



March 8, 2023

The Honorable Thomas R. Carper
Chair
Committee on Environment & Public Works
406 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito
Ranking Member
Committee on Environment & Public Works
406 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chair Carper and Ranking Member Capito:

As President and CEO of the Hip Hop Caucus, I thank you for hosting this hearing to shine a light on the role of corporate greed and government inaction that led to the toxic petrochemical disaster in East Palestine, Ohio. This hearing is important to continue needed conversations and hopefully force necessary action. Extensive news coverage has laid the foundation for questioning Norfolk Southern's lack of safety controls while carrying deadly petrochemicals, including vinyl chloride, directly through residential neighborhoods. Media have also taken on government inaction and corporate capture by both Democrat and Republican Administrations, and particularly zeroed in on the relaxing of rail safety rules by the prior Administration. We look forward to the committee raising questions on these aspects of the crisis to the panelists, which includes the U.S. Senators from Ohio and Pennsylvania as well as the CEO of Norfolk Southern and some of the U.S. agencies responding to this disaster.

As part of our effort to uplift the voices of those most impacted by this disaster, the Hip Hop Caucus has been on the ground in East Palestine and the surrounding communities, meeting with local advocates and observing the adverse impacts of this crisis as well as the ongoing legacy of pollution. We also launched a [petition](#) to stop the expansion of the petrochemical industry and highlight environmental justice issues in East Palestine that has over 50K signatures. From this perspective, we would urge the committee to hold additional hearings to allow environmental justice organizations to bear their firsthand perspective, to question officials on the adverse health impacts of petrochemicals including whether they should be manufactured or transported at all.



Petrochemicals are being used as Big Oil’s last lifeline and are on track to replace coal in terms of emissions that contribute to climate change. Petrochemicals, like the vinyl chloride in transit during the Norfolk Southern train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, contribute to serious health and environmental risks for all communities but especially impact Black, Brown and low-income communities. Petrochemicals contribute to liver, brain and lung cancers, as well as increased likelihood of leukemia, chronic respiratory conditions, nose bleeds in animals and children. Chemicals from the derailment have spilled into the Ohio River, affecting the water supply for 25 million people in the region.

In East Palestine, residents and organizers going door-to-door to provide relief services are still feeling the impacts weeks later. Independent analysts have debunked some of the monitoring that had led people to believe the air, soil, and water were safe by CTEH, a toxicology company hired by Norfolk Southern, as well as sampling done by government agencies. Despite a mountain of evidence to the health impacts of exposure to these chemicals, the petrochemical industry continues to flourish in Texas, Louisiana, and the Ohio River Valley where many of these facilities are located. This disaster has exposed how petrochemical expansion brings those concerns to the backyards of millions of Americans.

While on the ground, Hip Hop Caucus met with frontline groups currently impacted by Petrochemicals and threatened by future build out. In Beaver County, Pennsylvania, just 30 minutes from East Palestine, flaring from the Shell Monaca Plant creates fireballs visible for miles turning the sky brown and orange. The plant is situated directly on the river and residents living in brand new houses within a stone's throw are now seeking to sell their homes. At the far end of Columbiana County, Ohio, – the same county as East Palestine – residents of East Liverpool are being forced to breathe the remnants from the derailment as it is being transported to their local incinerator which already contributes to numerous long-term health hazards. These stories of people being exposed to petrochemicals for the profit of others unfortunately are not unique. Across south Louisiana and southeast Texas communities are dealing with similar environmental injustices, yet they continue to be overlooked as sacrifice zones. The Hip Hop Caucus is determined to bring these and other untold stories to the foreground in order to highlight the gravity of our reality and how communities are suffering because of this nation’s dependence on petrochemicals.



We know communities do not want these cancer-causing chemicals in their backyard. During a [national press conference](#) hosted by the Hip Hop Caucus, Shamyra Lavigne from Rise St. James, a Louisiana advocacy group based in so-called cancer alley, said as much. Jennifer Hadayia from Air Alliance Houston noted how people there know what it is like to live in the shadow of petrochemicals and yet the state government does nothing about it.

We challenge this committee to hold additional meetings to highlight the firsthand accounts of these advocates and community groups. We also challenge the committee to question the government and corporate interests at this hearing about the impacts of petrochemicals writ large on frontline communities, whether petrochemicals should be produced at all, and what can be done to protect frontline communities from the adverse health and environmental impacts of these man-made carcinogens in Ohio and across the country.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Rev. Lennox Yearwood, Jr.", written over a light blue horizontal line.

Rev. Lennox Yearwood, Jr.
President and CEO
Hip Hop Caucus

The Hip Hop Caucus (the Caucus) is a 21st Century social justice and civil rights organization that utilizes culture to help educate and engage BIPOC communities and ultimately work toward our own liberation. We span Gen Z, Millennials and Gen X communities and networks across the United States and globally. The Caucus works with our members through multifaceted efforts to organize grassroots communities and mobilize the Hip Hop generation on issues of environmental justice, voting rights, criminal justice, policing reform, economic justice, education and more.