United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 28, 2020

Kurt Thiede
Region 5 Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
77 West Jackson Boulevard
Chicago, IL 60604-3590

Dear Administrator Thiede:

On behalf of our constituents, we write to request your assistance in ensuring that the residents of Centreville, Illinois are free from the devastating flooding and sanitary sewer issues that have plagued their community for decades. Senator Duckworth had a chance to witness the deplorable conditions in Centreville and hear the heartbreaking stories of residents firsthand during a visit to the community on July 16. The issues plaguing this community require immediate action. Specifically, we request that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 5 Office investigate what regional solutions are available for Centreville as we pursue a whole-government approach to addressing the environmental justice challenges faced there. We also request your assistance in ensuring enforcement of our environmental laws to protect Centreville residents. Finally, we request EPA's assistance in conducting drinking water testing and sampling for this community, as well as investigation into the condition of the drinking water distribution system allegedly serving Centreville, as most residents are dependent on bottled water due to concerns of contamination.

Centreville is located adjacent to East St. Louis and is a low income, largely elderly and 99 percent Black community that faces chronic storm water flooding and sanitary sewage issues, which has destroyed the homes in which residents have invested, prevented them from enjoying the natural beauty of their area, and posed challenges to their health. Residents in this community check their yards daily for raw sewage and drink only bottled water due to concerns that their sewage backups may have contaminated their drinking water supply; they are also generally concerned about the taste, smell and appearance of their drinking water. This sewage problem is in part due to nonfunctioning or barely functioning pump stations that should pump sewage away from homes, as well as crumbling sewage pipes. Further, the community's storm water ditches and overall infrastructure are overwhelmed by even light rains, and have needed attention and maintenance for several decades.

According to our constituents in Centreville, this problem has been persistent for at least two decades with residents regularly calling and filing complaints directed to their wastewater utility, Commonfields of Cahokia ("Commonfields"). Yet to our knowledge, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency has been largely absent in taking enforcement action against the utility on Centreville residents' behalf, even though it has taken action against Commonfields on behalf of residents of nearby Belleville that resulted in system improvements for those residents. We also

understand that these issues are not limited to Centreville, but impact many similarly situated residents and communities in the Metro East region, including Cahokia, a municipality that is also predominantly Black. It has been brought to our attention that constituents in East St. Louis and Cahokia have similar issues that have gone long unaddressed. At the same time, these communities' water systems are directly connected to the water infrastructure in Centreville, likely causing or aggravating Centreville's problems and tying the communities together in joint deprivation.

The urgent public health crisis our constituents are facing – made even worse by the COVID epidemic hitting Centreville and the rest of Metro East particularly hard – demands action. We urge EPA Region 5 to consider deploying regional solutions in the Metro East Region, considering the scope of the problem. This Region 5 effort could include enhanced monitoring and enforcement actions that will ensure a full characterization of the problem and identification of solutions; bring necessary parties to the table; and maximize access to technical and monetary resources for a solution.

Furthermore, as noted above, residents currently lack security in the safety of their drinking water due to concerns with bacterial contamination as well as taste, odors and appearance. They rely on the Urban League of Metro St. Louis to secure bottled water and pay large sums of money to buy bottled water instead of using water from their taps. We urge Region 5 to provide assistance in monitoring and sampling Centreville's drinking water to better assess health risks and non-compliance, a particular concern during the COVID-19 epidemic. This data will inform the best corrective action and ensure safe, clean drinking water to Centreville residents.

Thank you for considering our request. If you and your staff have any questions, please feel free to reach out to Radha_Adhar@duckworth.senate.gov and Gina_Mazzuca@durbin.senate.gov.

Sincerely,

Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator

Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator