

Dr. Lisa Ramirez, Director – Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement Transcript

Chair Reed: I got a special friend of mine, she sits there right across me, smiling and everything else and she is the director of the OPPE Office Partnership in Public Engagement, Dr. Lisa Ramirez.

Dr. Ramirez: Thank you [inaudible 00:05:03]. I appreciate that. Good morning everyone. So happy to be here with you today. I know that many members of our team, our OPPE team have been with you a week. I see [inaudible 00:05:16] RJ and several of the folks that are supporting us back in DC but around the country. So, I'm going to just give you an overview of the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement. And please know as you start hearing about our portfolio, you might think, wow, that's a lot of different stuff there. But any kind of question that you have or if you need support or just direction, please do feel free to call us. We want to be able to [inaudible 00:05:49] that. As I go through this, just know that there's always that open invitation for that.

So, in the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement, our mission is to develop and maintain partnerships focused on solutions that rural and underserved communities in the United States are facing. And connecting those communities to the education tools and resources available through the Department of Agriculture Programs and different initiatives. As you know, USDA right now is working off some key priorities. One of the first priorities that we have heard and probably will continue to hear as we're working through this, is investing in climate resilience and the agriculture's ability to be part of the climate solution. Our second priority is around having a consistent access to safe and nutritious food for all Americans.

Developing more and better markets for agricultural producers, building stronger rural economies, ensuring underserved groups can fully access and participate in programs and services. And of course, and I'm happy to see the scholar that we had, well where did she go? Oh, there she is. Oh, are you trying to escape us? Attracting [inaudible 00:07:12] of retaining an engaged and motivated workforce and thinking of ways to make USDA the best place to work. So what's in the OPPE portfolio? As many of you here obviously know, we have the 2501 program that is the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers program. We also have as the biggest part of our office, our Education Initiatives division. And in the Education Initiatives division, we have the 1890 Liaison Officer program and Hispanic-Serving Institutions national program.

That division also posts the Agricultural Youth Coordination. So, we've just recently closed an application and announcement for a youth coordinator. We have the Military Veterans Agricultural Liaison, and that's to help support veterans in several different programs in our farm market coordination. We have our Women in Agricultural Initiative, Asian American and Pacific and Hawaiian Islander Outreach, and of course, the Advisory Committee on Minority

Farmers and the Advisory Committee for Beginning Farmers. The two bullets that you see there are two pieces of our portfolio that now belong in other places, and one of them was the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Portfolio. And that is now currently with External and Intergovernmental Affairs.

And as a result of much feedback, we have moved the 1994 program has transitioned to the USC Office of Tribal Relations. So let me share a little bit about each of those programs. For the Outreach and Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged and Veteran Farmers and Ranchers, this program awards grants to higher education initiatives, nonprofits and community-based organizations that provide outreach and technical assistance for underserved farmers, ranchers and stakeholders and of course foresters. And we continue to think of ways that we can crosswalk that support, not just with 2501, but with all of the other cooperators that we have. And I see that Ms. Fate is here today and she is one of our cooperators.

Our Education Initiatives, as I mentioned, is one of the bigger divisions in our office and we are working with 1890 historically black [inaudible 00:09:41] colleges and universities and Hispanic-serving institutions to establish opportunities to ensure that they are participating in USDA program services and resources. Now we also do a big push in attracting students through our Education Initiatives. And so, when we think about the next generation, the now generation, which is us, all of us here are thinking about the next generation. But we are thinking about it in a way that we're thinking about the challenges and the barriers that students have to be able to be part of university world and transition over to career. So, if you are thinking about the 1890s, we have a smaller program. That application is currently open. So it is an E Application. It's currently open until April 15th.

And so, if you can encourage folks to apply, we would certainly appreciate that. We have a fellowship program for HSIs. It is not a scholarship. It is a fellowship program that is one week for most of the fellows selected, and two weeks for those that are going to stay for an additional science-heavy week. And that's the [inaudible 00:11:04] Fellowship program. And that selection process is underway right now. We have MOU's with the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities and we also have internship programs with the Thoroughgood Marshall College Fund, the HAKU National Internship Program. And we have just started working. Last year was the first time we... I went to [inaudible 00:11:29]. That's a high school equivalency program, and the College Assistance Migrant Program. We have onboarding into Pathways and other support for USA jobs.

