

Energy at a Crossroad: Affordability, Fairness, and Transition

Speaker Biographies

Opening Remarks

Lisa Dubay is an Institute fellow in the Health Policy Division at the Urban Institute. She is a nationally recognized expert on Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). For over 35 years, Dr. Dubay has focused on evaluating the effects of federal and state policies on access to care, health care utilization, health insurance coverage, and health outcomes using quasi-experimental designs. Dr. Dubay's work also focuses on understanding the role that social determinants play in promoting health. Dubay returned to Urban after spending several years as an associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and as special advisor in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at the Department of Health and Human Services. She has an ScM from Harvard University School of Public Health and a PhD from Johns Hopkins University.

Opening Presentation

Oriya Cohen is a policy program manager in the Research to Action Lab at the Urban Institute, where he leads cross-division initiatives that help policymakers and practitioners strengthen climate resilience, spur housing innovation, and advance wealth equity. With experience in local government, community development, and grantmaking, Cohen brings an interdisciplinary approach to research and engagement with changemakers. Before joining Urban, Cohen was a Coro Fellow in public affairs in California, where he supported organizations to strengthen health and housing partnerships, develop affordable housing, and analyze the impacts of sea-level rise across the Bay Area. Before joining Coro, he worked in the Oakland Office of the Mayor, helping to establish the city's first department of transportation and supporting the development of a citywide general obligation bond to fund transportation, infrastructure, and affordable housing projects across the city. Cohen received a BA in sustainable environmental design from the University of California, Berkeley.

Panel 1: The Drivers and Effects of Household Energy Insecurity

Diana Hernandez is a tenured Associate Professor and Founding Principal Investigator of the Energy Equity, Housing and Health Program at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. She is also a co-Director of the Energy Opportunity Lab at the Center on Global Energy Policy. A pioneering sociologist, Professor Hernández has advanced the concept of energy insecurity along with research on the links between housing and health through innovative mixed-methods research, community partnerships, and policy interventions. Rooted in community engagement and policy innovation, her work addresses systemic barriers to healthy housing and household energy access and affordability while proposing and testing promising interventions. Professor Hernández is the lead author of *Powerless: The People's Struggle for Energy* (with Jennifer Laird), the first and most prominent book on energy insecurity in the US published

by Russell Sage in 2025. Her current projects include translating research to promote policy and programmatic action towards housing and energy justice in cities, states and with utility and clinical partners. For the 2025–2026 academic year, she was a Climate Justice Fellow at Harvard University's Radcliffe and Salata Institutes and is a University Fellow at Resources for the Future.

Samuel Towell has served as the 38th Commissioner of the Virginia State Corporation Commission since March of 2024. Judge Towell, along with his two colleagues, oversees a constitutionally independent state department of more than 750 employees responsible for the regulation of public utilities, insurance, state-chartered financial institutions, securities, retail franchising, and railroads, among other industries. The SCC also serves as Virginia's central filing office for corporations, limited partnerships, and limited liability companies and operates Virginia's state-based health benefit exchange. Judge Towell's prior public service includes five years as Virginia's Deputy Attorney General for Civil Litigation, where he managed the majority of the Commonwealth's affirmative and defensive civil litigation portfolio, including in the areas of ratepayer advocacy, civil rights, consumer protection, and constitutional law. He has also served as the Deputy Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry, supervising the policy development and economic growth initiatives for two of Virginia's largest private industries. He has been a member of the Virginia Code Commission and the Clean Energy Advisory Board. In the private sector, Judge Towell was the Associate General Counsel for Litigation at Smithfield Foods, Inc. Previously, he was a litigator in private practice with two Richmond-based law firms: McGuireWoods LLP and Williams Mullen P.C. Judge Towell received his B.S. in Mechanical Engineering with a minor in Economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and his J.D. from the University of Virginia School of Law. He is a native of Richmond, Virginia, where he lives with his wife and daughter.

