

**Opening Statement of Margo Schlanger, Nominee for Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights,  
Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry**

**Remarks as Prepared**

**Nov. 17, 2021**

Thank you, Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of the Committee. I am honored to be with you today and am grateful and humbled by President Biden's nomination of me to serve as Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights for the United States Department of Agriculture. I am grateful, too, for Secretary Vilsack's support.

I come before you buoyed by abundant love and support from my family. With me is my husband, Sam Bagenstos. Sam and I met as young civil rights lawyers at the Department of Justice and I have relied on his wisdom and encouragement ever since. Watching remotely are our two amazing children, Harry and Leila, who are seniors in college. And I lean, as well, on the support and love of my father, sister, and two brothers.

One of my brothers has been especially excited by the possibility that I might work at the Department of Agriculture because of nearly 10 years he spent as a vegetable farmer—an experience I learned a great deal from as well, vicariously. I also wish to honor Ruth Bader Ginsburg, for whom I clerked, whose memory is a blessing. I learned more than I can say from Justice Ginsburg.

Civil rights have been the core of my professional life since law school. What I mean by that is that I have focused my work on expanding equality and fairness. My whole career has been about building tools and processes within complex organizations to help them respect civil rights. If I am privileged to be confirmed, I would be excited to bring my experience to USDA.

I've learned many relevant lessons from my past efforts as a civil rights lawyer and professor, as the head of a different federal cabinet department's civil rights office, and as a court-appointed independent monitor. Among those lessons:

- Affected individuals have enormous insight into the problems they face and the solutions they need. Providing them a route to share their experience and taking their input seriously is necessary for solving those problems.
- Change requires will and collaborative problem solving.
- Transparency and information sharing are powerful tool.

If confirmed, I will work to use those lessons to address a number of urgent priorities:

- 1) **Addressing distrust.** I understand distrust exists towards the civil rights office among communities and individuals who have been excluded from access to USDA programs. I believe affected individuals have wisdom to share; I look forward to spending a lot of time listening and to building trust by being responsive to what I learn.

- 2) **Addressing the criticisms of the programmatic complaint program.** I believe the process must be open and easy to access. It must be fair and competent, able to accurately assess complaints. It must be speedy enough to actually solve violations when found. Where violations are *not* found, speed is necessary, too, to enable the agency and complainant to move on. And the complaint process must offer effective remediation.
- 3) **Helping to build a civil rights culture.** Secretary Vilsack has committed to build a culture that supports and reinforces civil rights at USDA. That means assessing the hundreds of programs the Department runs and thinking about barriers to access, and it means embedding civil rights in the Department's important decisions.

Secretary Vilsack has pledged to eliminate discrimination at USDA. He has promised a system of rigorous reporting, accountability, and oversight in all of the Department's efforts, and he has said this is a top priority. I agree there is no place at USDA for discrimination. We need both backward- and forward-looking action—to repair past mistakes and to ensure there are no new ones.

In 1864, President Lincoln called USDA—the Department he had founded—“The People's Department.” That should not be merely an aspiration; USDA can and should be a Department for *all* people, removing barriers to access and committing to equality and fairness in all its activities. I am honored to be considered to play a role in this mission. I look forward to your questions, and if I am confirmed, to working with you in the future.