

**Chris Suggs**  
**House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis**  
**Hearing on “Generation Climate: Young Leaders Urge Climate Action Now”**  
**April 4, 2019, 9am**

**Introduction**

Chair Castor, Ranking Member Graves, and members of the House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about my personal experience with climate change, and the need for urgent and equitable action to address this crisis. Chair Castor, thank you also for your recent leadership in introducing H.R. 9, the Climate Action Now Act--I'm excited to see Congress taking the first steps in a long time to act on climate.

My name is Chris Suggs and I am 18 years old. I'm a sophomore at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I'm double-majoring in Political Science and Religious Studies. I'm from Kinston, North Carolina, where I have lived my whole life and my parents have lived their whole lives.

In September 2018, my town was hit by Hurricane Florence--the second major hurricane in a 2-year period. The storm led to historic flooding that left entire neighborhoods underwater and caused massive damage to homes, businesses and infrastructure. Now, more than six months later, things are finally starting to get back to normal--just a few weeks ago, the last flood-damaged business finally re-opened. I'm here today to talk about the impacts of climate change that I've seen in my community firsthand and why we must take climate action now.

**Kinston Background & Kinston Teens**

Kinston is a small town with just a little over 20,000 people, located in the heart of eastern North Carolina. I was raised in East Kinston, a mostly poor, predominantly black neighborhood in the southeast part of town. My mom is an elementary school teacher and a city councilwoman, and my father is a parks and recreation supervisor. I love my hometown--everybody knows everybody, and it is truly an awesome place to live.

Once a bustling community with a robust economy based on textile manufacturing and tobacco, today Kinston faces a number of economic challenges. Before I was born, many industries left the area, and Hurricanes Fran and Floyd in the 1990s wiped out a lot of businesses and damaged many of our neighborhoods, leading to disinvestment, a lack of community morale, and significant population loss. Between 1990 and 2010, the population of Kinston fell more than 16 percent. East Kinston was particularly hit hard—a neighborhood known as “Lincoln City” was completely wiped out by Hurricane Floyd in 1999. To this day, there continues to be concentrated poverty and crime in part thanks to lots of abandoned structures, outdated and dense public housing, and a lack of economic development.

But despite these challenges, I believe Kinston is a great community, an awesome community. I grew up loving it and have always been actively engaged in my school, community, and in my church, Sand Hill Free Will Baptist Church. At a very young age, my parents instilled in my siblings and I the importance of

servicing our community and uplifting others. That's why, in October 2014, when I was 14 years old, and issues in Kinston began getting too bad, I knew I needed to make a change. Shootings were happening nearly every other day, especially among young people--to people I knew, people I considered friends. My classmates were shooting each other or getting shot. This combined with a 2014 study showing that my neighborhood of East Kinston was the most economically distressed census tract in the state, led me to decide that enough was enough.

We needed an outlet for young people to be empowered, and to make changes in their own lives. I'd been involved with Boy Scouts all throughout middle school, but I knew we needed more--a way to get people civically engaged and talk directly to our elected officials.

So, I decided to start a nonprofit called Kinston Teens with a mission of empowering young people through service, leadership, and civic engagement. We've been going strong for a little over four and a half years now, working to ensure young people are involved in the decisions that most affect us.

We host youth leadership seminars, arrange college visits for high school students, work to register voters, create mentoring programs at elementary schools, and make sure our voices are heard at state and local government meetings. In my neighborhood of East Kinston, we launched a Vacant Lot Transformation Program to transform vacant lots into small parks, community gardens and other amenities. We've been able to accomplish a lot in just over four years, but there is much more to be done. A big part of our work has been to respond to disasters, like Hurricanes Matthew and Florence, and work to build community resilience.

### **Hurricanes Matthew & Florence, and Climate Change**

As I mentioned, the year before I was born, in September 1999, Hurricane Floyd hit. From what I've read and heard from my parents and members of my community, it was beyond devastating. I grew up continuously hearing about how Floyd and Fran, which was an earlier hurricane in the 90s, forever changed Kinston and our community.

