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Fireside Chat:

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QUEEN QUET
Chieftess
Gullah/Geechee Nation

Panel Discussion:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Good afternoon and welcome to what I hope will be a unique conversation here at Brookings. Good afternoon again. Welcome to what I hope will be a unique conversation here at Brookings about rural minority communities in the wake of the pandemic. The conversation has pivoted and become all about broadband, which of course is mission priority.

But there are a lot of other concerns in rural areas about jobs, about climate effects, about other alternative pathways that are, I think being sorely overshadowed in this discussion.

Today, I'm joined by a phenomenal group of policy partitioners, trail blazers and technicians who help us think through these much deeper questions about what it takes to lift up some of the most vulnerable communities in rural America. And they tend to sit in majority block, majority Hispanic, and also in Native American communities. And a new, less-visible group such as the Gullah/Geechee in the coastal areas of Georgia, South Carolina, Florida.

I would like to sort of be flexible here because I've learned in this work that being flexible and meeting communities where they are and how they show up is really important to hosting their voices and making their work visible. So we will be bringing in our panelists and having them introduce themselves in a minute or two about where they're coming, what part of the world.

That gives us a few minutes to welcome our Queen Quet Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation who should be with us shortly. I'd like to first welcome Jamie Glosby. Jamie, would you mind introducing yourself?

MS. GLOSHY: Hi. Good morning or afternoon, wherever you all are. My name is Jamie Glosby. I'm a co-founder, director of Native Women Lead. We're an organization that supports indigenous women entrepreneurs. And I'm actually Zooming in today from a very rural community, Minto, Alaska, where my partner is from and actually based on the Southwest and Albuquerque, New Mexico so we escaped a little bit of the heat wave and are enjoying the midnight sun. So thank you so much.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Thank you and welcome Jamie. I just got news that Queen Quet has joined us. And we are working through some technical issues to make sure that we can have her. I'm excited to feature this fantastic woman. So just be patient with us.

Jennifer Grassham, can I ask you to introduce yourself to our audience?

MS. GRASSHAM: Yes. My name is Jennifer Grassham and I am the president and CEO of the Economic Development Corporation of Lea County in Hobbs, New Mexico and we're the most southeastern corner of New Mexico. About five miles from the Texas border to the east and to the south.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Wonderful. And so, we're just going to go on and kind of set the scene here. I'd love to bring Teresa in. Teresa? My dear, you're on mute.

MS. BURNETT: Thank you. Good afternoon. My name is Teresa Burnett and I am the executive director of the Monahans Chamber of Commerce. And we are located in West Texas in the heart of the oil and gas producing area of the world right now. And I am glad to be with you today.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Wonderful. And Teresa, I'm going to ask Gbenga to quickly introduce yourself and then we're going to switch our fireside chat with Queen Quet.

MR. AJILORE: Thank you, Makada. My name is Gbenga Ajilore. I'm coming from the nation's Capital, Washington, D.C. I'm a senior advisor at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Rural Development Mission.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Great. David, I think we've got a few – a second or two to bring you in. David, tell us about your work. I'm sorry. Where you're coming from today.

MR. JIMENEZ: The same place as Jennifer, Hobbs, New Mexico, Lee County, southeastern most county in New Mexico. Thank you.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Wonderful. Again, a warm welcome to everyone. I think we're going to have a fantastic conversation. And to our audience, thank you for your compassion and your patience. I think this is the kind of flexibility that it takes to ensure that we can hear all voices. And so, just give us a minute as we – join. We're joined by the Queen Quet. Good afternoon, Queen Quet. Can you hear us? Can you hear me?

MS. QUET: I've been able to hear you all day. It's you all couldn't see or hear me.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Welcome, welcome. It's been a minute since we've graced each other with each other's presence. I am so honored. Really happy to have you here. Thank you for joining us and we're switching things up a little bit, Queen Quet.

So I'm going to jump right in because folks are eager to hear you. And as we said today, let's bring the fire. Let's do this.

And I want to kind of start back a little and say to folks as I've been doing this work, I myself had to acknowledge that my appreciation of what means, the full expanse of black American history is limited and I'm growing and learning in that every day. And I think there are a lot of other people who share my experience and sometimes the shame in it.

The Gullah/Geechee though, Queen Quet, is part of this disconnect that I encounter. And want to hear more from you, and I think our audience too, about help us understand about the Gullah/Geechee nation. It's people, it's culture and really help me understand the underappreciated story land ownership there.

MS. QUET: Also, I'm about a year up on you. I thought we just had a leap at time. I don't want to spend a year on this same thing in a year. Okay then.

So the first thing is (speaks in Gullah) because most people (speaks in Gullah) from Jacksonville or Jacksonville. (Speaks in Gullah). So (speaks in Gullah) most times we switch over and start talking like this.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: All right.

MS. QUET: Many people will come to the delegation nation between Jacksonville and Jacksonville actually don't get the honor anymore of hearing us speak Gullah because people got tired of dealing with the, huh? What is that? So we would just know automatically. Okay. They're speaking English. Let's just speak English to them.

Also, because we were taught that our own mother tongue, which is the Gullah language, not the Gullah dialect, the Gullah language which has birthed a pigeon on dialect which is called Geechee. It was backward and ignorant is what they told us. They told us we were the descendants of evil Mandinka, Malinke, Ulibab, Golah, Geezie, Menda, Temny, Fec, Ibiblo, Yamasee, Adisto, Cree (phonetic) who had put together in languages and created one language, one mechanism of communication. That somehow that was a backward, ignorant thing to do.

And the continuation of it was a backward, ignorant thing. But yet now, I've done a lecture before called "From Backward to Brilliant." So now, the same people that were called backward are called brilliant for having retained and sustained and continued not only our own linguistic patterning, which comes from the African tree of languages. Not the Germanic tree of languages. That's why Gullah

is not a dialect of English.

Because any English speaker that I (speaks in Gullah) they look at me like what? Okay. I have yet to go anywhere in America. I've been to all 50 states. Speak Gullah and then have anybody know what I'm saying other than Gullah/Geechee people or Caribbean people, okay? Usually that's who knows. And the people who are actually Gullah/Geechee as well but are called Black Seminoles or Seminoles.

So we have a Gullah/Geechee diaspora that spread out from the Gullah/Geechee nation. And the Gullah/Geechee nation exist from Jacksonville, North Carolina to Jacksonville, Florida. Encompasses all the sea islands in 30 to 35 miles inland to the St. Johns River. Here we have not only the Gullah language, the Geechee dialogue, but we also have our own spiritual practices, our own food ways and our own land ownership that has allowed us to maintain these lived experiences that most people on first run, one might say, coming into the coast might see, might hear or might taste because everybody wants to come down here. (Speaks in Gullah) you know how that goes.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: I have how it goes. So let me – I'm glad you painted us a picture of where the communities are because the way I experienced all of the work that, you know, I've been doing with you and others in the community in the last few months.

And from a point of observation, what immediately emerges is the thing that's most – I think you're most passionate about, right? Broadband is the sexiest topic on the block right now. And there's this considerable overlap between rural and broadband. But it's overshadowing a lot of other more pressing concerns.

So tell me. You're on the frontlines. On the coast of a climate crisis. How is it effecting your ecology, health and your economic security?

MS. QUET: Yes. Well, go right there to broadband. When we're talking about being literally what I call the front shoreline. We are currently in the midst of hurricane season. It started as of June 1st. So even without that threat, we have king tides, cotton is no longer king here, but the tides are, right?

We are talking about a situation during the midst of the height of harvest season for those of us who are still agrarian. Where we are very concerned about what happens in both directions. If a

hurricane comes, you have massive flooding. And if it happens during a king tide, it's that much worse.

Why are king tides, why are hurricanes more intense? It's because of climate change.

