

Statement for the Record
Rep. Veronica Escobar
Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Environment & Climate Change
Legislative Hearing: *The CLEAN Future Act and Drinking Water: Legislation to Ensure
Drinking Water is Safe and Clean*

Thank you, Chairman Tonko, for including my bill, the *Colonia Infrastructure Improvement Act*, in today's legislative hearing before the Subcommittee on Environment & Climate Change. I am grateful to have the opportunity to discuss this bill and the many benefits it would provide for colonia residents.

Colonias are unincorporated communities along the U.S. Mexico border that are oftentimes referred to as "The Forgotten America". These communities are overwhelmingly Latino and while not every colonia is the same, many share similar characteristics. These include a lack of access to paved roads, drinking and wastewater infrastructure, broadband, and more. In El Paso County alone we have over 300 colonias, each with a combination of these needs.

There have been attempts in the past to provide aid to colonias and there are existing programs that address some of their needs. But these programs have -- at best -- offered only piecemeal solutions. But because the federal government has never prioritized ensuring that every American has access to drinking water, the challenge of bringing fundamental infrastructure to these neighborhoods has only become more expensive over time. In 2017, the El Paso County government provided an estimate that showed how completing all of the necessary colonia drinking and wastewater infrastructure projects would require close to \$200 million -- just for one county on the border. While El Paso County has been able to chip away at this figure through existing programs, it simply has not been enough. Additionally, the cost of building water infrastructure to these communities is simply too much for local governments to take on their own. In line with President Biden's plan to Build Back Better, we need to accelerate progress for colonias and provide the funding needed to help these forgotten American families to break free from conditions that create generational poverty.

The *Colonia Infrastructure Improvement Act* represents the most ambitious investment in colonias in a generation. It would provide approximately \$1.5 billion in funding for surface, drinking water, and wastewater infrastructure over the next 5 years. As it relates to this hearing, the bill would reauthorize a dormant EPA program dedicated to colonia drinking water infrastructure at \$500 million over the course of 5 years. The bill also makes key changes to this existing authority by eliminating a cost-sharing requirement and allowing local governments to apply for these grants. These changes combined with the added funding would help lift these economically disadvantaged communities and bring their infrastructure into the 21st century.

It is shocking to know that we still have families in America today who still have no access to drinking water, to wastewater hookups in urban areas, that are locked out of having fundamental infrastructure. If we are to help lift families out of poverty, we have to start with the basic building blocks that so many of us take for granted.

In closing, the *Colonia Infrastructure Improvement Act* would transform the lives of thousands of colonia residents across the southern border. It is imperative it be included in any future infrastructure legislation. I look forward to working with this subcommittee and President Biden to provide relief for these communities.