. It is composed of our own Environment Director, knowledgeable persons from academic institutions, and knowledgeable personnel of a variety of government entities. We use the SAB to help us be more productive and helpful in situations such as the opportunity to testify before this committee. The following are some suggestions from one of the members who is very close to our neighborhood's issues:

Suggestions for specific opportunities for improvement of the Superfund program:

All are focused on how to get MORE cleanups done MORE quickly as follows:

- 1) Are they ranking Superfund cleanup priorities in a manner that is most protective of the public health? That is, are they making Superfund sites that are in close proximity to residential communities the very highest priority?
- 2) Obviously, funding is a very important prerequisite to proceeding with Superfund cleanups. Based on my own experience with two Superfund projects, it seems as though one hold up is that when they have identified a responsible party, they have to fight it out with those parties to determine who pays how much, BEFORE they proceed with the cleanup. That process could be accelerated if the USEPA could enter into an agreement with the disputatious responsible parties that would allow EPA to proceed with the cleanup, IN PARALLEL with the dispute resolution over responsibility, and then backbill the responsible parties in accordance with a mediated settlement.

3) Could Superfund cleanup funds be supplemented via a “Supplemental Environmental Project” program allowing funds to be allocated to local agencies with expertise such as non-profits or local government entities known for superb work to do the work. We have an existing program in our neighborhood where the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection has allowed local industry violation fines to go toward local neighborhood cleanup projects. While it has only been used once, it led to the cleanup of a small abandoned neighborhood gas station, but one that contributed significantly to blight. By allowing the agency that was fined to execute the cleanup (in this case a local county municipal utility authority), the process from idea to execution went faster and more efficiently than with complicated government processes.

4) Lastly, is there anything that USEPA can do to accelerate the cleanup of contaminated sites that fall just below the Superfund criteria, like a “Superfund Jr.” program? We have 28 other contaminated sites that fall below the Superfund criteria but still pose a significant barrier to the full recovery, and safety, of the residential community. In addition, there is a case where the State of New Jersey took over the responsibility of an adjacent plot of land to the Martin Aaron Superfund site, seemingly for economic development reasons that never materialized. It is pretty widely rumored, or likely factual to USEPA personnel working on the Martin Aaron project, that the Martin Aaron contamination is also present on some parts of the adjacent parcel, but is being ignored due to jurisdictional reasons, and indeed, now, not being addressed at all. There should be a forum to make sure politics does not prevent known problems.