So now, you have areas where you have agricultural land that can get inundated with salt water, which is what's around Dulce Islands because we literally live in the Atlantic Ocean.

And now, if that salt water comes in, you may not be able to have any of the vegetation be harvestable afterwards. Or you may not be able to use the field for some years to come until you can hopefully restore that field to the conditions and the pH levels that are necessary for you to plant and harvest the things that we have that we sustained ourselves with.

Well, let's go to the other end of the spectrum. The pH off balance in the ocean is also a problem due to climate change because we have this thing called ocean acidification that's happening. Ocean acidification is causing the depletion of our shellfish. One of our primary shellfish is oysters not just because we eat them and because all of the tourists want to get them, right? But because the oysters actually serve a purpose in regard to water quality.

One oyster cleanses 50 gallons of water per day. So if you have an oyster bank or oyster bed with hundreds of oysters there that keeps that water clean which keeps our seafood healthy which keeps public health out there safe. We are then able to sustain ourselves directly from harvesting from land and from sea. But cannot do it if we have these intense storms. We have this intense level of sea level rise. The massive numbers of feet that the sea is climbing.

It's no longer just a high tide and a low tide. It's now the sea level rise. And then the ocean is acidifying because if the oyster shells are not there, the oyster beds are not there. Spartina grass, our salt marsh is not there. If the salt marsh is not there, the maritime forests get exposed, the trees fall. You will not have a sea island anymore, thereby you would not have Gullah/Geechee culture anymore.

So when we start talking about these things that I'm passionate about. If you have a storm come in and we have no service then you can stop talking about broadband. I've lived here through multiple hurricanes. People can always still get in touch with me because I have a thing you all don't know about anymore, a house phone.

I'm a computer scientist. I can still get access to the world because I still am connected.

But if we only have cellular devices, we get disconnected because the winds that also come with the storms can knock the poles down even if we had the broadband. So now, if we bring in rural broadband, we have to consider these factors. The solidity in the air on any given day and also where do you put these things?

Where do you put the cable? We're on a sea island. The sea level rises. Can you put them underground or not? If you put them in the air and there's a lot of maritime forest, you've got to keep that area clean because if the wind breaks a tree, it hits the wires, down you go.

So I am that person who I just said it before coming on here. I own my own vibration because I said for more than 25 years, I'm a black Jetson. I always loved the Jetsons. And I said, I'm the black Jetson. Everyone look at me funny like why did she say that?

I said first of all, you all never saw black people in the Jetsons. Second of all is I'm the computer scientist from the rural sea islands, St. Helen Island that people never understood why I said my office was in my briefcase. Because my computer was in there. And when I tried to encourage Gullah/Geechees not to send their children off to colleges with cars. Send them off with computers. They looked at me like the RCA dog with the little head tilted to the side like that. What?

Because they did not grasp what I was saying and how far behind our communities already were 25 years ago in regard to access, computer access. So when I first started saying, at least 50 years ago. We need broadband internet service to these rural areas. Politicians or anybody else didn't know what I was talking about. They were like use your cell phone.

I said that's not broadband. And they could not grasp what I was saying. So now, like you said, it is a passionate topic for me. And it is now a sexy topic as they say for others that I wish people had caught onto faster because the broadband and the suite of it cannot get to me and my house and my office fast enough for me.

We needed it 25, 30 years ago. So I hope we're not 25, 30 years behind waiting on funding to come to our area, so we can have it.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: You know, that's really tough. Every time I hear you talk about this, it makes me really emotional because I think when you don't travel out to these communities and experience what that ecology that's changing and how, you know, being so politically disempowered and

marginalized. But we're having big equity conversations here in Washington. It makes it urgent that you and I can sit here today.

But I want to talk about another piece of your work that to me deserves urgency. So we're not talking about another future 25 years and to come that hasn't been funded or, you know, has been ignored and dismissed.

Earlier you said we've been relegated to the side as though we don't know what we're talking about. (Speaks in Gullah). So tell me if you're about to save the Gullah/Geechee nation as you've been working on for 40 plus years. Here's the microphone. You know, we talked. We're not doing telephone here. Here's the microphone.

MS. QUET: Right.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: What is the agenda? How should federal governments, philanthropic organizations, people along the coast, what is the work that you want us to; one, understand; two, appreciate; three, lift up and four invest in? Lay that agenda out for me.

MS. QUET: I'm going to lay it out for you, sister. I appreciate this.

So, number one, it's about Gullah/Geechees owning their own land. That's number one. That is the overall agenda. Why? So that we can maintain and continue to live our culture. It is not preserving the culture. Preservation means we encapsulate it. This time of year, we jar things. Put it in a jar, put it on the shelf. You can look at it. When you're ready to expel it, get rid of it, you open the jar. You take it. You can dump it out. You can eat it. You destroy it. It's done. That's not what we're doing.

We want our culture to continue to thrive and survive. That culture has to exist on these sea islands between Jacksonville, North Carolina and Jacksonville, Florida.

So we need not only that whole list that you mentioned from the federal government down to the philanthropists and all the individual people to support Gullah/Geechee land rights and also Gullah/Geechee water rights. Access points so that Gullah/Geechees can sustain our culture and sustain ourselves and our subsistence fishing rights.

So the Gullah/Geechee association has been fighting for this to be the case and North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida for a decade since the existence of that organization came about. And we have yet for any of them to understand that there were racial practices that governed why

black people during reconstruction were denied their access and their rights to the water and especially to fishing and hunting.

That needs to be reversed in the case of a minority group as we're recognized as internationally and a federally recognized group as well. Specifically, as a culture ethnic group that is indigenous to this land and indigenous to this coast. We should have the same rights as the other indigenous people such as the Catawba in South Carolina have to fishing.

So the next thing is how do we have it? If we have the access with all of what you and I have already discussed with climate change, we have to also stop gap some things in regard to climate change and coastal erosion.

So we have to put some moratoriums on over building into the coast line. Not building on beach front. Not building into the salt marsh. I'm currently one of the leaders in the South Atlantic Salt Marsh Initiative to preserve and conserve and protect one million acres of salt marsh in the southeast.

In doing so, we will now have that buffer that protects the maritime forest thereby protects the sea islands from flooding, from erosion and also would help with the toxicity, the salt marsh will help cleanse out the things that come with storm water runoff from the land, from the roads and so forth.

The other thing that we are working on that incorporates the salt marsh initiative, a living shoreline initiative that are part of the greening Gullah/Geechee community's project that started working on with the Environment Protection Agency. They had been outstanding partners that brought in other members of what I call the federal alphabet soup so that we can turn it into a Gullah/Geechee gumbo instead of just having a soup. It's a little hot for soup but people still eat gumbo in the summer time around here.

And so, we have now various federal agencies that are partnering with us in the Gullah/Geechee nation to work on the green Gullah/Geechee community's effort to have certain areas that are part of the 30 by 30 initiative. So that you do protect 30 percent of land, 30 percent of water.

We also are going to help with community capacity building amongst native Gullah/Geechees and landowners in the Gullah/Geechee nation that are on water side to have living shorelines. Where we help them to learn the importance of the Spartina grass which is a salt marsh and oyster beds and help rebuild them through projects like the South Carolina SCORE project.

We have two SCORES now, which I hope are adding up to a lot in South Carolina. One has a year in the end, one doesn't. One is our oyster restoration project, enhancement. That's the one with the year in the end. And the other is our South Carolina office of resiliency. And it's important to use to protect cultural heritage and maintain and sustain Gullah/Geechee culture or heritage while we talk about maintaining the resilience or making the coast itself more resilient to these environmental harms.

So any philanthropy that is done for biodiversity, for the natural environment. You need to include cultural heritage. And when you talk about it in the southeast, you can't talk about cultural heritage and dismiss the living culture which is Gullah/Geechee culture. That was native here. That was operating. That was living in balance with the land and the water before any of these laws came.