Our liaisons that set at these universities have a variety of responsibilities. And so as I mentioned earlier, we have scholars at the 1890 liaisons. I'm happy to say that, at this current time, we actually will have all 19 1890 universities with the liaison assigned to them. For our HSI National Program, that national program is run a little frequently. It is not for every institution because we have 575 HSIs. Currently, we only have three liaisons. We are working to get at least six, but

we're doing a regional approach. That is an area that we do receive a lot of feedback and questions about. We are working through that and thinking how we can revisit that. For the 1994 Land Grant National Scholarship Program, they too are working through some of those challenges. For the 1994's, there are 38 eligible institutions. There's only one liaison as of right now and they are working on doing that.

And that program now resides with the Office of Tribal Roots. The liaisons assist the communities, the students, the faculty rangers, farmers, foresters and other folks that would be interested in USDA programs in initiatives and help them to get information about it, awareness about it. But our goal is for them to actually access it. Knowing about it is not enough. We want to make sure they're actually being able to access it. So, a big part of their role is developing and maintaining these partnerships and these relationships with the field. And so we have offices, USCA offices, across the country, so they also work with those offices and local stakeholders. They are a primary point of contact at the partner campuses. So, whenever we are out there, we definitely work with them to help find the right people, get the right people at the table and think about who is not there. And that's what we, who's missing in these conversations.

As I mentioned earlier, we are currently, I'm so sorry.

Next slide please. There we go. Thank you. Our Agricultural Youth Coordinator. This is an area we really have seek. We're seeking to do it differently, but we hear a lot when we're engaging with 4H and FFA. Our young people are telling us we need to start earlier, we need to be having these conversations much earlier. We can't wait until we're going to college to decide that this is a career field that we want to do. And so we are looking for a Youth Coordinator and we're hoping to really strengthen that K through 12 piece of the work that we do and create that bridge to higher-ed. And so we are very excited for this upcoming selection process and we had a record number of applications who wanted this position.

As we learned yesterday, several hundreds of applications came through. So I am certain we're going to find someone that's going to do a wonderful job for us. We also have our Military Vets Liaison. Our military vets play a big role in our country and it is important for us at USDA to make sure that we're remembering their important role and connecting our military vets to roles that help keep America's food supply safe and secure. And so we assess service members, veterans and their families to be able to transition into the food and agriculture sectors.

Our Farm Worker Coordinator right now has, the work has been done by Maria Goldberg, and Sylvia Fabula has joined USDA as the Senior Advisor for Farm Worker Coordination. So you see those two names in this slide here. So the Farm Worker Coordinator works to identify challenges faced by the farm workers and coordinates the community with the community's needs. And this is an area that we heard a lot about through the equity commission. And so,

there were several equity commission recommendations. 19 through 24 I believe, or specifically for Farm Worker Coordination. So we are working to think through that and think through how we can actually deliver on some of those recommendations.

Women in Agriculture. And then, as we are nearing the end of Women's History Month, we certainly want to highlight this, thinking about the role that women play in agriculture and really giving and providing some space for us to see those contributions. And to really just highlight and elevate their voices in this space, and hopefully, that we can continue to do that as they are going to be a very important stakeholder group. Our Asian-American and Pacific and Hawaiian... Excuse me. Asian-American, Pacific and Hawaiian Islander Outreach is an initiative that we're working on to improve the quality of life for API individuals and communities across the nation.

We also at OPPE would like to do a better job in this outreach space. I would love to see students participating in some of our internship programs and fellowship programs. When we think about the athletic territories in the communities, there is definitely a desire for them to be part of these programs. To thinking of ways to create pathways for them to do that is important. But I will point to that second [inaudible 00:17:59]. One of the things that we're really being thoughtful about is actually using the data to drive what we're doing and measuring that, so that we can see at the end of the day, what have we actually moved [inaudible 00:18:14]. Our Advisor Committee on Minority Farmers. I bet all of you know about this, if not, news flash.

This is our Advisor Committee to advise the secretary on the Administration of the Outreach and Assistance for Social Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers competitive group program, and how to increase participation of socially disadvantaged farmers and Ranchers in USDA programs. And as all of you know, the new members are being solicited and that federal registered notice is added. But before I leave this slide, I have to tell you that this is a very, very important committee. The recommendations from here are read, considered and we have received directions we need to be active upon. And so, I appreciate everyone being here and really committing your time and energy and thoughtfulness to this committee.

