

# Building Rural and Native Communities' Resilience to Disasters

## Speaker Biographies

**Farah Ahmad** has spent her career advancing policies and programs that promote economic inclusion and opportunity. She currently serves as the Chief of Staff for USDA Rural Development. From 2015 through 2017, Ms. Ahmad served as a Program Manager with the Rural Business-Cooperative Service's Community and Economic Development program. Before rejoining Rural Development, Ms. Ahmad managed financial resiliency programs and strategic and operational initiatives for the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. She also served as a Senior Policy Analyst for the Center for American Progress where she helped advance evidence-based economic policies that centered on racial equality. Farah Ahmad holds a Master of Public Affairs from the Princeton University School of Public and International Affairs and a Bachelor of Science from the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations.

**Kimiko (Kimi) Barrett, PhD**, is a native Montanan with a deep interest in rural landscapes and the people who live there. She has a natural aptitude for connecting and energizing people in the pursuit of community resilience and climate adaptation. Kimi has managed Headwaters Economics' *Community Planning Assistance for Wildfire* program for six years. She has worked with firefighters, land use and planning staff, government agency personnel, and elected officials in more than 80 communities across the country, helping them devise community-driven solutions to reduce wildfire risk and increase community resiliency. Kimi's partnerships with senior researchers, professors, and policymakers ensure that her work is science-based and relevant. Kimi is a committed agent of change in how we live with inevitable wildfires. Drawing on the expertise within the broad networks she has built, she has led research of national significance on topical issues such as the true cost of wildfires, the cost of building wildfire-resistant homes, and measuring wildfire impacts through structure loss. Her work has changed the national wildfire narrative and shaped new strategies for protecting communities from wildfire.

**Nikki Cooley** is the co-manager for ITEP's Tribal Climate Change Program. She is of the Diné Nation by way of Shonto and Blue Gap, AZ, and is of the Towering House Clan, born for the Reed People Clan, maternal grandfathers are of the Water that Flows Together Clan, and paternal grandfathers are of the Manygoats Clan. Nikki received her Bachelors and Masters of Forestry from Northern Arizona University (NAU) with a few years of post-graduate study at Michigan State University. For her undergraduate and Masters studies, she has worked extensively with the Cherokee Tribe of North Carolina, and has worked with various tribes including the Kaibab Paiute tribe. Prior to ITEP, Nikki has worked with the Merriam Powell Center for Environmental Research on a Climate Change Education Program, and at NAU Talent Search working with underrepresented, low-income, potential first generation college students at 10 middle and high schools in Northern Arizona. In addition, as a river guide and cultural interpreter working on the Colorado River-Grand Canyon and San Juan River, Nikki is the co-founder of the Native American River Guide Training Program and Fifth World Discoveries, was the first Native American President and Vice-President of the Grand Canyon River Guides Association (GCRG), and is a former associate director of the Native Voices Program. She is very passionate about advocating for and education about the protection and preservation of the environment and its resources. Nikki thoroughly enjoys gardening, her Navajo language and culture, and spending time with her large extended family in the southwest and Iowa.

**Alison Davis, PhD**, is the H.B. Price Professor of Agricultural Economics at the University of Kentucky and the Executive Director of the Community and Economic Development Initiative of Kentucky (CEDIK). CEDIK is an integrated engagement/research center housed within the College of Agriculture, Food and Environment at the University of Kentucky. CEDIK's mission is to build engaged communities and vibrant economies. Dr. Davis leads a team of fourteen engagement and research staff to support for CEDIK's four priority areas: economic development, leadership development, community health, and community design. Dr. Davis' role is to build relationships across campus, Kentucky and the South with the goal of promoting a stronger sense of community and an improved economic base in rural areas. Her rural economic development program utilizes workshops, trainings, and educational materials to highlight the importance of community engagement, infrastructure development, regionalism, and the impact of changing public policy on rural communities.