That are now zoning laws. Before any of these laws against fishing and hunting came. We've been there. (Speaks in Gullah). So it's time that people look at the traditional ecological knowledge that Gullah/Geechees have about living in balance with the land and the water and financing that.

Investing in that. The greening Gullah/Geechee community project that we have will create a Gullah/Geechee living landscape starting on my island, St. Helen Island and South Carolina. And have that sea island then model this as a mechanism of sustainability and resilience north of me and south of me. So that we can replicate it on numerous other sea islands like Edisto, which I can look right across.

And even to encompass obtaining areas like Bay Point and Bufford that is so significant to us. That is a fishing area and having that remain natural and open space for the use of everyone. So it's very important that we look at it in totality and not compartmentalize each thing. Because for us, it's all one. I always say to people, the water – bring me in the water (speaks in Gullah). But the water to be blood land (speaks in Gullah) that we found it. The water and the land don't be and we be Gullah/Geechee.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Pretty quiet. I hope our audience and our panelist understand why we just had to be here today. I am so thankful that you have been gracious with me. And, you know, I come for a culture where my elders are everything. Everything I am, I am because of them. So thank you for taking the time to help us understand.

It's broadband. But if you're not in these areas and these communities, you don't understand how to implement work on policy in the way that really shifts and makes a difference on impact. Thank you so much for joining us. You are a blessing.

MS. QUET: Thank you. This has been a blessing. And I hope that we truly brought the fire. I already know we're here sweating and in triple degree in the Gullah/Geechee nation, but we wanted to bring a little bit more fire to this Brookings discussion. And it is such an honor to be here.

And I hope that anyone who is thinking about how to find me, how to look for me, how to do this with us collaboratively. Please follow gullahgeecheenation.com, G-U-L-L—A-H, G-E-E-C-H-E-E and there is no I in Geechee. Gullah/Geechee nation, N-A-T-I-O-N, dot com. You can also find me at queenquet.com. I'm on Twitter at Gullah/Geechee. I'm on Instagram at Gullah/Geechee. I'm even talking with the children now at [gullah/geecheebase.tiktok](https://www.tiktok.com/@gullahgeecheebase) and we're Gullah/Geechee nation. We have a Facebook fan page.

So please support our Gullah/Geechee land and legacy fund which is on GoFundMe. And just come out and join us in this work that will help everybody not just the Gullah/Geechee community. Because these barrier island called the sea islands protect mainland America.

So even if you've never been here just take it in a selfish way that if you live even in the rest of the state, we're the ones that protect you from the storms. So help us to be here for some generations to come. You all can go to gullah/geecheeland.com connect with us there. Make contributions and sign up. And bring your expertise to help our cultural community.

My sister, Makada, I love your name because she's one of the queens that I honor that's one of our ancestral legacy and lineage. And so, it is always wonderful there to sit by the fire with another queen. So much love to you, much blessings and I pray for all the panelists that this enriches all of our listener souls today. Thank you, Brookings for this opportunity to help folks think. Because I know that's what you do in a think tank. Let's get them to think, yes. About who we (inaudible) Gullah/Geechee. Peace and blessings.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Peace and blessings. Thank you so much.

I want to welcome in our panelists. That was an amazing message to kick us off. She left us with so much to chew on. So much to respond to and direct challenges for each of us to get

involved. And so, if I can welcome my panelists back from our first session. Guys turn the cameras on and let's get going.

Fantastic. Bingo. Let me ask you to kick us off here. It's a tough act to follow so I'm going to let you do what you can here. But, you know, you've repeatedly made the case of both attentive and like a firm act in progress and I'm sure you're doing much of this here under the rubric of the federal government to talk about what Queen Quet just brought to life there.

That there's so much diversity and ingenuity in wrapped up enroll minority communities. Kind of set us back, right? Help us understand this diversity, this systematic differences in rural America. But give me it from two lens, you've been a researcher. Now, you're a federal policymaker, right?

How can you help us think through the critical challenges? And help them draw on their assets to do some of the work that Queen Quet has just laid down for us?

MR. AJILORE: Thank you. And you're right that was a really hard act to follow.

I guess the way to think about this is that when we talk about rural communities, we say rural America. What the audience is looking at here, what the audience just heard from that never comes up. No one ever thinks when I say rural America, they don't think that.

But rural America is this. And a lot of the issues that Queen Quet brought up, we don't have to use the broadband. We like to talk about high-speed internet because a lot of communities have broadband, but they don't have high speed. And you look at the pandemic, these places needed high-speed internet. And so, we like to focus on that.

But the issues are the same across different communities, but then the diversity, the differences matter in terms of policy. So like in one community, it might be difficult to have high-speed internet because of the land. And as Queen Quet had mentioned before, the difficulty in getting high-speed internet there is about do you put in the air or do you put it in water? So there's a diversity in terms of how to produce it.

And so, one of the things we have to think about is understanding what rural communities look like, how they are and where they are. And so, you know, it's very important to kind of focuses on those differences because that matters for policy. But even before that the important thing about understanding the diversity of rural communities is that we need to be able to see these communities.

Like when we talk about rural America, we don't see a lot of these places. We have these images in our head. Like when I was at the Center for American Progress prior to joining the U.S. DA, you know, I always said that rural America is not some bald white guy sitting on a tractor in Iowa. That's part of it, but that's just one part of it and there are so many others.

But then, you know, understanding the full diversity of it and then when you see these communities, the next thing you do is listen to those communities. Hear what they have to say. And, you know, a lot of words that I think about when talking about policy and Queen Quet had mentioned the thing that, you know, come here but collaborate, be collaborative.

You know, a lot of federal policy is like, oh, we know what you need and this is what we're going to give you. When that's not, you know, these communities already have the answer. What they need is a partner. And so, in terms of thinking about this framework as being a partner.

And being a partner and being collaborative work is that each place has a different set of assets. And so, where in the federal government or state governments are going to be helpful is helping to realize those assets, translate those assets into prosperity so these communities can thrive. And so, that's why, you know, I'm really harping on understanding the differences in these rural communities, what they look like. Listening to them. Understanding their assets and then partnering with them, collaborating with them to be able to establish what they need to do.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Thanks, Gbenga. That was really full. Let me bring in Jennifer here.

Jennifer, you sit in a place where, you know, to find this point, we lumped everybody in together and we don't kind of make those separations. What I think of or a lot of folks think of rural and extractive resources and industries, they think coal. But they never really make these organic, you know, connections between oil and gas, which we try to locate psychologically in Houston.

But your work with us has really kind of shown that these differences make a difference and a drive to kind of demographics that we're observing on the aggregate. So you have a majority of Hispanic. You've benefited tremendously from oil and gas, but you've experienced that boom and bust. So what's the story?

Have you protected yourself and what can others tuning in today learn from these

experiences?

MS. GRASSHAM: Thank you, Makada. As I was thinking about, you know, conversations we've had with you over the last couple of months on this topic.

One of the things that we've done and I think is important in protecting in these cycles is really around mindset. Like a community mindset. So in Leah County, we would have a mindset that openly acknowledges that there's going to be a boom and there's going to be a bust, but nothing ever lasts forever.

And so, as soon as we enter a boom territory, we start talking about what do we do for the next bust? And as soon as we're in the bust, we start talking about what are we doing for the next boom? So that we are ready. And really, we do this because you have to start making adjustments long before it feels right. Long before something else – other signals are out there.

You need to be working on it. So it's really, really counterintuitive. So during a boom, what it looks like on the ground. During a boom, you would see aggressive saving at the government level, at the – even the public sector level. There's a lot of investments because it's a boom, right? But a lot of aggressive savings so that when the bust comes, you're still able to make the investments in roads and other kinds of infrastructure in broadband.