Another committee out of our office is the Advisor Committee for Beginning Farmers and Ranchers. Now, this committee advises the Secretary of Waste to develop programs to provide coordinated assistance to beginning farmers and ranchers, while also maximizing new farming and ranching opportunities. We are currently looking for new members and so, that is a two-year term. And even though I went through that very quickly, this is our contact information and RJ will let me know and actually, okay, somebody will let me know.

Terry:

Dr. Ramirez, thank you, really. I'm just amazed because we learned a lot this week. And the way you had everything laid out, look around this table. We all fit that bill because all of the different nationality [inaudible 00:20:17] groups and

what have you, each one, someone is here on this committee. And I didn't look at it that way before because we all have locked in this little box called a Zoom. So, now we see one another. We know one another and we realize that we represent every ethnic group here in this country, which is good. But I mean, being locked up for a long time, [inaudible 00:20:47]. But we're really glad that you're here and I want to let y'all know she was very instrumental in us coming back into life again. She got us [inaudible 00:21:00] and she brought us to where we are right now. So, I want to thank you personally for that.

Dr. Ramirez: Well, I thank you, Terry, for your tenacity in that as well. So, thank you for being a good partner.

Terry: Okay. What I'm going to do, I'm just going to open up to the committee that you've all [inaudible 00:21:15].

Arnetta Cotton: [inaudible 00:21:16]. This is Arnetta Cotton. On your internships, are they just based in directing individuals or students to the career pathways model only?

Dr. Ramirez: Okay, so the internships, we have a couple of different models and the different agencies cut them. So we do have internships that are either time based for summer, I'll just use that as an example. But we also have third-party internships like the Thoroughgood Marshall that are year round, like we have different times it's rolling. And the idea is that they would be able to participate, they get some experience and then they would also be able to apply for our Pathways Programs. And it doesn't have conversion authorities. The scholarship program does have conversion authority. Our internships are more experiential.

Arnetta Cotton: So to tag onto that, question, the internships are, am I correct in assuming that the internships then are basically learning to work in how the USDA works in directing them toward jobs?

Dr. Ramirez: Yes, correct. And they can declare specialty areas too.

Arnetta Cotton: Okay. So then my next is, don't you think it would be beneficial, especially since we're targeting young people, that internships would also include feet on the ground, hands in the dirt to be in their learning? Because we have these young people going out to many, many farms where the average farmer is over 55 and it's almost insulting because they have the book knowledge, they have the agency knowledge, but the actual feet on the ground, hands in the dirt experience is not there.

Dr. Ramirez: Yes. I'm so sorry. I did not explain that properly.

Arnetta Cotton: Okay.

Dr. Ramirez: They're actually in the field.

Arnetta Cotton: Okay.

Dr. Ramirez: They're in these different areas in the field. They're not just sitting behind a desk doing that.

Arnetta Cotton: Okay. But I'm not talking about in our CS offers, technical assistance and what farmers need. I'm not talking about going alongside that. I mean, actually they're with the farmers doing the work. The reason that I ask is we turnkeyed an entire microgreens farm for an Institute of Higher Learning. And took it in, did training for three professors, and they basically let the food die because there were not young people attached to the responsibility. Being left to the educators, they just kind of blew in the wind. We also put in a couple of gardens, huge ones for again, Institutes of Higher Learning. And they were scrambling to try to get the educators, the teachers out there to work and maintain the garden rather than the students who were in the [inaudible 00:24:22] business programs. So, that's the kind of internships I would really appreciate if you would consider because it's needed.

Dr. Ramirez: Thank you. And as we're working in partnerships with all of the agencies that actually host them, we will certainly be taking that information back. But I have to just reiterate, many of the agencies that do that hands-on, get your hands dirty, living the real life behind this work.

Arnetta Cotton: I know that there are other questions, but since I have it right now, who, what, where is the 1994 liaison located?

Dr. Ramirez: We have, in the Office of Tribal Relations, is that what you mean?

Arnetta Cotton: Where is it located?

Well you said [inaudible 00:25:06]. That's Heather.

Dr. Ramirez: Heather Dawn Thompson is the director of that.

Arnetta Cotton: Okay. I spoke to her.

Dr. Ramirez: Ma'am.

Speaker 1: That's who we spoke with yesterday, wasn't it?

Dr. Ramirez: Yes, she's the director. She [inaudible 00:25:19].

Arnetta Cotton: Okay, so she's the liaison.

Dr. Ramirez: No, she's the director of the Office of Tribal Relations. It's Lisa Yeller-Luger.

