

**STATEMENT OF NAOMI C. EARP, OF MARYLAND TO BE ASSISTANT
SECRETARY FOR CIVIL RIGHTS,
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, Members of the Committee, it is an honor to sit before you today.

When sitting before Members of Congress as a nominee for a Presidential appointment, it seems everyone is humbled by the experience. I also feel the weight in this moment of both pride and humility.

I am proud President Trump nominated me to the position of Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights at USDA and humbled by Secretary Perdue's faith in me. As I sit here with members of my family present, we are in awe because there is nothing in our lives that could orchestrate such an outcome but God, and I give Him all the praise.

My mother and I share the name, Naomi. Both of our birth certificates say we are just "colored girls" born in Newport News, Va. But, we've spent our lives proving that people are so much more than limited, frozen in time, monikers intended to serve as lifelong designations and keep us in prescribed categories. My mom was my first hero and mentor. She taught me self-discipline, never to settle, to be methodical and to take life one step at a time, always striving to do better and keep moving forward. I am the first born of her thirteen children. I sometimes chide her that I must have been a really great kid because she kept trying to replicate me.

From very early on, my mother and I shared responsibility for our family. As a practical matter, my mother became the father and as the oldest child, I took on as many motherly responsibilities as I could. At eight years old, I could change diapers and wash dishes as effectively as my mom. At twelve, I shopped for groceries, cooked, and often took responsibility for getting younger siblings to the doctor and dentist by bus. By the time I was a teenager, I could negotiate with the insurance man, the Encyclopedia man, and bill collectors while mom worked.

I had always loved school, and I found a refuge and sanctuary in my all black high school. Despite segregation, the black teachers and administrators pushed my classmates and me. They challenged us to work twice as hard as our white contemporaries and to make a positive contribution to the black community; no matter how small that contribution might be.

With an absentee husband, my mom worked in the homes of affluent white people. If you've read the book or seen the movie, *The Help*, you have a sense of my mom's early work experience and the challenges she faced by bussing to faraway neighborhoods and cobbling together enough daily work to earn a week's salary.

As I was discovering my place in the world, my mother was discovering President Johnson's *War on Poverty*. Mom took advantage of every job-related, educational and economic opportunity program offered. She went back to school, trained as an OBGYN Technician and bought a home. Both my mother and I graduated in 1972. I from college and mom from high school.

As I was starting my federal career with the Chicago Regional Office of the Department of Commerce, Congress was authorizing an amendment to a \$4 billion legislative package of public works spending that “set aside” 10 percent of each grant for minority business enterprises. Serendipitously, I was hired as a Civil Rights Specialist for the minority set-aside portion of that program. It was both the beginning of my federal career and the start of a long love affair with equal opportunity and civil rights matters.

Working for different agencies, I climbed the ranks from GS-9 to the Senior Executive Service. I can say with conviction that federal agencies have made important strides in affirmative action, equal opportunity, diversity and inclusion despite problems that remain. If confirmed, the USDA I will return to—despite some diversity challenges, is not the same USDA I worked for in the late 1980s.

If confirmed, I bring a record of achievement forged in a number of federal agency cultures: large, small, geographically dispersed, single location, bureaucratically complex and straightforward. Long after my departure from these agencies, employees I mentored have thrived and programs I conceived and shepherded are still viable. Three examples are the Office of the Ombudsman at NIH, the Youth@Work Initiative at EEOC, and the recognition of the LGBT Affinity Group at the Library of Congress. It is not unusual for a change in leadership to result in the death of a prior leader’s initiatives. These programs, and others I am affiliated with, still stand because of strategic alliances, foresight and the hard work of changing minds, culture, and business processes. The saying is, *if you build it, they will come*. I say, if you build it right, it will be embraced.

After spending most of my career in federal service, I felt called to work in Memphis, TN. I wanted to contribute to Dr. King’s legacy in some way. I took a position working on labor and employment issues for the City of Memphis. I was fortunate enough to work with and meet some of the very same sanitation workers who had marched right alongside Dr. King in 1968. However, this experience showed me that there is still much work to be done to address Dr. King’s dream of a color-blind society based on the content of one’s character.

In his, *I’ve Been to the Mountaintop* speech, Dr. King prophetically says that he may not get there with us, but that we as a people will get to the promise land. I believe the reference to “we as a people” was broader than the sanitation workers and their supporters present that night. I believe “we as a people” is all of us in all walks of life and for me, the “promise land” for government is fair and honest dealings with our public servants and our customers. This is what I have strived to achieve my entire life and continuing to help accomplish that mission is what has brought me back to federal service, should I be confirmed.

My vision for USDA is to continue building on strategies Secretary Perdue already has underway such as (1) outside investigators for employment and program delivery complaints, (2) the Harassment Reporting Hotline, and (3) zero tolerance for discrimination in any form with strict accountability when it is found.

Should I be confirmed, I will devote my energy to building a “culture of civility” based on respect for customers and employees. My priority would be every person’s right to respect and dignity in every encounter between employees and those USDA serves. If confirmed, I plan to specifically

target harassment and retaliation issues with new approaches to training designed to address behavior and not just raise awareness and sensitivity. Eradicating harassment and retaliation would be the centerpiece of my tenure in an effort to permanently change the very culture and atmosphere of USDA. I want to make it not just the “people’s department”. My goal is to help make USDA a department for all the people, all the time, and in all places.

Again, my thanks to you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee for your consideration. I look forward to answering your questions.