And so, I think that's if you don't have a mindset around acknowledging what is happening in your community because you're that one community. It really makes it hard to adjust to those cycles.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Makes sense. Teresa, you and Jennifer are almost to – you know, the same side of a coin, but there are distinct differences.

Lea County is an oil service county. You're a direct production. And so, in some ways, you experience, you know, the same kind of volatility but the strategies certainly are different. What's Monahan Counties growth story? And, you know, to Jennifer's point. When you're in the bust or in a boom, you should be thinking about that next one. You guys are doing some of that already. So tell us how you're preparing to adopt green economy as well?

MS. BURNETT: Right. Jennifer's story is a lot like ours in we are – had major oil and gas producing companies here. You know, we are in far west Texas and when things are good, things

are good. And when things are bad, they're bad.

You know, we're constantly having to depend on people from other communities, from other states to come in to help us be able to feed the businesses and the jobs that are here. So we depend on that. When things are good, we're having to like Jennifer said, we're having to look ahead. We're having to provide for infrastructure, for housing, for education. You know, with the influx of people that are coming in.

So that's one thing that's very difficult on our area because when things are bad as everybody knows, you don't have that money, the federal support coming in that you need to. And with us being primarily oil and gas, we depend on that industry to come in and to take care of us.

I will tell you that the oil and gas industry produces so much more than anybody even realizes. If you'll just do a search and you look at how many products that are provided by the oil and gas industry that the whole United States, the whole nation depends on delivery. I mean our medical supplies, our appliances, our – just everyday life things that we have to have. Refrigerators, batteries, tires for our vehicles. All of these things, these products depend on the oil and gas industry.

So even though we're looking at maybe diversifying and going to electric cars and things like that. We still have to realize that you've got to have the oil and gas industry because an electric car has to have a battery. An electric car has to have tires. So you're still going to have to produce that industry so that people can continue to survive and live and grow through this.

I know that you asked me about the green energy and what we're doing in our area for the green energy. And it is growing. It is an industry that's growing out here. We do have solar farms that are going up. And those are used to maybe help with our refineries in providing energy for our refineries.

But the biggest industry that has kicked up out here is the Bit Coin industry. So with that it uses huge amounts of power. So we're seeing some solar farms coming in that are being built just to sustain the energy levels for the Bit Coin industry. So that's one of the ways that we're doing that. Plus a lot of people are going to the green energy by putting panels on their rooftops to help, you know, supply them what that.

So we're a lot likely Lea County. We have a lot of the same problems. And when it's

good, it's good. When it's bad, it's bad. So always looking for ways to diversify. So anything that we can do with diversification. And there are some of those things in the works right now. But it cost money to do that and it's big industry that takes that over. So we have to always continue to plan ahead, to look ahead.

Whether it's going to be in oil and gas. Whether it's going to be in agriculture. Whatever the future is going to be. And of course, as Jennifer said, broadband is a huge part of that. And, you know, I go on for hours.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Well, come back to that one.

MS. BURNETT: Yeah.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Well, come back to that one. So let me bring Jamie in. Now, talk about diversity here.

You sort of come from a place that has been struggling for some time with a lot of issues. This is not the space to talk about what we already know. What we don't know is what are the strategies? And what are these alternative pathways that are helping us to see, you know, different opportunities emerge in Native American communities?

So, Jamie, tell us about the work that Native Women Lead has been standing up. And what motivates Native Women Lead? And then tell me, you know, entrepreneurship for you guys is sort of the key product there, right? Like key economic development tool. Why is it so vital? Gloshey

MS. GLOSHAY: Thanks so much. I appreciate this question. I think this is really an also interesting panel as we look at like the inclusion of rural voices as well as the lack of infrastructure that's available. Whether it's talking about digital inequalities that exist in rural and troubled communities but also this conversation around energy use especially when it's oil and gas.

A lot of our communities definitely participate in that economy. And now, it's emergent where it's now focusing on green infrastructure building. A lot of indigenous communities will also have to be worked with as, you know, batteries for electric vehicles need to be made and solar panel, et cetera.

So resource extraction will still happen within Native communities. So I just kind of want to segue in a touchpoint on what was shared earlier.

So I'm a co-founder of Native Women Lead. We're an organization that supports

indigenous women entrepreneurs and leaders. Our community is very visible. We represent less than two percent of the population and often find the indigenous places excluded. A big part of our way is really the women in our network. I just want to also name from the onset, we believe in them because we are them.

We understand and know the power and ingenuity of innovation and problem-solving skills that indigenous have in addition to the generosity, strength, humor -- our culture is complex and beautiful.

I'm sorry. Is my internet okay? Are we still good? I'm in Alaska right now.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Yeah, we're hearing you in some bits and then we're losing you at another part if you can still hear us?

MS. GLOSHAY: Can you hear me okay?

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: You know what, Jamie? Yes, maybe you should turn off your video, so we can hear?

MS. GLOSHAY: Yeah, I'm going to turn my camera if that's okay?

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: That works for us. Thank you.

MS. GLOSHAY: Sorry about that.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Jamie, let me do this. Can I come back to you? And can you hear us now?

MS. GLOSHAY: That's critical.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Yeah. So why don't I just do this. David, what an apt segue to bring you in. Here you are, a CEO of CEO of Leaco Rural Telephone Company doing some really fascinating work to solve exactly what this problem is here that Jamie and I are experiencing. That's part of the barrier and part of the invisibility.

And, you know, you guys have been doing fantastic work. So tell me. Share your experience. What has Leaco accomplished. I want people to hear that. And then I'm asking a specific question about corporateness, right?

Are we overlooking them? Not thinking about them properly? What are the missed opportunities if we're not doing that appreciation well?

MR. JIMENEZ: Absolutely. So here at Leaco having to serve a fairly austere environment, we've actually managed to connect a lot of our rural areas with fiber. And we managed to that via the USDA RUS loan process. The RUS is a Rural Utilities and Services Center that helps cooperatives gain funding, grants even support to try to connect these rural communities.

Now, we've been able to do that in the past, but some of those systems have changed. The last time we received one of those loans was 2009 or '10. But reducing that inequality is important. And just to touch on what we're saying because it mirrors. Believe it or not out here in southeastern New Mexico, you know, west Texas area, it mirrors some of the issues that we see here.

You know, we have to reduce that inequality and access to broadband. It's one of the most important way that we have of being able to give better levels of support whether they're medical, social, educational to community members. It's a way in which they can enhance and be able to have access to diverse economic growth now.

The issue is like Queen Quet was saying that a key and often overlooked component in effective intervention aimed at reducing this inequality. You know, this bridging of the digital divide is engagement and connection with the potential community. So today our process involves identification and maps of target areas that are being, for example, sociably vulnerable or areas that don't have 25 meg downloads or 100 meg downloads which might be some of the issues that we just ran into.

And while there's a significant amount of reporting, resources and regulation that goes into this awesome mapping tool to assist in deciding where support should be prioritized, these maps and tools were not designed with an engagement and community connection in mind. Let alone are they a definitive representation of the needs of a community. And Queen Quet was just spot on with that.

And we're of almost two different, you know, ways of looking at it, but we were speaking the same language and I felt her fire. So I just want to retouch on that.

So when it comes to rural communities even when a bridge through the digital divide is built though by failing to intimately connect with a given community and give voice to their insights, specific challenges, values. We've not necessarily met the critical needs of the community or provided a bridge that will impact them positively.

So the recipients of funding. So as we look towards all this funding that's coming, the

recipients must first connect to a community, connect to their specific cultural, societal and values based needs prior to making any commitment or being awarded very sparse funding.

So there's not funding available to connect the entire U.S. As much funding as is being made available today, it's not enough to do the entire job. So that's why there's these schools and way for us to try to make that money go further. But this is an integral things that needs to be considered before you award this sparse funding.

