

**Testimony of Catherine Coleman Flowers
To the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works
Subcommittee on Chemical Safety, Waste Management, Environmental Justice and
Regulatory Oversight
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Thank you, Chair Merkley, Ranking Member Wicker, and all the members of the Subcommittee on Chemical Safety, Waste Management, Environmental Justice and Regulatory Oversight 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. Lowndes County too has a proud history of fighting for equality and the right to vote. 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. Most of all, I stand on the values learned as a country girl that grew up with a healthy respect for nature and I appreciate what our creator has provided for us which includes the knowledge to know when we are out of balance with creation.

That failure is exemplified through fish kills, more powerful storms, higher groundwater tables in some areas, drought in other areas, floods, unsafe mobile homes, high electric bills, pollution, straight-piping of raw sewage, or failing wastewater systems. I have often taken policy makers, philanthropists, and people from both sides of the aisle from Jeff Sessions to Doug Jones to Robert Woodson to Lowndes County to see the infrastructure 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, inequality, failing or no sanitation infrastructure, and climate change come together.

The climate crisis impacts all of us. Whether one is in Louisiana which has been losing at least 25 square miles of land per year, or in Alabama where more intense tropical storms can harm housing, roads, transportation arteries, or other valuable infrastructure. Throughout our nation we are dealing with failing infrastructure, and it also includes the most basic infrastructure, sanitation. 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, the county seat of Lowndes, 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. The failure is more pronounced when there is a hard rain.

This is emblematic of failing wastewater infrastructure around the United States. It is something that we need to address, and our rural communities should not be left to their own

devices as they struggle to cope with the climate crisis and the lack of investment in sustainable infrastructure that goes back decades. Failure is repeating the same thing time and time again and expecting different results.

Despite being knowledgeable of the failures of the lagoon system, a similar design to the one in Hayneville is being planned for the town of White Hall. This sewage lagoon will sit next to an elementary school. The liability for failing septic tanks in this system will be transferred to the homeowners. This does not consider the failures that already exist here and around the nation, nor does it account for a changing climate producing more rainfall in many areas, nor does it consider the health and wellbeing of the residents or the nation. Yet it begs 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 the nation?

This is indicative of the sanitation inequity that exists throughout the US whether in Montgomery, Alabama where many older black communities are on failing septic tanks, or Martin County, Kentucky where poor white families are asking for environmental justice and good paying jobs as well. Monday, I visited the Town of Mount Vernon, New York and met families that have been unable to flush their toilets for more than twenty years. Sewage backups and floods from rainstorms are becoming more common. Two fire stations had to relocate their first responders to escape sewage backups. This is within thirty minutes of Times Square. Our infrastructure is failing. Our changing climate is magnifying the inequities.

The American Jobs Plan provides an opportunity to deal with the climate crises head on in forgotten rural, Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities that are experiencing the most

severe job losses, untimely deaths, poor living conditions, and health crises. It is a chance to right some wrongs of all marginalized communities 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 of Lowndes County or Linda McNeill from Mount Vernon, New York will not get more sewer in her yard and home, lagoons are not built next to schools, and each onsite system or any infrastructure placed in neglected communities should 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, New York, Louisiana, Texas, and wherever in our great nation working infrastructure is needed will get relief and protection from the climate crisis.

It will be neglectful not to mention Cancer Alley which sits along the Mississippi River where residents combat high cancer rates due to pollution and are one climate crisis away from a catastrophic event that could overshadow Hurricane Katrina. We can make a difference and do something now.

As a child, I learned in Sunday school that we all have the power to do good and change our communities for the better, and we should. Therefore, I implore our leaders and policymakers to recognize the areas outside of urban centers that do not have the privilege to “flush and forget,” are losing their homes to sea level rise, roads are being destroyed and their homes do not provide safe haven from extreme heat or storms. Change the formula for disaster relief to enable all Americans to receive recovery aid to include people that are renters, live on heir’s property or in rural communities that are not densely populated. Invest in clean infrastructure for all, prioritizing communities that have been left behind. And most of all, we

together must confront this climate crisis for our children, grandchildren, and the generations to come.

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 climate justice for ALL Americans.