

Anthena Gore

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TESTIMONY:

Chair Duckworth, thank you for this opportunity.

The short bio about me tells the story of what I represent and who I am today. I would like to add a small bit about where I'm from. I am from North Lawndale in Chicago. My mother is a musician who has been blind all her life; my father, an electrical technician, a tradesman who excelled so much at his craft that his opportunities was subverted. Thanks to their fighting spirit, I am an overcomer of childhood lead poisoning. These experiences underpin every point in my testimony.

Today, I am going to focus on what it means to build resilience and equity into the implementation of lead service line replacement initiatives. Among many things that could be discussed, resilience and equity in lead service line replacement will require three things: 1) a strong, effective communications and outreach network; 2) technical assistance for small, rural, and disadvantaged communities and tribal nations; and 3) an unprecedented transformational financial investment and unbiased commitment to improving local economies via workforce development innovations.

[COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH]

First, a resilient and equitable communications and outreach network knows how to reach people, connect them to resources and funding, and move actions to completion. In my experience, if the message doesn't reach the people, the money certainly will not. When I was leading a public sector energy efficiency outreach program that targeted what the state of Illinois categorized as "economically distressed communities", I learned that most decision makers wanted to know two things: 1) Who do I call? And 2) What is the next step? There was plenty of material made available via one-pagers, fact sheets, websites, and the like. However, communication moves at the speed of trust and word of mouth still made the biggest difference. Decision makers – at any level - want to hear about opportunities from people they know and trust, people they have or feel good about developing relationships with, and people that will support them as they learn about and develop new projects. For example, resilience and equity in this space could look like activating community-based and/or centralized outreach teams to form relationships with publicly owned utilities and municipal decision makers to help facilitate their access to resources and funding available. This service could help fill in gaps where there are broadband challenges at the community scale. For initiative uptake at the residential level, it could be working with community based organizations and special service consultants to offer timely, relevant, and actionable information in multiple languages, in larger prints, via TTY phone services for the hearing impaired, and even in braille for homeowners like

my mom. All of these communications and outreach efforts should acknowledge where a deep lack of trust exists between local government and community. A resilient and equitable communications network reaches people and enables them to act on and complete lead service line replacement initiatives.

[TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE]

Secondly, technical assistance for small, rural, and disadvantaged communities and tribal nations is paramount to sustain and maintain water systems located therein, and everything else that depends on and interacts with those water systems. In the wake of COVID-19, we must intentionally embrace and fortify the interdependence of our lives and economies; we cannot afford to continue extractive and exploitative practices within these communities and then turn on the heel during unprecedented times to rely on essential workers and limited tangible goods coming from these communities. It's not fair and it's not sustainable.

Water is life, and it requires a circular and curative ecosystem to sustain that life. Technical assistance for small, rural, and disadvantaged communities and tribal nations is a critical part of that ecosystem.

Resilience and equity in technical assistance requires the understanding that though it is a technical, transactional activity on its face, technical assistance requires a host of soft skills – patience, customer service, relationship management, emotional intelligence, cultural competency, collaboration, and leadership. At Elevate, we have a history of successful community engagement and outreach. We strategize with policy and utility leaders about their water affordability and lead service line replacement initiatives; we convene with water advocates to understand the plights of community issues; we visit and listen to the stories of people in homes and businesses affected by water debt and lead in water challenges; as a person who had lead poisoning at age two, I take pride in saying that Elevate has extensive experience with the childcare community – a vulnerable population to lead in water. We have learned how to be in community, when to lead and when to let community lead us.

Equitable technical assistance also includes understanding communities' experiences and orientation to their water infrastructure, in order to equip them with information to make better decisions. For some communities, this is beyond only replacing lead service lines; this is an opportunity to better define, design and install or build water infrastructure that better serves the community and the people, economies and systems interacting with that community.

Furthermore, the need for technical assistance to disadvantaged communities is vital to ensure affordable water rates. These communities are facing water bill affordability crises that range from exorbitant arrears to inability to respond to emergencies. Disadvantaged communities must be defined properly, should include input from people living the experience, and should be integrate into a technical assistance program that flags these communities to receive grants and principal forgivable loans instead of loans that would result in future rate increases and compounding stress on the residents. It is absolutely imperative that this matter is handled with

precision and care to ensure that the messages and money get to communities that need it the most.

A resilient and equitable technical assistance programs incorporates the hard and soft skills necessary to build capacity and operational efficiency in small, rural and disadvantaged communities and tribal nations such that if we were to look 10 years ahead, we see a well-maintained water system that can ensure public health and safety while meeting supply needs.

Technical assistance for small, rural, and disadvantaged communities and tribal nations is a great responsibility because, done well, is not simply transactional; it is a transference that affords the communities respect and room to realize their own agency, a state in which leaders are equipped and empowered to carry forward their unique commitments for growing and sustaining their residents and business.

[WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT]

Lastly, for communities to implement lead service line replacement initiatives, the workforce must be there to meet the demand. When I say workforce development, I mean that in the same way that one would talk about a lifecycle approach to infrastructure. The investment in human capital has to align with the investment in the physical infrastructure. We must fully assess the social infrastructure required train people, retain employment, and facilitate innovation in the water industry. Two significant things are happening in the water industry: 1) a significant number of water professionals are retiring in the next 5-10 years; and 2) this is going to have a great impact because generally there was an era of time across trade industries when people kept knowledge and information close to the chest for job security. Thinking back on how these things affected my own life, I remember when my father graduated from a technical institute and took on a job as an electrical technician. Within the year, he lost his job as an electrical technician because he was too enthusiastic. He was tracking to outpace his supervisor in knowledge and pay; therefore, he was perceived as a threat to someone else's job security. According the 2018 Brookings Institution report titled "Renewing the Water Workforce," "Water workers tend to be older and lack gender and racial diversity in certain occupations; in 2016, nearly 85 percent of them were male and two-thirds were white, pointing to a need for younger, more diverse talent." What happens newly recruited younger and/or diverse talent run into the roadblocks my father encountered? Workforce development must continue to account for how institutionalized vocational pathways intersect with race and socio-economics, and other facets of identity, such as ability or gender.

Resilient and equitable workforce development involves building support networks that will help workers endure while the country reckons with its history of inequity. At large, this could be realized through training, mentorship, pay and benefits equity, knowledge transfer and retention, professional development, and wrap-around services for those coming from hard-to-reach or citizen re-entry backgrounds. For entrepreneurs and business owners, this fair contracting, removing barriers to acquiring DBE/MBE/WBE/VBE status, better connection and

engagement with local and domestic supply and value chains; capacity building, especially to acquire and maintain general business operations specialists like accountants, lawyers, technologists and administrators who can keep the business compliant and on a path to expansion; and most importantly, hiring, retaining and growing the local workforce in their communities and putting that money back into the economies that serve that workforce. Again, I emphasize, water is life, and it requires a circular and curative ecosystem to sustain that life.

In conclusion, we must make a transformational, holistic investment in people to see the outcome of safe, affordable, and well maintained water systems. Strong communications and outreach networks, well-rounded technical assistance and sustainable workforce development initiatives are critical to getting and keeping the lead out of water for future generations to come.

Thank you for your ear and your leadership on these pressing and complex issues.