So our way of doing this doesn't specifically incentivizes what we're trying to do. What we need to do which is connect with a community. Community specific needs and values are best served through prioritizing funding to local telephone cooperatives. Sounds self-serving, but the reason why is because local cooperatives have been doing that connection for over 60 years or longer on average.

Now, very quickly this huge funding that's being made available, the \$42.5 billion internet for all initiative that everybody is talking about. It really has the potential to exacerbate this very same problem. It incentivizes companies with deep pockets, larger footprints to come in and check off all those boxes, you know, based on the tools that we have available and say, hey, we're meeting this objective, this objective, this objective and then they stamp that community as connected.

Now, while that's something that will solve a short-term issue which is broadband connectivity. If fails to address what is broadband connectivity and what is connectivity for that community in particular. We're very top/down as Gbenga was talking about when it comes to giving this funding or providing funding or deciding where it goes. We're written very top/down.

Now, rural America would benefit most from both a participatory approach to funding which means listening to folks like Queen Quet. Listening to the folks being provided for versus the top/down approach. They can do this via communities and local properties and the willingness of the program managers at the U.S. level. The program administrators to weigh their awards and the rubrics accordingly.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: I'm sorry to interrupt but Jamie is back with us and I do want to give her a moment to join the conversation. Jamie, can you hear us?

MS. GLOSHAY: Yeah, I can. I think case in point, right, this is what the digital divide and the inequalities are. I'm in rural Alaska and I thought I secured an internet connection, so I apologize. I'm

now at another place so I think we're okay.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: You don't need to apologize.

MS. GLOSHAY: Thanks. Yeah, so what I was saying is I support an organization that has actually been co-created with community.

To your point, David, we really pride ourselves in being able to do that because then we have the trust. We can understand the real challenges and barriers, even the nuance that exists as well as look to our community and see our community as the solution experts because only they know what's going to be supportive.

So what we do is we actually provide programming capital as well as culturally relevant technical assistance that speaks to the needs of our community. While holding an understanding that there's a lot of historical and interregional trauma that effects the lives and livelihoods of people.

So I just wanted to stress the point too is that as we're a highly invisible community representing less than two percent of the U.S. population and less than five percent of the global population. Indigenous people actually steward 80 percent of the world's biodiversity. So the inclusion of indigenous voices and especially with rural federal government policy, local policy, city policy, et cetera, is actually really, really critical because we hold a very unique government to government relationship.

And we have I think knowledge and wisdom and history to share that could actually support in the dismantling and restructuring of the systems that be that are currently not benefiting all people.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Thank you, Jamie. I want to try to change things up here a bit. And be a little more futuristic and practical as well. I want folks to hear, to understand we're not talking just about concepts. These are real strategies in play.

David, I'll plug for you that Leaco got quality gig level fiber out to Tatum for about 600 homes. So it's happening. It's possible. If the questions that lead choose to ask.

So let me ask a different question, Jennifer, because I love some of the work I'm seeing going on and in the workforce phase, right? So thinking about the future. This greening. Getting ready for a green economy. It's there. There's nothing you're going to be able to do about it.

What is your strategy to building a future proof to work for? So it's going to fit into these

few jobs. Who are the partners that you're working with?

MS. GRASSHAM: Yeah. So, you know, thinking about –you're right. It's a green economy and it's coming. And so, what we're doing here in Lea County – I've taught like a dual track approach. So we continue to do oil and gas development and it's kind of our bread and butter at the same time that we are helping to continue to diversify into more green energy sources like hydrogen, wind solar. All these things that actually we can do in Lea County.

We just happen to have those natural resources as well. The cool thing about it is that the workforce is somewhat similar. And so, that's one of the reasons that it allows us to do both, right? We don't have to just say, well, we're not doing this anymore. We've moved over. We can do both and – and so, in a workforce there's a couple of things that some tweaking to skills training that can take a guy from our, you know, and now much more.

We can take some girls in the field and take them. I did some roist abouting myself. You could go from the field and a couple of minor changes. Work in the hydrogen production facility. There's a lot of similarities in energy production which is why we think about – and above, you know, all the above approach to energy.

But what I'll say about the workforce and it goes back to partnership and I think you see this theme. Community partnerships through everything that we're talking about. In rural communities, we rely heavily on partnerships. And it maybe is our secret sauce. And we have really good example and it's in workforce. And we are opening a brand new vocational high school in August.

So we're super excited about this. It was funded through a partnership. Maybe the largest – one of the largest public/private partnerships in the state of New Mexico. It involved private philanthropy. It involved local government and a school bond to fund not only the building of this, but also programming and a sustainability fund for the future purchases of equipment. Because we know that's going to change.

And when you need to buy new equipment, you're not going to have the money. So you better go ahead and just do it now. And put that money – you know, so it's always if you see another thing about Lea County, it's always planning for the future. Always. It's very forward looking.

But that workforce thinking is not just a traditional school. It's accountable to the

business community and it gets support from the business community. And so, things like our kids being taught what's going to be useful. Can they have a living wage graduating from high school? Can they go to the community college? Can they go to four year? Can they do whatever they want to do right out of high school?

And so, I think this really it's a great partnership in terms of workforce development that looks fantastic from the highway as well.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: It does. We took fantastic pictures of it. I can't wait to see tech to open.

Teresa, I'm going to bring you back in here because you and I talked about the ways broadband has been, you know, getting in your way. It has been limiting your ability to attract new businesses. Whether it's to support the economic diversification or to do some more stand fracking. I am not an environmental scientist here. So I'll leave that right there and don't say anything more about it.

But I want to hear from you about the work that Monahan has done and is doing right into respond to its own broadband infrastructure. Tell me about your work there.

MS. BURNETT: Well, it started about six and a half years ago so it is a long process and it is not an easy fix. And as David said, it's very expensive. It takes a lot to get it done.

But we started about 60 years ago. And we partnered as Jennifer said, partnerships are so important in our area. It's what makes the whole area not only your community successful but the whole area successful. And we partnered with a foundation that gave us a grant to be able to research our community and see what we needed as so far as broadband has been internet to get this done.

So with that being said, we did surveys. We checked speed tests. We looked all of the areas. The different type of, you know, satellite. The different type of fiber bit was here. And put all of that together and worked on getting a planned device that we needed for our community.

So after all that hard work then we, you know, you have to get with the right people. You know, not everybody really knows all they say is that there is to know about broadband and how to put it together. And how to successfully. And financially put the whole works together.

So hired a consultant and we've been working very close with this consultant for several years. And we went out. We started seeking bids and were able to get some money. We've actually

raised \$3.2 million for our community to start doing our process here. We have completed the first phase which is an ethernet, a ring around the community that will help us. So if there comes in and there is a cut in the line or there's, you know, someone knocks over a telephone pole or anything and we lose connectivity at least we don't lose connectivity for days or hours. We just use lose it for a few seconds. And it will provide redundancy in the community too to keep us going.

Because as we all know right now. Communities, if we lose our internet, we lose nearly everything in our town as far as, you know, restaurants that need to check people out in restaurants. Motels that need to check people in and out of motels. Gas stations that, you know, people need to get their gas with. The grocery stores that we have to purchase. So we've done that and we've completed that first phase to get put in so we're really excited about that.

And we're now starting our second phase which is actually boring in the alleys to try to get connectivity to residential and commercial businesses in our community. So that is our second phase right now. And not really sure when that is to be completed. But we will keep going as long as we keep getting money and we keep moving forward on this project.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Thank you, Teresa. This is exactly why I wanted you to be here today and talk about that ethernet ring that you're building.

