

Opening Statement of Devon Westhill
Nominee for Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Agriculture
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
April 29, 2025

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and distinguished members of the Committee:

It is the honor of my life to get the chance to testify before you today, and I thank President Trump for that. This is the second time he has entrusted me with the honor and duty to head the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (OASCR) at USDA. If I am fortunate enough to be confirmed, I would cherish the opportunity to work under the leadership of Secretary Rollins and alongside numerous wonderful people with whom I served in President Trump's first term—including career officials—and many tremendous new colleagues like Luke Lindberg.

But that would not be possible without the support of my little family who have stuck by me since day one, and who are here with me today. Allow me to introduce them.

It is such an honor to be here because I have spent my entire career dedicated to the public interest via nonprofit leadership and government service. This is the fourth time I have volunteered to serve my country. The first was as a teenager in the United States Navy, the second was at the U.S. Department of Labor, and the third was within the very office to which I am nominated to lead again. My principal aim in all these endeavors was to be a small part of our shared project to form a more perfect Union. Specific to the role for which I am interviewing today, that means ensuring civil rights protection, equal opportunity, and equal justice under the law for all.

That mission is deeply personal to me. I was born a poor black child and raised in the South alongside my two siblings by our single mother. It was hardscrabble. But being born into tough circumstances is not at all unusual, of course. In fact, it is what the vast majority of mankind has experienced. But for my siblings and me, we had two things that made all the difference in our lives compared to untold numbers of others. We had an extraordinary mother who loved us, who wanted the best for us, and who set an outstanding example for us, and we were Americans.

Like my heroes Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington who came before me, I have learned that in America the mere connection with race, color, or ethnicity, or ones starting point in life will not permanently carry an individual forward unless he has individual worth nor finally hold an individual back if he possesses intrinsic, individual merit. So long as we do not permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities, the sky is the limit in this country. I am living proof of that. That is the true history of America and the crux of the American Dream. We must keep it that way. I have been a voice for this perspective for a long time, and hope to continue to be.

If I am confirmed, I want to pick up where I left off in focusing OASCR on its core duties: Communicating from the top to the bottom that civil rights will be vigorously enforced at USDA, being laser focused on improving its core complaint processing work, and ensuring the development and deployment of effective proactive prevention measures. We were very

successful in the first term in this regard, for example: We improved the timeliness of EEO complaint investigations from 61% to 100% within 3 months of my arrival, we grew a Model EEO Program pursuant to EEOC requirements from 61% to 85% within 6 months of my arrival, and prior to my departure, we developed and implemented new department-wide civil rights, anti-harassment, and reasonable accommodation policies.

Should the Senate confirm me as Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at USDA, you may be surprised to learn, it will be only the first time since the Obama administration that a senate-confirmed leader will have headed that office. That, of course, is no way to maintain any statutorily mandated federal government office nor is it fair to the 100,000 employees and millions of customers who want to do business with USDA on equal footing. I mention this merely to point out the gravity of the moment for civil rights at USDA. If that long span of vacancy in senate-confirmed leadership is broken by my confirmation, I commit to you to carry out the responsibilities of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights with the utmost integrity.

Once again, I am honored to appear before you today and eagerly look forward to answering your questions.