

Statement of Sylvia E. Johnson
Nominee for Member, Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board
Before the
Senate Committee on the Environment and Public Works
Subcommittee on Chemical Safety, Waste Management, Environmental Justice, and
Regulatory Oversight
July 29, 2021

Chairman Merkley, Ranking Member Wicker, and Members of the Subcommittee, I am Sylvia Johnson. I would like to first thank you for the opportunity to appear before you for my nomination by the President to the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB).

With me today is my big brother Anthony, who retired after 29 years with the U.S. Air Force at the top of the enlisted ranks as a Chief Master Sergeant. My other two brothers, Mike and Kenneth, are joining via live stream.

I grew up in rural North Carolina, raised by my parents, Herbert and Annie Johnson, who believed in the dignity of hard work and instilled the same belief in us. Although they did not have the opportunity to go to college, they understood the value of education and ensured that we could graduate from college and pursue our goals.

My parents are deceased, but their influence on me is indelible. My mother worked in a shirt factory, and I remember her coming home covered in cotton dust every day. Unfortunately, she became ill and had to quit her job. I remember her sleeping in a chair due to a debilitating lung condition that made breathing difficult. Watching my mother suffer and witnessing her death at the age of 61 left me wishing her work environment had been safer. There were no federal protections, regulations, or even recommendations during her time at the factory. My mother's experience inspired me to search for answers, become an occupational epidemiologist, and endeavor to make factory working conditions safer.

Passion for public service is as deeply engrained in me as passion for science. My dad exemplified service to family, community, and country. He served in the military during the Korean War, in a segregated Army, but that did not diminish his pride in serving. After leaving the Army, for the next 60-plus years, he was a small business owner—first in logging and then in trucking. He also served as a County Commissioner in Bladen County, North Carolina for 12 years and was Chairman of the Board during his final term. My dad's dedication to community and country continue to motivate me to improve others' lives.

I am honored and humbled to be nominated. If confirmed, I will be guided by the principles that have defined my training and career: improving and protecting public health and safety for all people.

My work in this area spans more than two decades, starting with earning a Master of Science

degree in Biomedical Engineering with a concentration in Industrial Hygiene. As a doctoral student, I researched the health effects of lead poisoning in young children. My professional experience includes investigating industrial manufacturing accidents, hazard recognition and mitigation, and understanding the connections between government agencies and health and safety.

As an Occupational Epidemiologist in the Health and Safety Department for the International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW), I conducted workplace hazard assessments and investigated incidents involving worker deaths due to chemical, biological, or physical exposures. I have sat with grieving workers who lost a colleague to an industrial accident, and it is a gut-wrenching experience. In every hazard investigation I led, I worked with management to fix unsafe conditions so that employees were protected, and the work continued.

I have worked on legislative efforts to assist those who were sickened by contaminated drinking water in Flint, Michigan. Given that my doctoral dissertation research was focused on childhood lead poisoning, I was all too familiar with the health risks of lead poisoning and how the government could assist in addressing this crisis.

Most recently, as a legislative representative with the National Education Association (NEA), I am part of a health and safety team focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on educating NEA members on the safety and efficacy of vaccines so they can make informed decisions about the vaccine and protect themselves and their students.

Health and safety issues remain a tenet of my career in legislation and advocacy. For me, promoting adequate funding for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency has always been a priority. These agencies must have the resources to carry out their crucial work.

If confirmed to the CSB, I dedicate myself to its mission to “drive chemical safety change through independent investigation to protect people and the environment.” This aligns with my personal calling and is a tribute to what I learned from my parents: Workplaces must be safe and healthy, and service to others is a privilege and an obligation.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I look forward to answering your questions.