

Developing Local Community and Economic Development Ecosystems: What Does It Take?

Speaker Biographies

Zoila Ligia Jennings is Impact Investment Lead the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Previously, Zoila served as senior relationship manager with U.S. Bank, the fifth largest commercial bank in the United States, as part of its Community Development Corporation. In this role she sourced, structured, and underwrote loans and equity investments to Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs). She also developed and executed investment initiatives to help address racial inequities, including a \$25 million fund to support women of color microbusiness owners and the first CDFI-issued racial equity bond for targeted investments in underserved communities of color. Prior to joining U.S. Bank, Zoila spent 10 years at JPMorgan Chase, New York, rotating in various roles including vice president for Community Development-New Markets Tax Credits, where she used tax equity to structure community development transactions. As a credit underwriter she managed a credit portfolio that included lending—from small working capital lines to large syndicated tax-exempt debt obligations—to nonprofit hospitals, higher education institutions, and social services agencies. In other roles, she founded a consulting firm that specializes in credit underwriting, loan structuring, and financial due diligence for loans and investments that benefit low-income communities. Zoila holds an MBA from Kellogg School of Management, and a BS in Business Economics with a concentration in Catholic Studies from Fordham University.

Robert J. “R.J.” McGrail is senior research fellow in the Office of the President at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At the Lincoln Institute, R.J. is principal investigator and director of a new project, *Accelerating Community Investment: Bringing New Partners to the Community Investment System (ACI)*. The project will increase the efficacy and impact of philanthropic impact investing portfolios through a combination of field research, convening of leaders in the community investment system, development of potential investment opportunities for mission investors and collaboration with other Lincoln Institute program areas. Before joining the Lincoln Institute in 2019, R.J. served as a senior strategy and program executive in senior management roles in both government and politics, most recently as policy and program impact officer for MassDevelopment, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ quasi-public economic development authority. In this role, he was responsible for leading priority organizational development, strategic planning, program impact, and policy development strategies. His portfolio also included leading and supporting the agency’s collaborative work with non-traditional state and regional capital providers, with a focus on managing relationships with philanthropic partners and national thought leaders in community and economic development. Prior to his role with MassDevelopment, R.J. served in a variety of roles in the gubernatorial administration of Deval L. Patrick, including working directly with the Governor and as a senior adviser on policy and political matters to the Governor while traveling with him. Prior to this role, he served as a senior policy adviser to the Commonwealth’s Secretary of Labor. R.J. serves as a member of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston’s Working Cities Challenge steering committee and has been an invited lecturer at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Also in collaboration with the bank, he cochaired the mixed-use downtown redevelopment task force and was a contributor to *Capital & Collaboration: An In-Depth Look at the Community Investment System in Massachusetts Working Cities*, which assessed challenges, opportunities and recommended system changes needed in the community investment system in Massachusetts. He is a graduate of the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and also holds an M.A. in Public Administration from Suffolk University in Boston.

Brett Theodos is a senior fellow and director of the Community Economic Development Hub at the Urban Institute. His work focuses on economic and community development, neighborhood change, affordable homeownership, consumer finance, and program evaluation and learning. His research includes evaluations of the Economic Development Administration, New Markets Tax Credit, Small Business Administration loan and investment programs, Opportunity Zones, and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's Choice Neighborhoods, Community Development Block Grant, and Section 108 programs. He is studying how capital flows (or fails to flow) into communities, including the role of mission finance actors like community development financial institutions. He leads projects researching how entrepreneurs can access capital. Theodos has conducted studies of neighborhood change and geographic mobility. He is evaluating several place-based initiatives. He's led studies of affordable homeownership supports, including shared equity models like community land trusts. In the financial capability space, he's led studies of financial coaching, financial curriculum, and rules of thumb for decisionmaking. He's explored the geography of debt. Theodos is working to grow nonprofit capacity in performance measurement. He directs Measure4Change, which provides technical assistance and facilitates a community of practice for nonprofits and has led randomized controlled trial evaluations of youth workforce and education preparedness programs. Theodos serves on the Board of the Center for Community Progress, the Douglass Community Land Trust, and the Housing Authority of Prince George's County. Theodos received his BA from Northwestern University, MPP from Georgetown University, and PhD in public policy from George Washington University.

Christopher J. Tyson is President of the National Community Stabilization Trust. Chris was recently a Newman Trowbridge Distinguished Professor of Law at the Paul M. Hebert Law Center at Louisiana State University. In December 2021 he completed a four-year term as the President and CEO of Build Baton Rouge, the city's redevelopment authority and land bank. Under his leadership the city launched a \$50 million Bus Rapid Transit project, won a \$30 million HUD Choice Neighborhoods grant, was awarded the highly competitive \$5 million JP Morgan Chase AdvancingCities grant, and established Baton Rouge's first Community Land Trust. During that same period Build Baton Rouge acquired and prepared for development over 20 acres of vacant and blighted urban property and administered over \$20 million in HUD Community Development grants on behalf of the city of Baton Rouge. Chris received his Juris Doctor degree from the Georgetown University Law Center, his Master of Public Policy degree from the Harvard Kennedy School, and his Bachelor of Architecture degree, with honors, from Howard University.

Karen Williams has been an economic and community development professional for over 30 years, focusing on public-private partnerships and subsidy financing as tools to accelerate infrastructure and projects with high jobs or services impacts for private, government, nonprofit, and tribal clients, particularly in low-income areas. She was invited to testify before a Senate working group on innovative infrastructure financing and to participate in a working group of the Clinton Global Initiative. As a lawyer or consultant, Karen has participated in financing transactions totaling over \$2 billion for infrastructure, community facilities, commercial sites, manufacturing, and affordable housing.