Jamie, what I hear from Teresa and everybody else going from a partnership, but we're also hearing innovation. Like we're doing it our way because nobody else is trying to understand what we think needs to be done. Native Women Lead is also doing it your own way. What are you doing when it comes to making women seen and visible? Native Women Lead business in particular? Describe that body of work for us.

MS. GLOSHAY: Sure. So it's definitely a community lead, co-designed work and approach. As I said, we are creating a place for community to lean into that's representative of them.

We're also creating, I guess an arm of advocacy just to ensure that indigenous voice is including at multiple levels as well as creating our own capital tools. A lot of – like 70 percent of our network are self-funding. They're entrepreneurship strings and ideas in businesses. And I think I read a report to see, you know, how many indigenous folks were actually funded through the Small Business Administration, through the SBA. And it was like .67 percent, less than one percent of the indigenous

people are funded through the SBA.

So what we essentially did – and we also have huge predatory lending in New Mexico. There was barely legislation that was passed this past year that kept interest rates at like 30 percent, which is still ridiculous. People in indigenous communities are often targeted by predatory lending that have interest rates upwards of 300 to 400 percent. So it is extremely exploitative and we saw a need to create our own capital tools and mechanisms.

So we're actually challenging traditional underwriting frameworks that exist in finance. For example, the five Cs of credit. If folks are based in the U.S., we all know we need like a good FICO score. We need capital to repay the loans. Potentially utilize assets or collateral to leverage the loan as a promise to pay.

Indigenous people don't have that, a lot of those things. Exclusion from accessing financial literacy and education as a result of low FICO scores. We're not able to leverage our assets in our traditional homelands because they're held in trust by the federal government. So we can't utilize a home or land or even vehicles to leverage to get a loan as a promissory pay.

Additionally, we don't have access to intergenerational wealth that has actually spurred a lot of differentiation between black and brown communities who are able to transfer wealth through homeownership and other asset building strategies. So we had to create a different framework just to meet the needs of our community. And as a result, we've created the five Rs of (inaudible) which is actually an underwriting decision making mechanism that centers indigenous women from the design all the way to the implementation and the decision making.

And it's actually challenging the five Cs of credit to say like this is actually framework that has been economically exclusionary not only to indigenous people but communities of color. And we're going to rewrite our own rules because access to capital is something that is a huge issue in our communities.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Jamie, I'm going to take license here and editorialize a little bit. I met one of the wonderful women that Native Women Lead has funded. And so, when Jamie says we're rewriting it means that they give her access to capital. And in the repayment structure they take nonprofit dollars, blend it with the capital, but they put out a (inaudible) loan fund to her.

And so, if there's a month where Ms. Archileta (phonetic) cannot make her payment. Her credit report doesn't suffer. Those loan funds come in, make the payment for her and that payment sharing keeps her credit and that character protected and safe and therefore visible. So one day she's going to go back into that mainstream to get larger sources of funding, but that's the work that Native Women Lead does. It's not based in feeling and yoga. It's real strategies.

So I will pivot to David because I want some more strategy talk here. What are the ways that, you know, you've been through it all, David? From DSL all the way now to fiber so you've experienced a lot. In your experience which policies, programs, strategies have worked in your favor? And I think Gbenga is probably perking up his ears now because we kind of want to know what should the federal government be doing differently to serve?

Like those foreign areas like Tatum that Leaco has been bring fiber to?

MR. JIMENEZ: What we did again like with Tatum is get a RUS loan, a Rural Utilities Service Loan that allowed us to do that. What we're doing now, though is we're exploring more of a partnership type deal with Southern Lea County and I'll bring up Jal, New Mexico as a good example.

They did apply for some loans, some ARPA funding and they were denied not once but twice based on, in my opinion, the oversight folk's inability to really truly understand how broadband was built. Regardless, they kept on working. Attempting – trying to get funding either in internally through the municipality, the city. They brought in anchor institutions like the hospital and also the schools.

Now in municipalities are a town's needs. Again, I'm going to reiterate that is what drives good connectivity. And with Jal, Leaco developed and continues to develop a very good relationship with them to the point where we respond to their needs not from a top/down approach but from a participatory type of scenario. And that has worked in the case of Jal, New Mexico.

So with Jal, the community itself has been able to raise a significant amount of capital much like what Teresa was talking about to the tune of about, you know, a little bit north of \$3 million to try to get connectivity in fiber not just in the city of Jal, but the transport or the link, which is the most expensive part back to a more central location in the county that can serve the needs of Jal, all their anchor institutions and anything else that they try to do.

So we've been able to see a monetary success of that route versus simply just putting up

our plans out, our engineering plans and waiting for an award.

We've used the reconnect two process that's been put in place. We've got a reconnect three that's also coming up to be awarded a good size – and this is – that type is not a loan. It's more of a grant and you have to invest some of it. So it's like a 25 percent investment for 75 percent grant. So that's another way that we have been able to obtain some sort of funding to be able to get fiber to, in this case, locations like Maljamar, New Mexico, Dexter and Hagerman in New Mexico as well.

These are very tiny and small towns. Smaller than Tatum even that would continue to be overlooked if it wasn't for some of these programs that have been put in place now. Attempting to get those funds is a significant process. It's not a barrier in so much is as a protection to make sure that the folks and the entities being funded are going to be able to do what they say, number one. And that there's longevity in place so that the investment that's being made by the government or any other agencies is a sound investment moving forward. My point is that in some cases that overshadows the actual need that the community has like it did for Jal.

Now, in Maljamar, Dexter and Hagerman, we were able to meet those needs. We're still in the process of making that happen, but Jal was left out in the cold. And because the incumbent exchange that serves Jal is a tier one or tier two without saying names.

Like a bigger provider, a non-coop. The chances of them seeing any type of funding by their provider, you know, their independent provider are very slim because that same large provider with a huge footprint that I talked about earlier. They're going to spend their money where they can get their rate of return back, you know, their investment back. And that's not going to be in a village of Jal, you know, with 400 homes.

So we've done things differently to try to bridge those but it's – for the third time, it's about the connectivity. Communities need more than good programs and good intentions. We need connections too. But just not of the fiber kind only, but human connections as well.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Yeah. Thank you, David. I love that you are able to, you know, distill these extremely complex programs and all of the energy that goes into trying to get some thorough resources and turn that into action and then help us -- can see the work that you're doing out there. And it's a tough place. And some places – but when you look inside the technology is so amazing. You would

think you were in a city.

So Gbenga, I'm going to turn to you here. Devil's advocate. We've heard your remark at the beginning. It was like, man, this is rural America, right? It's diverse. Some familiar faces are here and others new. So it takes an incredible amount of effort to reach out. To reach beyond the standards that you and I are judged by to do this kind of work.

How has this conversation on racial equality then showing up in the USDA's programming its policies? Vis-à-vis the communities that we are talking with here today? And just let me add a part B because, of course, I wouldn't be me if I didn't.

Is there room for new partnership models? Like I want to hear real strategy that you can sort of take back tomorrow after this and say, here's where these pieces fit in given, you know, what's on our drawing board right now. Help us understand that thinking.

MR. AJILORE: Thank you, Makada. I appreciate the question. I really appreciate this conversation because it's not been radical. We're talking about what people are doing. What, you know, the issues that come up and here's how we tackle it. Like Jamie and Native Women Lead, you know, make me think about there's this pilot program for homeownership in native communities where it's based off of – you know, to get a mortgage, you have to have a credit score.

So we have this pilot program where you use a native CDFI or they do a different type of scoring. And so, they've been able, I think in the last three or four years – been able to like do like 10 or so houses. You know, but that's all a completely different model. And it takes individual knowledge like localized knowledge.

I was thinking about David. He was kind of generous saying that it wasn't a barrier our grant process. You know, it is a barrier. And this actually goes to the first part of your question about how is this conversation really helped out USDA? Well, those are more broadly the federal government. Executive Order 13985 calls for a whole government equity review.