Laurie Wheelock is the Executive Director and General Counsel of the Public Utility Law Project. She began her career working for the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) where she fought for the rights of consumers across the state. Ms. Wheelock went on to work for three different members of the New York State Assembly in both Albany and New York City focusing on a wide variety of issue areas including legislation to promote affordable housing, public access to insurance, nonprofit reform, and environmental protection. Ms. Wheelock received her Bachelors Degree in Political Science from Binghamton University and received her Juris Doctorate and Masters in Environmental Law and Policy from Vermont Law School.

Mark Wolfe is an energy economist who is a nationally recognized public policy expert on energy markets, affordability, efficiency, and financing programs. In the course of his career, he has focused on helping low income families increase the energy efficiency of their homes, developing strategies to maximize the affordability of their home energy bills and helping them adapt to rising temperatures as a result of climate change. Mark has been an op-ed contributor to the CNN, The Hill and The Messenger as well as other media outlets on environmental justice issues, particularly at the intersection of energy, housing, and public health. He serves as Executive Director of the National Energy Assistance Directors Association (NEADA) where he leads the state low-income energy directors and represents their interests before Congress. Mark also serves as Co-Director of the Center on Energy Policy and Poverty, a national non-profit research organization primarily funded by the ClimateWorks Foundation, whose purpose is to develop model regulations and programs to help low income families increase access to energy efficient cooling systems. He also leads a national campaign to educate the public about the importance of helping

low income families adapt to rising temperatures. Mark serves as adjunct professor at the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy at George Washington University on environmental, energy and social-justice issues and has been a guest lecturer at other schools including Yale University School of the Environment and George Mason University. Mark has held previous positions with the Coalition of Northeastern Governors, National Governors Association, US Treasury Department, and the Congressional Research Service. Mark holds an M.S. degree in public policy from the State University of New York and a B.A. in economics from Antioch College.

Panel 2: Pathways to Advance Energy Affordability and Decarbonization for Households

Anna Goldman is a primary care physician and Medical Director of Sustainability at Boston Medical Center. In this role, she develops and leads programs at the intersection of environmental stewardship and health equity and supports team efforts to meet operational sustainability goals at BMC. She co-founded and directs Clean Power Prescription, a program that transfers solar energy credits directly to patients' electric bills. She is also leading a multi-year collaboration with Takeda Pharmaceuticals to reduce pharmaceutical waste and supply chain greenhouse gas emissions.

Christoph Reinhart is a building scientist and architectural educator working in the field of sustainable building design and environmental modeling. At MIT, he is the inaugural Alan and Terri Spoon Professor of Architecture and Climate and head of the [Sustainable Design Lab](#) (SDL), an inter-disciplinary group with a grounding in architecture that develops design workflows, planning tools and metrics to evaluate the environmental performance of buildings and neighborhoods. Outside of MIT, Christoph is a managing member at [Solemma](#), a technology company and served as strategic development advisor for MIT spinoff mapdwell until it joined Palmetto Clean Technology in 2021. Planning tools originating from SDL and Solemma are used in practice and education in over 90 countries.

Julie Roth is the Energy Manager for the City of Ann Arbor's Office of Sustainability and Innovations. She leads a team whose work focuses on the creation, implementation, and management of programs to facilitate community-wide adoption of solar, building electrification, and energy efficiency; networked geothermal deployment; commercial and residential building benchmarking and green rental housing ordinances; and greenhouse gas accounting. She has been recognized as a Crain's Detroit 2023 Leader in Energy, and has received awards from the Great Lakes Renewable Energy Association and the Sierra Club for her work on renewables. A²ZERO is the City of Ann Arbor's plan to achieve a just and equitable transition to community-wide carbon neutrality by 2030.

Sara McTarnaghan is a principal research associate and colead of the Climate and Communities practice area at the Urban Institute. Her work focuses on postdisaster housing recovery, resilience capacity building, climate-forward regional planning, and long-term adaptation to climate risk, with a focus on achieving equitable community-level outcomes. McTarnaghan leads mixed-methods research, evaluation, and technical assistance for federal agencies, philanthropies, and local governments to strengthen climate-resilient housing and community development strategies. Her work helps decisionmakers design policies, target resources, and implement programs that improve outcomes for communities facing increasing climate risk. McTarnaghan's recent work includes leading outcome evaluations of city- and regional-level climate resilience initiatives; conducting a US Department of Housing and Urban Development-funded

