



**Testimony by Bakeyah Nelson, PhD, Air Alliance Houston Executive Director
EPA Chemical Disasters Listening Session July 8, 2021**

Good evening, my name is Bakeyah Nelson and I am the Executive Director of Air Alliance Houston. Air Alliance Houston is a nonprofit organization working to reduce the public health impacts of air pollution and advance environmental justice in the Houston region. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

The Houston Region is saturated with industrial pollution and risk. Houston is home to dozens of industrial and petrochemical facilities, which routinely violate a host of environmental laws and regulations, spewing pollutants into the air, soil and water. More toxic pollution is released annually in the Houston Metropolitan area than the top five Metropolitan economies combined. In addition, hundreds of these facilities are in our floodplains which make them more vulnerable to damage when climate disasters happen. And, we have hundreds of our most dangerous facilities within 1-mile of schools and 800,000 children living in chemical danger zones.

During Hurricane Harvey, industry reported estimates of over 5 million pounds of harmful chemicals released into the air during and after the storm – about 5 months' worth of air pollution in just a few weeks. More than 15 floating roof storage tanks failed and the rain from Harvey damaged other facilities which caused hazardous gases to escape. For example, Houston officials detected alarmingly high concentrations of cancer-causing benzene in Manchester, a neighborhood close to a leaking storage tank at a Valero Energy refinery.

Harvey was followed by 3 very high-profile industrial fires in 2019. These fires caused entire cities to issue shelter in place orders due to hazardous levels of benzene, schools were closed, and highways were shut down; benzene levels in our region reached 100xs their routine levels during one of the fires. These same incidents resulted in hundreds of people being treated for respiratory issues and other illnesses. In 2016, three years before the spate of these chemical fires, an investigation by the Houston Chronicle found that explosions, fires, or toxic releases from Houston area plants occurred an average of once every six weeks between 2014-2016.

These incidents are clearly not outliers but rather are tragically a part of the daily threat of living in our region. However, communities of color and working-class neighborhoods bear the brunt of the health and safety risks from oil and gas infrastructure.

All neighborhoods WERE NOT and ARE NOT created equal, and for the communities that have been the dumping grounds, the places where people live, work, learn, and play contribute to poor

health and premature death. For example, children living near the heavily industrial Ship Channel are 56% more likely to develop leukemia than those 10 miles away. If the EPA doesn't intervene - there are real life consequences, particularly in Black and Brown communities and working-class neighborhoods.

Because storms are getting stronger and becoming more frequent, emergency preparedness plans need to be strengthened. We have thousands of people that live, work, or go to school very close to these facilities. For years, our state has given facilities the freedom to pollute our air, damage our health, and for many, take their lives too soon. According to a recent analysis by Environment Texas, every single day in 2019, at least one industrial facility was responsible for an unauthorized air pollution event somewhere in Texas. Communities deserve better protection from these health and safety risks. We need stronger rules to regulate these facilities, many of which are repeat offenders. We urge the EPA to implement the recommendations in the Preventing Double Disasters report.