So every single federal agency has to go through their policies, processes, programs and to see how do we score on equity. So that means looking at everything. It means talking to our internal staff. It means talking to our external stakeholders. And there's a number of things that we found. And, you know, a number of barriers. And, you know, there's barriers like our process of applying for loans

and grants. I mean by nature applying for a program is a barrier, right?

And so, you think about the actual process of like getting – you have to like maybe like a DUNS number. Let's say, you're applying for broadband, but you have to go to grants.gov, right? You have to go online to get broadband. You know, that's a barrier right there. And you think about the paperwork and the timing.

You know, you go to L.A. or D.C. or San Francisco, they have whole teams, whole departments to apply for these things. You go to these small towns of 400,000; 500,000 people. They don't have that. And so, you're asking them in order to figure out what they need to do to go through that. That's a barrier. But even more fundamentally, there's the issue of trust, right?

The federal government, we don't need to go through the history of the federal government. You know, particularly, you know, travel to communities. Black and brown communities. You know, you say we have all these great programs but these communities they say, oh, that's not for us because it hasn't been for us, right?

And so, one of the things you have to think about is like, well, how do you build back trust? Well, part of that is engagement. So David is talking about human connections. You know, one of the things – let's say, you're talking about what are some new models for partnership? We mentioned partnership, collaborative, localized knowledge, focusing on the community.

Well, part of it is, you know, one of the things we have this initiative where we have the state offices and state directors and we have field staff. Part of it is just a way of just saying, you know what? Let's go to the community and talk to them and listen to them. But you can't say, well, you need to just go talk to them and ask them and see what's going on. You have to give the incentive.

So at world development, you know, we get money to obligate funds, right? And we're, you know, scored on it. Our performance is rated on how well we get money out. Well, to get money out you go to people who know how to apply, who have the projects, who have the history to be able to do that.

Now, these communities – you know, this is the first time applying for it. So as David just – you know, to me that was not able to get it. Now, normally, we would say, well, they just can't get it because, you know, they can't get it. So there's nothing we can do.

But what we actually need to do is go to that community and say, okay. Why were you denied? What was it that denied? And then say, okay. What can we do to help you so that the next time you apply you can get the grant? Because then if we do – we could take those steps. You know, help build that local capacity. Two years, five years, 10 years from now, they'll apply for grants. They're getting it. They're paying for loans, they're getting it and paying it back and they're building up and having prosperity.

So part of that new framework is to be able to go to these communities, help them build a local capacity and then therefore, they're going to be more successful. But we have to incentivize our staff to do that. Say that taken the time to engage with these communities is going to be rewarded because if it's not they're not going to do it.

And so, we have to do those things. So one way we're doing this. We have a new initiative called the Rural Partners Network. This is what 13 different applicable agencies where we have a desk officer, we have staff on the ground, FTEs, to be able to go to these communities. So right now, it's 25 communities like Arizona, New Mexico, Alabama, all the states that we're working on where we actually go to these communities. Work with them to figure out, okay, how do we help you build your – you know, basically, helping them, one, navigate federal resources.

So we say, okay. These are the things that you want. These are the things that you need. You go to SBA or you go to Commerce or you go to the Department of Labor or you can go to USDA and here are the things to do it. Now, we're going to help you to apply for it. So does that mean leveraging partnerships? Is there philanthropy? Are there nonprofit institutions that you could partner with that help you?

And then part of that is to helpfully build that local capacity so that, again, the next time they apply, they won't need our help. They'll have those partnerships. They'll have those connections to do that. There was also in Build Back Better rural partnership program that had money for technical assistance, the capacity building.

So a lot of what we're trying to, you know, change our framework is to really to put into practice building capacity, having partnerships, collaborative, using localized knowledge. Not just like we're coming in and we can tell you what to do. But like going in and saying, okay, what do you know?

You know, communities are already being innovative. And it's like okay. What can we help to partner with that?

And so, a lot of it is just – but the other thing, the other important thing when it comes to federal government is to work on the culture. That you can change programs. You can put new policies. You can put new regulations. But if the staff and the people don't want to do it, they're not going to do it.

And it's not about saying, well, you worked at USDA for 20 years and USDA is racist. It's not that. It's more of like this is the mission of rural development. And this is what you've been doing, but what we're talking about is a way of doing that better. Of reaching the communities that were hard to reach and they maybe hard to reach for a good reason. But we're going to give you the incentive to put that extra effort in because that's what we do. That's who we are.

And so, you know, it's also the culture that we have to help build up and do. And so, that's what we're working on and hopefully we'll be successful.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Thank you, Gbenga. As I'm processing your comments. It takes me back to I was in New York a few weeks ago and listened to a dynamic speaker who made me come back to this work and say, you know, you're doing it right. And he said choose to be specific. Race work is hard work. You know, we don't talk about it, but it's hard work.

But I think there's something being overlooked here in how you should be approaching all that you heard here today. The stylist box are what they are. They're not going to change. When we had the crisis roll out, we understood because we've been to this before, the Great Recession. The homeowners are going to be hit hard and they're going to need support and they're going to need those checks and their going to need forbearance.

And after we declare that those forbearance programs are done, the states are going to still need some help. And so, nine, ten – almost \$10 billion monies or checks are written to states through a check and written to states. And there's an allocation for each state. Tell us how you're going to use these funds given what we think is the, you know, how severe is your crisis is? Not apply for this, but here's our assessment of what your need is.

How are you going to use these funds? Let's work with you to craft those strategies through data driven approaches. And I wonder if the USDA might want to shift some of its framing to that

way? You know, I want to see for example Jasper, who is not here today, county show up in your pipeline.

They have a \$5 million shortfall and bring in the Jasper ocean terminal online. That's going to be lots of jobs. It's going to be a transformational project. Where is the federal government? They should be waiting at their phones. We understand. You are in our pipeline. How can we help? So that's my challenge and I'm not going to make you anymore uncomfortable.

I'm going to switch to Q&A. And the way we're going to do this, guys. I'm going to throw it out to you and we'll be as nice as we have been and compassionate with each other here and not, you know, over speak but get everybody to respond to these questions.

Jamie, we had a question for you asking, what role can ESG, Environmental Social Governance market in the municipal securities or capital stacking models play in addressing rural communities? I'm going to change that question a little bit. When you and I spoke, we shared – we realized we shared a similar background coming from CDFIs.

Something that you said to me, I will never forget. And you're right because I went back into my history and I looked at it and it was the same thing. I worked in an organization bringing millions of dollars down every year and took from poverty wages.

So tell me what should we be thinking as we're trying to lift up your kind of work for the people who are engaged in that kind of work? Nonprofits have an obligation here in helping us to close the racial wealth gap. Those decisions that they make are part of that. So I'll leave it there and we'll see how you take that piece on.

Gbenga, for you. I live in Pennsylvania. It's a long dead coal fields. Here, we are seeing new jobs, right? We're seeing warehouse jobs from Amazon and whoever else is building those logistic frameworks there. But if all of these are semi, let's call them, low skill jobs. How am are these areas supposed to keep their college educated graduates at home?

David, somebody wants us to react to the Brookings' piece that was written in 2018 that says, put simply. The fate of rural America relies on cities. A particular broadband world because you are rural. These are your communities. I want you to react to that premise.

Teresa, in order to do what you've done, you've had to go through some extraordinary

legislative processes with your folk. What are those solutions in that, you know, Texas – in your award county experience. Help us understand that maybe other states and other communities can learn from that experience.

And then, Jennifer. The rise of remote work, I think a lot of communities are excited about getting these foot loose workers in. How can we accelerate broadband access? It could be just in Lea or for, you know, everyone here generally, right? To help them I think retain or attract those kinds of populations because that's going to be, you know, a part of the growth cycle as well.