**Ines Polonius** is CEO of Communities Unlimited, Inc., a CDFI and community economic development organization in the rural South. Communities Unlimited (CU) works side by side with local leaders to create fair access to resources needed to sustain healthy communities, healthy businesses and healthy families. CU resides in the solutions space, providing direct assistance and capital to micro-enterprises, small businesses as well as water and wastewater systems in persistently poor rural places across Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee. Ines earned an MBA and an MA in Economics from Boston University and received her undergraduate degree from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. Today, Ines serves on the board of directors of the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) and of the Association for Enterprise Opportunity (AEO). She is a fellow of the Interdisciplinary Research Leader program funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, an active member of the Partners for Rural Transformation, the national WealthWorks network and a 2017 BALLE Fellow,

**Corianne Payton Scally** is a senior fellow in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where she explores the design, implementation, and outcomes of affordable housing and community development policy and programs for vulnerable populations across rural and urban areas. Her research on rural communities ranges from measuring assets and capacity to guiding investments in equitable solutions that boost services and infrastructure, and improve health and economic mobility. To explore these issues, Scally leads mixed-method research projects, directing extensive primary data collection via site visits, interviews, focus groups, and surveys, and analysis of administrative data to evaluate program processes and outcomes. Scally is a former associate professor in urban planning and former affordable housing developer. From 2015 to 2016, she led data and research initiatives at the US Department of Agriculture's Rural Housing Service for the Urban Institute. She received her PhD in urban planning and policy development from Rutgers University.

**Xochitl Torres Small** is the Under Secretary for Rural Development. Before coming to Rural Development, Xochitl was a United States Representative for the fifth largest district in the country. In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, Xochitl kept a rural hospital from closing its doors, improved constituent access to healthcare over the phone, and helped secure tens of millions of dollars for broadband in New Mexico through USDA's ReConnect Program. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, Xochitl raised the alarm on broadband disparities, serving on Majority Whip James Clyburn's Rural Broadband Taskforce and as an original cosponsor of the Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act. As a member of the House Agriculture Committee, Xochitl helped champion the needs of dairy farmers and sponsored legislation to help local producers and rural communities invest in infrastructure to navigate new markets. Xochitl forged additional bipartisan solutions on the House Armed Services Committee and as chairwoman of the Oversight, Management, and Accountability subcommittee of the House Homeland Security Committee.

Xochitl was the first woman and first person of color to represent New Mexico's second congressional district. The granddaughter of farmworkers, Xochitl Torres Small grew up in the borderlands of New Mexico. She came home from college to work as a field organizer, working in colonias in southern New Mexico. She continued serving rural New Mexico as a field representative for Senator Tom Udall, where she collaborated with local grassroots leaders, business owners, elected officials, and regional and state economic development officials to help communities rebound from the Great Recession. Inspired by Senator Udall's work on water in the West, Torres Small studied water law and worked closely with rural water utilities. After law school, she returned home to clerk for United States District Court Judge Robert C. Brack. Throughout her career, Xochitl has employed her experience working in vulnerable, rural communities to achieve lasting investments that combat persistent poverty. Xochitl has a law degree from the University of New Mexico School of Law, an undergraduate degree from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, and an international baccalaureate from Waterford Kamhlaba United World College of Southern Africa. She's happily married to her husband, New Mexico State Representative Nathan Small.

**Sarah Rosen Wartell** is the third president of the Urban Institute since it was founded in 1968. During her tenure, Urban celebrated a milestone anniversary by moving into a state-of-the-art research and convening facility and launched its Next50, a strategy to advance upward mobility, equity, and shared prosperity by bringing the power of knowledge to help changemakers accelerate solutions. Under Wartell's leadership, Urban aims to leverage cutting-edge technology and data science; understand and confront structural racism; and deliver timely, relevant, and actionable research to communities, capitals, board rooms, and wherever innovators are pursuing bold ideas. Previously, Wartell was deputy assistant to the president for economic policy and deputy director of the National Economic Council. She also worked in various roles at the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. After government service, Wartell was the founding chief operating officer and then executive vice president of the Center for American Progress. Her work focused on the economy and housing markets, and she directed the Mortgage Finance Working Group and the Doing What Works government performance program. Before her tenure in government, she practiced law with the Washington, DC, firm Arnold & Porter. Wartell currently serves on the boards of Enterprise Community Partners and the Georgetown Day School, Bank of America's National Community Advisory Council, and the Sadie Collective's Advisory Board. She previously served on the boards of the Low-Income Investment Fund, the Center for Urban Science and Progress at New York University, and the Corporation for Enterprise Development (now known as Prosperity Now). Her areas of expertise include community development, consumer finance, asset building, and housing finance. Wartell has a bachelor's degree with honors in urban affairs from the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs. She has a law degree from Yale Law School.