study on the role of Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery in supporting disaster recovery for renters and affordable rental housing; supporting regional planning efforts in California's Central Valley under the Jobs First program; developing scenario-planning tools to help Gulf Coast communities address climate-related health risks; and providing technical assistance to local governments and community development organizations to advance community-driven climate action. McTarnaghan is a frequent contributor to media on climate and disaster issues, with her work featured in NPR, the *New York Times*, the *Associated Press*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *CityLab*. She previously worked at a nonprofit housing organization in Santiago, Chile, and is fluent in Spanish. She holds an MS in community and regional planning and an MA in Latin American studies from the University of Texas at Austin.

Fireside chat: Framing the Questions on Data Centers and Energy Affordability

Nicholas Miller is a policy associate with NCSL's Fiscal Affairs Program, where he supports work on economic development policy and state budgets. Previously, Miller spent time with the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He holds a bachelor's degree in public policy with honors from the University of Chicago.

Vernice Miller-Travis is one of the nation's pioneers, leading experts, and most respected thought leaders on environmental justice. Early in her career she served as a research and production assistant to the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. In this role she helped to research, write, and produce the landmark 1987 report: *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States*. She is also a deeply skilled practitioner in cross-cultural engagement and organizational development with significant expertise in clean air, hazardous waste remediation, and clean water public policy and regulatory systems. She is trained as an environmental and urban planner and has worked for more than forty years to integrate environmental and public health considerations into the field of urban and land use planning. Vernice consults for federal and state agencies, foundations and nonprofits. Prior to becoming a consultant, she established the environmental justice initiative for NRDC and as a Program Officer, initiated the environmental justice grantmaking portfolio for the Ford Foundation. Vernice has extensive experience working with communities that have undergone economic disinvestment and environmental degradation by facilitating community-based planning and implementing successful community revitalization and sustainable redevelopment initiatives and projects. In this capacity she led the team that produced the award-winning Revised Master Plan for John Chavis Memorial Park in Raleigh, NC. Including its successful application to the National Register of Historic Places. She has the proven ability to bring unlikely partners and diverse stakeholders from all sectors together to help find shared goals and solutions. She is trained in environmental conflict mediation, alternative dispute resolution, and how to navigate longstanding racial, cultural and economic conflicts. Vernice is the co-founder of WeACT for Environmental Justice, and has served on its board for 35 years, including currently chairing its C-4 board for We ACT 4 Change, and co-chairing the \$7.3 million WE ACT EJ Center's Capitol Campaign. She is an appointee of Maryland Gov. Wes Moore to the Board of Trustees of the Chesapeake Bay Trust foundation. She also serves on the board's of: Land Loss Prevention Project, National Community Reinvestment Coalition, Natural Resources Defense Council's Action Fund, Patuxent Riverkeeper, and on the advisory boards of the Harvard University School of Law Energy and Environmental Law Program, and Imani Energy. Vernice is a highly sought after public speaker, lecturer, and author. In 2024, Vernice Miller-Travis was awarded the

prestigious William K. Riley Lifetime Achievement Award by the American University School of Public Policy. Currently, Vernice serves as an Executive Vice-President at the social change and strategic communications company - Metropolitan Group. There she leads its Climate and Environmental Justice, as well as Social Justice Focus Areas.

Rekha Balu is the director of federal equity initiatives and vice president of the Center for Equity and Community Impact at the Urban Institute, where she leads research and policy programs that deploy analytics and evidence to inform federal agencies on how to advance equity. Balu joined Urban from MDRC, where she was a senior fellow and director of the Center for Applied Behavioral Science. She launched a portfolio of studies and designed interventions tackling challenges in human services, K–12 education, and the transition to postsecondary education. She has partnered with federal agencies and grantees around the country to help them base their decisions on data and evidence. In 2019, as a fellow with the Office of Evaluation Sciences in the US General Services Administration, she developed trainings, intervention designs, and field trials for federal agencies. She has an undergraduate degree from Northwestern University, a master of education degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and a master's degree in economics from Stanford University. She earned her doctorate in the economics of education from Stanford University.