So there you have it. I don't know who wants to jump in first?

MR. JIMENEZ: I can speak quickly to the article. I read it and it's – the big point there is that it was very relevant in 2018. But if anything, the issue that we've had globally has shown us is that everything can change.

It was based on facts that were very relevant that you could count on back in 2018, which was, yes, that the majority of the economic benefit to a nation was coming from the metropolitan areas.

Now, post-pandemic, we've seen a massive shift with remote officing. Now, you can get the benefit of those good jobs in the metro areas but be able to live in a more peaceful area. You know, like say rural America. Somewhere X, Y or Z.

Now, the big point that I was going to make with that whole article is it talked about connected rural communities having higher rates of educational attainment, population growth, average earnings and high wage service jobs and less income volatility than isolated communities. So it wasn't just a rural community that they mentioned, but there's two types of rural communities, the connected rural community and the isolated rural community.

So if we can get more connected rural communities, you can quickly see that those things would align and kind of update that article from 2018 and speak to the same needs that we're talking about today.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Wonderful. Jamie, can I get you and then, Gbenga, I'll come to you.

MS. GLOSHAY: Thanks so much. I appreciate that question and that differentiation between like the rural communities that's really helpful for my work.

I would say in response to the questions posed. In short, people are paid a living wage in honor of the lived experience that communities of color bring to the work. Especially as far as like honoring world views and solutions that we can also bring knowing that the systems are, in fact, failing right now.

I would also just add to the – I guess the question that was posed is that a lot of ESG framework doesn't go far enough. So we do need to be expansive on that as well as – sorry, give me one second. I'm in village life right now. Everybody is like, hi.

It's not expansive enough to, I think do the economic justice that we all seek and change in the world, and we want to change in the world. Additionally, I do think it's going to require creativity and looking at capital stacks that are inclusive and not only grant lending, recoverable grants. We actually have loan forgiveness woven into our capital program, which is explicitly saying that I don't want to just give my people debt in the wake of a pandemic.

And to the point of economic exclusion. I also feel like indigenous people are owed. We already have for lack of a better term, the skin is in the game as financial folks always talk about as well as our assets. The wealth that has been built is on indigenous land so that's kind of a strategy that we're approaching now as a more of a reparation lens to this work. And also, by living by that example and ensuring that we're not going to over burden our community just by giving them that.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Thank you. Gbenga? And then I'll go to Teresa and then, Jennifer, you close us out. We only have a few more minutes left. So I want folks to be mindful of the time.

MR. AJILORE: Thank you. So one thing I want to mention is that instead of being termed low skill, I always like to use the term low wage. That skill levels are different.

And, you know, with the warehouses and jobs, you know, we've always had to get that economic developed moves jobs. But we should shift from that mentality of economic development to community development. That it is not enough just to provide jobs. You have to provide a place for people to live, work, love, all these things.

And so, if you focus on the community development and place making so there's a number of actually funds and programs to actually develop communities in place and community centers

and things like that. And housing and churches and hospitals, all those things that when you build that then the jobs will come. And then the college educated people will come.

And, you know, we saw some push back on like wanting to, you know, the creative class kind of thing about wanting to bring a college educated. Bring people in. Pay living wages and just develop these communities and that should be the focus of it. I'll leave it at that.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Thank you. Teresa?

MS. BURNETT: Well, speaking of broadband. I feel like broadband is the number one economic development project in the states right now, in the nation also.

And I do feel like that it is very important to partner with all your elected officials. They need to know what's going on in your community. What needs you have. How it's affecting the way that your community operates and how the people live in your community.

The Texas legislator in the last session were very proactive in helping us with the broadband and they created the broadband office for the state of Texas. In the meantime, they have had to – I mean, they have just hustled and bustled to try to get the broadband office going, getting the director in place, working on their advisory board and focusing on mapping throughout the state of Texas to see, you know, just where we have fiber, high speed and where we don't have it.

Identifying how many people in the state of Texas have broadband and how many don't. I do want to throw a statistic out there. It's just that 98.15 percent of the households in Texas have access at 25.3 leaving 165,353 households unserved. On a note, there's 141,730 homes in rural Texas and that means that 409,061 who reside in rural Texas do not have access to broadband at home, to attend school, visit doctors online or work remotely.

So that is a huge population for the state of Texas that's rural community that we don't have that accessibility. So stay in touch with your elected officials and your state in what's going on in trying to get that help to all of the communities. I think it's a necessity. It has to be done in order to continue to grow your businesses, to provide health services to educate and to provide security for what we're doing in today's world.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Thank you, Teresa. I want to underscore that point about security. Not until the colonial pipeline did we connect broadband to national security in a way that meets every

single person on this call here today. So think about it as you go back and you ruminate on the questions, thoughts and ideas here. Jennifer, over to you.

MS. GRASSHAM: Real quickly. Thinking about how to accelerate broadband development. I think we have been thinking around using the lens that broadband is a utility.

And so, we start talking about broadband like we talk about water and sewer. And so, when those things happen, it's not just, oh, that would be nice to have. It's a necessity to have. And so, whatever it takes to get water to new homes or out to – upgrading sewer systems, we think about upgrading fiber as well. And so, but I will put a real quick plug in for your local cooperatives because it's really useful to sit in a city commission meeting and understand, oh, they're going to redo the infrastructure out along the highway.

And say, oh, gosh. I know that's a place that we don't have our broadband infrastructure. And then down the street, literally, go into the, you know, local cooperative and say, hey, their digging a ditch, shouldn't you have your conduit in there at the same time? And absolutely, yes, we can.

And that can't happen with people who – when your CEO doesn't live in your community that kind of work doesn't happen. And so, I think we are – if we're not really elevating the cooperatives as a prime partner in the broadband work, I think we're missing a huge opportunity to accelerate. And it's those connections. So I'll leave it there.

MS. HENRY-NICKIE: Thank you, Jennifer. Guys, I'm really honored to just sit here. I'm looking at my screen and I'm like, man. This is it. You have won.

And I just want to say that over the last few months, I've been guided by some of my own values. Like Native Women Lead, in my Caribbean culture there's a proverb I've heard from my elders over and over and over again. And it goes like this. Plankton you eat like rice. So let me translate that to D.C. speak. (inaudible) nations, the policies at work there, they don't translate well to, you know, people who live in rice nations.

And so, to create an equitable community, right, we need everybody because here's another one. One, one coco, fill the basket. Every single piece and every single community regardless of size or shape or contribution makes this country competitive. It makes it what it is today.

So I want to challenge the partners, the governments, our nonprofit partners. Let's ask

better questions in our grants. Not why should I care? What motivates you? And how can I help? That's a big thing for me. Researchers, small rural communities deserve your attention and some space in academic journals.

Asking the same questions of these communities will give us useful answers. What motivates you? How can I help?

Media partners, be intentional about your language and the images you choose to feature in your stories. Part of the work I have done was to invest in buying intellectual property from my partner, Dave Cooper. From the pictures that he has collected so I can donate them freely to the public. We collected them. They're free. I'm going to donate them to the public. Choose to use them.

And audience, I want to hear from you about whether we've done anything here to convince you differently to think about what it means for rural America to show up in the policy architecture?

But don't reach out to me because I don't know it. I just kind of orchestrated this. I challenge you to reach out to these communities here. Get their Twitter. Get their IG. Whatever else. Amplify, invest, support their work.

And when you're done, I'd love you to drop me an email and tell me, here's how this conversation today made me think differently about rural communities. Here's how it showing up and they're showing up differently in my work.

And that's all that I ask. That will be the greatest gift I think we could give back to Queen Quet, to Native Women Lead and to all the people who shared their time so generously with us. Thank you so much and look forward to hearing more from everyone around this table.

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