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Chairman Eric Schmitt, Ranking Member Welch, and Distinguished Members of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. It is an honor and solemn responsibility to address this esteemed body during a time of great consequence for our nation and its ongoing commitment to equity, justice, and democracy.

I am Robert Stewart, Jr., a proud native and current resident of historic Selma, Alabama. I serve as the State Senator for Alabama's 23rd District—home to the storied counties of Lowndes, Dallas, Wilcox, Perry, and others in the heart of the Alabama Black Belt.

This testimony today is rooted in the lived experiences of the people I represent—descendants of enslaved Americans, veterans of the civil rights struggle, and rural families who have not yet realized the full promise of the democracy they helped forge.

I begin by invoking the words and legacy of President Lyndon B. Johnson, who declared a War on Poverty during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Tragically, I come before you today to declare that we have shifted from a war on poverty to a war on the poor.

In the Alabama Black Belt, including Lowndes County—where citizens risked their lives to build a multiracial democracy—our communities are still fighting for the basic rights that define human dignity and American citizenship. These rights include clean water, functional sewage, equitable education, livable wages, and the protection of civil liberties.

Let us remember: It was the people of Lowndes County—Black farmers, teachers, and veterans—who advanced the cause of American democracy by demanding not only the right to vote, but also protections against land theft, wage theft, state-sanctioned violence, and the right to self-determination. They understood that the ballot box alone could not uproot inequality without accompanying justice in housing, health, labor, and infrastructure.

Today, that same region suffers from conditions that would shock the conscience. In 2017, a report by the United Nations revealed the presence of hookworm—a disease long considered eradicated in the developed world—due to failing wastewater infrastructure in Lowndes County. Families were exposed to raw sewage because septic systems had collapsed, and outdated policies left them without solutions.

Thanks to the dedicated work of Congresswoman Terri Sewell, President Joe Biden, and even bipartisan efforts during President Trump's first term, investments were finally made in wastewater infrastructure across rural America. Yet, we now face a devastating reversal of that progress due to the rescinding of vital funding.

I wish to commend Ms. Sherry Bradley and the Black Belt Unincorporated Wastewater Program, whose tireless efforts have connected hundreds of families across the Black Belt to working sewage systems in record time. But this momentum will stall without restored federal support.

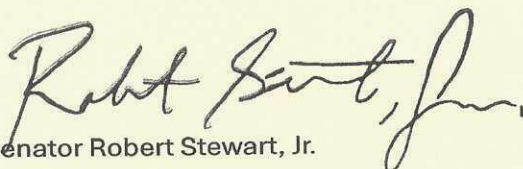
As we gather here to discuss civil rights and illegal discrimination, let us not overlook the structural discrimination of neglect—of treating rural, Black, and poor communities as an afterthought. That, too, is a violation of civil rights.

DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives are not preferences or perks—they are attempts to rectify generations of exclusion and ensure equal access to opportunity. To eliminate these efforts under the guise of enforcing civil rights is to misinterpret history and undermine justice.

I urge this subcommittee to look beyond rhetoric and into the realities of rural America. Restoring wastewater funding, protecting voting rights, supporting DEI programs, and fulfilling the unfinished promise of our democracy are not partisan ideals—they are American imperatives.

In the words of those who marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma 60 years ago, "We must build the beloved community." That community cannot stand if its foundations are cracked by inequality and indifference.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



Senator Robert Stewart, Jr.