

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM & SANITATION CRISIS IN CAHOKIA HEIGHTS, ILLINOIS

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I. SUMMARY

Centreville, a small city of about 5,000 people, across the river from St. Louis, continues to experience severe violations of the human right to sanitation despite decades of fighting. On May 6, 2021, Centreville ceased to exist as an independent city and was incorporated into the new city of Cahokia Heights.¹ The population of Cahokia Heights is predominantly African American, with Black residents making up 75% of the community, and a poverty rate nearing 42%. Whenever it rains, the streets of Centreville are flooded, not only with water but with a brown tide of raw sewage that infiltrates homes, backyards and even drinking water.² For decades, the pump stations designed to pump sewage away from homes and the poorly maintained aging infrastructure have caused raw sewage to flood streets and homes when it rains.³ Climate change and development in neighboring areas has only made the sewage and flooding situation worse. The flooding situation is so severe that people have resorted to using boats for emergency evacuation when it rains.⁴ The smell of raw sewage fills the air, and bits of soggy toilet paper and slicks of human waste cling to the grass in neighborhoods. A large portion of the community has not drunk the water from their taps for many years due to poor water quality and becoming ill from the water. The persistent sewer overflows have created a public health crisis exposing residents to contaminated water and disease-causing bacteria. Living in close contact with raw sewage has led to ongoing health problems, including gastrointestinal illnesses and breathing difficulties from indoor mold.⁵

¹ *History of Cahokia, Centreville & Alorton*, Cahokia Heights, <https://cahokiaheightsil.us/cahokia-heights-history/>.

² Adam Mahoney, *The Sewage Crisis Drowning America's Poorest Town*, Capital B (Dec. 12, 2024), <https://capitalbnews.org/cahokia-heights-illinois-sewage-americas-poorest-town/>.

³ Id.

⁴ Id.

⁵ *Infection Risk from Work with Sewage*, WorkSafe, <https://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/safety-and-prevention/hazards/hazardous-exposures/biological-hazards/infection-risks-from-work-with-sewage>.

For the last decade, and even longer for some, the residents have urged their local government officials, state and federal government officials, the United States Environmental Protection Agency, and St. Clair County, to repair Centreville's failing sewage system.⁶ Despite decades of complaints, government officials have failed to take meaningful actions to address these inhumane conditions.⁷

Everyone is entitled to affordable and accessible sanitation that is safe, hygienic, secure, and culturally acceptable, ensuring privacy and dignity.⁸ Sanitation is a very personal and private matter, one that is closely linked to human dignity.⁹ Access to sanitation extends beyond an individual's right, as the lack of proper sanitation leads to the contamination of the environment, public spaces, and water bodies through feces and wastewater, and reflects a denial of freedom from racial discrimination.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the residents of Centreville have been denied this basic dignity for decades. This creates a public health crisis that threatens the lives and wellbeing of everyone in the community, violating their human rights to health, life, and a safe environment.

⁶ Bala Sivaraman, *In the Heartland, Human Waste Floods Homes*, Earthjustice, (July, 17, 2020), <https://earthjustice.org/article/sewage-flooding-centreville-illinois-environmental-justice>.

⁷ Id.

⁸ *Checklist on Human Rights to Water & Sanitation for Small Scale Providers*, Human Right 2 Water, <https://humanright2water.org/2133-2/#:~:text=The%20human%20rights%20to%20water%20and%20sanitation%20entitle%20everyone%20to,of%20life%2C%20that%20is%20safe%2C>.

⁹ Inga T. Winkler, *The Human Right to Sanitation*, 37 U. Pa. J. Int'l L. 1331 (2016), <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1927&context=jil>.

¹⁰ Id.

II. TESTIMONIALS

“I believe we should not have to live in raw sewage, without working bathrooms, and that we should be able to drink the water in our homes,” said Michael Johnson, a resident of Cahokia Heights since 1987. Since the 1990s, Mr. Johnson’s family home has experienced flooding and sewage back



up because of stormwater and sewage overflows in his neighborhood. “I designed and had our house built so it would be the perfect retreat for us and our family,” he says, “[b]ut the flooding and raw sewage has caused us problems for so long, we don’t remember what it was like to truly enjoy the home.”

“[W]e have a natural right to have a clean place to live and clean water to drink,” said Mr. Leon Spruell. Mr. Spruell has lived in Centreville for over 40 years and has witnessed firsthand the devastating impact of the community’s failing sanitation system. As a member and Assistant Secretary of Centreville Citizens for Change (CCC), he has worked tirelessly to secure grant funding and advocated before local government officials to address the storm water and sewage overflows affecting residents.

Living near Grand Marais Lake, Mr. Spruell has fished there for over 50 years since he was a child. It was once a place where he, and many others in the community could go to catch food and enjoy time on the water. But that is no longer possible. A sewage overflow pipe on North 82nd Street regularly spews raw sewage into a ditch that runs through a few neighbor’s properties. Mr. Spruell has seen the sewage bubbling up from the pipe into the ditch, which then

drains into a Canal, ultimately contaminating Grand Marais Lake. What was once a local fishing spot has become polluted and unsafe.

