

Testimony of

Keshia Anderson

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Written Testimony

Hearing Before the Senate Judiciary Committee

on

Protecting the Right to Vote: Oversight of the Department of Justice's Preparations for the 2008 General Election

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Senator Cardin and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, it is a privilege to be here today to share my experience attempting to vote in Chesterfield County, Virginia during the 2008 Presidential Primary on February 12.

Background

My name is Keshia Anderson. I'm not a public person. I'm a mother and school teacher and never thought I'd be in front of United States Senators.

I was born and raised in Virginia; graduated from high school in Chesterfield County in 1992; and earned a college degree at Virginia State University. I currently teach special education students in Richmond, Virginia.

Chesterfield County begins just outside the City of Richmond, stretching mostly south and west. It has a bigger population and is wealthier than most Virginia counties, but not where I vote. My precinct has a larger African American population than most areas of the County.

I agreed to come here today and tell you about what happened to me when I tried to vote because of what my grandmother, may she rest in peace, taught me by word and example. She cherished the right

to vote. My grandmother cleaned houses. She took extra jobs to save up so she could pay the Virginia poll tax and ensure that she and her family could vote. She had to ride the bus 25 minutes to get to her voting precinct, and she sometimes brought a wheelchair-bound elderly aunt with her so that she could vote too.

When I went to vote in this year's historic presidential primary, like my mother used to do with me, I brought my 7-year-old son, who was learning about Susan B. Anthony and the suffrage movement in school.

I want to try to ensure that what happened to me and so many others in Chesterfield County does not happen again. I am `hoping that the Department of Justice will take action.

Trying to Vote on Primary Day

The polls were open from 6 AM to 7 PM for the February presidential primary election.

Here's what happened to me.

I heard from my mother, who votes at the same Chesterfield County elementary school as I do. She told me that at 6:15 AM there already was a long line, stretching from the cafeteria out into the hall.

I first arrived to vote around 7:30 AM with my son, before work. The parking was so bad and the voting line so long, that we decided to try again later.

Around 5 PM, we drove through the rain back to our precinct. The situation was no better. The parking lot was so full that people were parked on the grass and along the road. Inside, the line was huge, even longer than before. It could have been 200 voters, extending from the jam-packed cafeteria where voting occurs, out into the hallway and all the way down to the classrooms. Most of the people waiting to vote were African Americans.

The line moved slowly. After more than an hour, as my son and I got nearer to the front, the line stopped moving. We weren't told why. We were just told to wait. I was growing frustrated. My son was getting hungry. His experience was not what I had hoped, and my job meant that I still had papers to grade that evening.

I noticed that some people on line were leaving without voting, sometimes saying they just couldn't afford to wait, or couldn't stand long enough. One lady near us explained that she had paid extra money to have her son stay late at day care so that she could vote. But after waiting in line for more than an hour, and not knowing how much longer was needed, she had to leave without voting to pick him up. Another lady brought her mentally challenged daughter with her. They also had to leave without voting. A third woman said that there were no chairs to rest on and her handicapped husband was waiting in the car until she got to the front, but they both left without voting.

My son and I continued to wait after the line stopped moving. Then something happened that seemed really absurd: one poll worker announced that anyone voting Republican could go straight to the front of the line and vote. I watched as some of the white voters who were there responded by coming out of the long line of mostly African-American voters and proceeded directly to the front tables, no longer having to wait. Shocked and frustrated, I asked "why?" A poll worker at the precinct explained that the precinct had run out of Democratic ballots.

The poll worker then went into another room. I thought she was going to pick up more ballots. But she returned with computer paper instead, the old kind with holes and perforated lines on the side. She explained that she had been trying to get more Democratic ballots from the County all day. She tore the paper in pieces for use as ballots. She told Democratic voters to handwrite the name of our choice for president on the scraps of computer paper. She said our votes would count. She also gave me a phone number I could call with any complaints about the new voting procedure. A name like Barack Obama was probably spelled many different ways that night.

At about 6:30 PM, I finally was called to the table. Assured by the precinct worker that my vote would count, I wrote my candidate's name on the torn piece of computer paper and put it in the very full ballot box. Then I went home. Some voters stayed around, hoping regular ballots might still arrive.

Just before 7 PM, I received a call from my son's coach, who was behind us in line, saying that State Troopers brought 45 more real ballots and that the handwritten ballots would not count. I was too far away to get back before the polls closed, and I also knew that 45 ballots weren't nearly enough for all the people who were still in line behind me.

Later, I read in the newspaper that I was one of 299 voters across several precincts who were given scrap paper to vote on and that these votes did not count.

Many voters in my precinct were driven away even before they had to decide whether to stay and vote on scrap paper. Overcoming bad weather, job, and family care challenges were just the beginning-- the obstacle course placed in front of us still included overcrowded and unavailable parking, enormous voter lines and long delays, a lack of chairs to rest on, shortages of Democratic ballots, a lack of information, and new scrap paper voting procedures. Many of us-- and in my precinct there is no question that most of us on line that evening were African Americans-- were deprived of our right to vote, even if we did absolutely everything asked of us, whether reasonable or not. I came to the precinct twice to try to vote, watched white Republican voters moved to the front of a long line of mainly African American voters, and followed very troubling instructions to write the name of my presidential candidate on torn computer paper after assurances that it would count.

I am deeply upset and angry that there were so many barriers and that my vote didn't count in an historic presidential primary election-- between a woman and an African American. This election drew unprecedented participation everywhere. I don't know if my grandmother could have imagined such a contest, or if she could, that I would have been unable to cast a ballot in it and have it count.

I hope the lesson that my son and so many other voters learn is not that it's easy for someone to take away our precious right to vote.