The thing about Kinston is that the hurricanes aren't even the worst part of the storm... it's the catastrophic flooding that follows. Kinston sits on the banks of the Neuse River, which cuts right through our town. That river is one of our greatest natural assets, but also one of the most dangerous. It has flooded again and again and again--cutting off parts of our community and damaging homes, apartments and our biggest business corridor, which lies along US Highway 70. As a result, my town's socioeconomic challenges cannot be divorced from the extreme weather we've experienced. Poverty and hurricanes are deeply intertwined for us in Eastern North Carolina.

In 2016 when I was 16, Hurricane Matthew hit. Within three or four days after the hurricane, entire neighborhoods were under water. During Matthew, the flood stage hit 28.3 feet--swamping apartment complexes, flooding businesses and churches, and cutting the town in half. My organization, Kinston Teens, had been in existence for two years when Matthew hit, and we immediately got to work. It was a

month-long fiasco. Parts of Kinston were cut off from food access for 25 days because of the flooding. It took three or four weeks for the flood levels to completely recede.

Fast forward two years, to last year: September of 2018 when Hurricane Florence hit. At the time, many families, neighborhoods and businesses were still recovering from Hurricane Matthew--and Florence and its floods made sure that these places that were just starting to get stable again were right back under water.

Kinston Teens again sprang into action. We worked with our city officials and police department to go door to door before the Hurricane hit and in the days following ahead of the floods, notifying people about the evacuation process, telling them where their local shelters were, and even in some cases helping them to physically evacuate. We had businesses donate funds, coordinated volunteers to distribute food, groceries, phone chargers and other supplies to families in shelters and first responders impacted by the storm. I remember one lady we helped was a single mother of two kids, who lived in southeast Kinston and worked at a restaurant on highway 70. Her home was flooded, and her job was too. We were fortunate to be able to provide food and clothes for her family while they were displaced in the shelter. It's been eight months, though, and she's still not fully back on her feet. As the greatest country in the world, there's no way we can sit idle while these storms cause such detrimental effects on our citizens' lives.

### **Next Steps & Climate Action Needed**

My community is still rebuilding from Florence, and from Matthew on top of that. And there's hesitation and fear in Kinston around what might happen this year. Hurricane season starts in just a few months. In just my eighteen-and-a-half years on this Earth, my community has experienced TWO 500-year-floods--on top of the floods after Hurricane Floyd in 1999. They're not supposed to happen this often, but they occurred within the span of just two years--back to back. For these kinds of catastrophic events to happen at such a fast rate--a rate that my community can't recover from--is deeply alarming.

For me, the saddest thing about these recurring natural disasters that are exacerbated by climate change, is that the communities that are the most affected--like mine--are often the communities that have ALREADY been hit the hardest by all of society's other problems. You have poor, rural communities that are completely underwater or get cut off from their access to food, hospitals, and medical supplies. You have communities that rely heavily on the farming industry just devastated by these storms, causing farmers, migrant workers and their families to lose income while the farms are underwater. And you have predominantly poor communities, black communities and housing projects that were built in the flood plains--because those were the only places they were allowed--that become completely submerged. That's the story of Kinston, and much of eastern North Carolina.

I've never known a world that wasn't impacted by climate change, and it's time for that to change. My generation knows we have no time to waste, and while Kinston Teens and I are here to help Kinston rebuild and become as resilient as possible-- it shouldn't just fall to us. We need action. I voted for the first time in the November of 2018 and like millions other young people and first-time voters across the

country, I was voting to keep our communities safe and resilient, and to protect our families and our homes. We turned out in record numbers last year, and we're not going away.

Climate change is an extra kick to communities and populations that are already down... especially with how often these major hurricanes and floods are occurring. My testimony is a call for action. We have to do something now to address the threat of a changing climate, reduce OUR impact on the environment, and mitigate the effects of these natural disasters.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to tell my story today. I look forward to answering your questions.

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