Beyond the lake, Mr. Spruell and other residents constantly deal with raw sewage spilling into their yards and streets. Whenever it rains, sewage backs up into homes, making toilets completely unusable for days or even weeks at a time. Residents have had to seek alternative solutions like camping toilets just to meet their basic needs. Plumbers have repeatedly confirmed that the issue stems from the City's failing sewage structure, yet no meaningful action has been taken to repair the system.



“It is inhumane to have a community live in an environment with raw sewage and storm water overflowing almost every time it rains. Not only is my health affected but my home ha[s] been destroyed before my very eyes due to years of the devastating environmental injustice impact,” said

Ms. Yvette Lyles, a resident of Centreville for 31 years.

She currently serves as the secretary for Centreville Citizens for Change, which is a nonprofit organization advocating for the rights to water and sanitation in Centreville since 2018.

Her home has been severely affected by sewage backups multiple times. One of the most disastrous events occurred in 1997 when her home was flooded by a combination of raw sewage and stormwater, leaving it filled with



foul-smelling water and causing extensive damage. Ms. Lyles and her family were trapped in her home for two days, surrounded by giant bodies of brownish water. Despite her best efforts to protect her home from further damage, the sewage-filled water seeped into every room, destroying furniture, flooring appliances, and even her HVAC system.

This initial flood was just the beginning for Ms. Lyles, as the area continued to suffer from frequent flooding, leading to severe financial hardship and health problems. Over the years, the flooding has caused severe damage to her foundation, broken beams, and ruined walls and floors. The persistent environmental issues, including contaminated water and unaddressed storm drains, have left her home in a constant state of despair. Despite repeated calls to the city for help, she has received no support, and her home continues to deteriorate. The flooding and poor sanitation conditions have contributed to ongoing respiratory issues and infections for her family, further complicating her life. Ms. Lyles has tried to clean up the mess herself, using protective gear to shovel out debris and disinfect the property. However, she has been diagnosed with sinus infections, bronchitis, and adult-onset asthma, which became chronic.

III. DOMESTIC LEGAL FRAMEWORK & INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS

1. The United States is party to several international human rights treaties, including the CERD, the ICCPR, and the CAT. The U.S. has yet to ratify the CEDAW, the CRC, the CED, the CRPD, ICESCR, or ICRMW. The CERD prohibits racial discrimination and guarantees health and basic services without discrimination.
2. In 2010, the UN recognized the essential human right to water and sanitation in GA resolution 64/292.¹¹ However, the U.S. has yet to recognize resolution 64/292 as binding nor have they recognized the right to water and sanitation as an essential human right.¹²
3. The U.S. received several recommendations related to the recognition of the human right to clean water and sanitation without discrimination during the second cycle of the UPR in 2015.¹³ The U.S. accepted the recommendations in part, stating “The U.S. is not a party to the ICESCR, and we understand [the recommendations] as referencing a right to safe drinking water and sanitation, derived from the right to an adequate standard of living. We continue to improve our domestic laws and policies to promote access to housing, food, health, and safe drinking water and sanitation, with the aim of decreasing poverty and preventing discrimination.”¹⁴
4. The U.S. regulates wastewater at the federal level through the Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”) by using the Clean Water act (“CWA”).¹⁵ The CWA aims to eradicate pollution by regulating the discharge of sewage and other pollutants providing the minimum standard for regulating water quality.¹⁶

¹¹ See G.A. Res. 64/292, ¶ 1, U.N. Doc. A/Res/64/292 (3 August 2010).

¹² See Sofija Korac, *Explanation of Position for the Human Rights to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation Resolution*, UNITED STATES MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS, 15 November 2021.

¹³ See Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review*, 14 September 2015.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ See 33 U.S.C. §§ 1251-1387.

¹⁶ *Id.*

5. The U.S. government primarily delegates the regulation of sanitation to state and tribal laws.¹⁷ However, the federal and state legislation is limited, ineffective, and inconsistently applied across each state and municipality.¹⁸ Current federal, state, and local legislation places the burden of sanitation management on households which disparately affects marginalized, low-income communities.¹⁹

IV. RECOMMENDED QUESTIONS

1. What resources is the U.S. government devoting to investigating and alleviating the racially disparate impacts of state and local government decisions regarding water and sanitation infrastructure?
2. What policies exist to identify and address racial and socio-economic disparities in access to clean water and proper sanitation infrastructure?
3. What measures has the U.S. government taken to ensure meaningful involvement of the communities and individuals most impacted by lack of adequate sanitation services?
4. What steps has the U.S government taken to ensure that all communities have access to clean water and adequate sanitation?

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Re-allocate government funding to create programs for temporary assistance in housing, healthcare, and basic needs for those living in unsanitary environments.
2. Ensure meaningful involvement of the communities and individuals most impacted in the implementation of sanitation policies, legislation, and programs.
3. Officially recognize the basic human rights to safe water and sanitation.

¹⁷ See *Closing the U.S. Sanitation Equity Gap: Exploring Opportunities to Learn from the Global Sanitation Sector Experience*, GLOBAL COMMUNITIES, January 2022.

¹⁸ Id.

¹⁹ Id.

4. Implement programs and legislation focused on preventing future discrimination of marginalized communities impacted by lack of sanitation.
5. Eliminate sanitation laws and policies that place the burden of sanitation management on primarily marginalized households.
6. Create a monitoring system of communities primarily impacted by lack of access to sanitation to increase government accountability.