



**July 27, 2022**

Dr. Sharunda D. Buchanan  
Interim Director

Arsenio Mataka  
Senior Advisor on Climate Change and Health Equity

Office of Environmental Justice  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Room 716G  
Washington, DC 20201

Re: Virginia Environmental Justice Issue

Dear Dr. Buchanan and Mr. Mataka,

We are excited to learn of President Biden's efforts to expand environmental justice with U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' new Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ). We are hopeful to see positive changes with its instatement. With OEJ's stated purpose to "undertake actions that seek to directly improve the well-being of underserved communities," the Healthcare Equality Network is writing to bring to your attention an issue that could gravely affect residents of Cumberland County, Virginia, in hopes that you will be a champion for this underserved community.

As a network dedicated to securing equal, quality access to healthcare for Black Americans, Healthcare Equality Network is partnering with AMMD Pine Grove Project and other local advocacy groups to fight back against environmental injustice in Cumberland County, Virginia. We felt this issue would be of particular interest to the OEJ.

Currently, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) is reviewing a proposal for the development of the [Green Ridge Mega-Landfill](#) in Cumberland County, Virginia. This mega-landfill is proposed to operate 24 hours a day, six days a week and add 500 daily tractor-trailers to local roads, jeopardizing the air quality, access to clean water, and residential land value for the roughly 10,000 residents of Cumberland County. Not only does the mega-landfill harm the community's health and local businesses, but it is also proposed to be placed next to a historical landmark – the Pine Grove Elementary School, built in 1917 – that is treasured by the surrounding community.

This school is a testament to the many challenges Black communities have conquered over generations, as it was one of the thousands of "[Rosenwald Schools](#)" constructed in the South to educate Black children in the Jim Crow Era. Just last summer, the Pine Gove School was identified as [one of America's 11 most endangered historic places](#). Developing a mega-landfill in such close proximity to Pine Grove is

disrespectful to the ongoing perseverance of this community. Given your prior work to ensure equitable access to education, we felt this issue would be of particular interest to you.

The [Virginia Environmental Justice Act of 2020](#) defines environmental justice as, “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of every person, regardless of race, color, national origin, income, faith, or disability, regarding the development, implementation, or enforcement of any environmental law, regulation, or policy.” It also defines “fair treatment” as “the equitable consideration of all people whereby no group of people bears a disproportionate share of any negative environmental consequence resulting from an industrial, governmental, or commercial operation, program, or policy.”

It would be safe to say that the mega-landfill and its potential local impacts do not respect the concepts of environmental justice or fair treatment as codified in our state’s and the OEJ’s statutes. That is why our local organizations have been tirelessly working to stop this project. Implementation and enforcement of environmental justice laws, as they pertain to proposals like the Green Ridge mega-landfill, are critical to protecting our nation’s most vulnerable communities. Without enforcement, these laws and policies are simply virtue signaling and hollow.

As part of the review process, in March 2022, the DEQ held a [public informational meeting](#) in Cumberland County to provide locals a chance to engage with regulators and decision makers. However, in the face of overwhelming resident concerns about the mega-landfill’s detrimental effects on their wellbeing, including pollution of their private water wells, worsened air quality and unsafe pedestrian routes due to increased oversized traffic, the DEQ repeatedly hid behind regulatory scientific technicalities that do not prioritize environmental justice for those living nearby. We urge you to reject this behavior and instead stand firmly against this project, in the name of environmental justice and the prosperity of the Cumberland County community.

Underserved communities are already disproportionately burdened by the challenges of COVID-19 and approving this mega-landfill’s proposal will crumble this community. Cumberland County increasingly needs public support against this proposal. Residents need to know their government leaders have their best interests at heart. While we can’t change environmental injustice overnight, we can make positive lasting change one community at a time.

We kindly request that the OEJ shares its public support of our efforts, and the rejection of this project that will have unintended consequences on the community’s health, quality of life and local economy.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

#### **Members of the Healthcare Equality Network**

**Reverend J.R. Gurley**, Frederick Douglass Foundation, Virginia Chapter

**Dr. Benjamin Chavis**, National Newspaper Publisher Association

**Southern Christian Leadership Conference**, Virginia Chapter