Arnetta Cotton: Yes, okay. And then my last one. The Ag Youth Coordinators, bless their hearts, whatever they're going to be.

Dr. Ramirez: I only have one position.

Arnetta Cotton: That was my thing. Bless their heart, really. Are there going to be incentives to high school? Again, we're a community of less than 2000. Of course, we're adjacent to other smaller communities that have bigger populations, but none more than 15,000. And we have attempted to go into nearly, our organization, Agriculture In Action: Farm Training Program, to go into these schools to actually make presentations on the elementary level, the middle school level, the high school level, so that they can make just as you said, get the information to them and kind of light a fire before they're getting ready to graduate. And it's been very difficult because the school have certain goals that they have to reach, and they have timelines that they have to reach them in. And so, to set aside time for another outside organization to come in is costing them. So will there be incentives, other than just in a suggestional marketing program, that they open it up to?

Dr. Ramirez: Sure. And one of the things we're able to lean on right now, even though there's only going to be one Youth Coordinator as that role, the liaisons actually have already built a lot of those relationships in nice high schools. So they are already doing some of this work. I do hear what you're saying about the incentive parts, like to actually participate. And that is something we need to think through as we think of high schools across the country becoming agri-STEM high schools. That might be an area, and we do see a rise in that kind of high school and school districts even. So we are certainly looking at that. Thank you. Yes, dear.

Speaker 1: Terry, Judy, good morning. Three questions. I'm going to try and make them brief. The first one is, the 1994 Tribal Scholarship Scholars Program. I'm assuming it's going to be run or managed just like the 1890s, but it's just under their Office of Tribal Relations. Is that my understanding? Okay. That's the first question. Second question. The Farm Worker Coordination Program you have, now is that pretty much for farm workers to, they have concerns or complaints to wherever they are? Do they address them with you? Is that what it is? Or is it [inaudible 00:28:07] do outreach? Does it do references.

Dr. Ramirez: Yes. So for that one, for the farm worker, we are also looking at different parts. So coordinating throughout USDA that has farm worker pieces, it's housing, it's safety, it's protections, it's pay. Even though that's in Department of Labor.

Speaker 1: Right.

Dr. Ramirez: Thinking through how our commerce and ranchers are actually impacted, because one of the things that the secretary here is having enough labor, but we also have to remember our farm workers have needs too. And so, that's part of that work.

Speaker 1: Oh, okay. Because that's one issue we have. We were trying to figure out how to address that.

Dr. Ramirez: Yes, and that's a very important issue that came out [inaudible 00:28:56]. And not that that was the first time USDA had heard about it, please know that. But it's certainly one that has been elevated.

Speaker 1: Okay. One last question in regards to your Interests Internship Program, has the department considered or thought about having a grant opportunity so that CBO's could provide internships? Like you all [inaudible 00:29:19] yourself? We would love to have something independent.

Dr. Ramirez: And there is a vehicle already that has been used. So when I mentioned that third party internships, we do have ways that go set out that, and having those conversations through cooperative agreements, ways to really help facilitate young people coming to. Thank you. Thank you, thank you.

Arnetta Cotton: I have another [inaudible 00:29:49], since you've referenced twice that the equity committee has made recommendations. You said 19 through 24 were specific to the farm worker. Is there a way that we can get a copy of that, those questions?

Dr. Ramirez: Absolutely. It is a public document. We want people to read this thing and we can certainly get that link to you with the equity commission. I also want to point out another one because this one's very important, based on the work that we're doing here. Recommendation number four is specifically with Technical Assistance and Outreach. And so, that's another one that of course our office sits squarely in. So yes, we can definitely get that link to you for that full report.

Arnetta Cotton: And I'm really grateful that Carrie, thank you. I'm really grateful that Carrie mentioned about the CBOs having that. We asked a question last year, 4H and FFA. Unfortunately in many, many areas since the home EC and carpentry and all of that stuff is out of the schools now, by and large, if they're going to be educated, it's going to be through these organizations. However, these organizations are geared toward people who have land, they have some history, they have ability to buy their animals and so forth and so on. And so, in the language it says, and I'm paraphrasing, something like 4H FFA are similarly formed organizations. So I asked, you know I did, can our organization be considered since we are similarly situated? But what I didn't find out was how do we get recognized so that in this listing, our name is there? Yes, it's in USDA documentation.

Dr. Ramirez: Yeah. So I don't know if you know, but I do not know the answer of how you would become that. But I also know that for 4H to the first part, your comment there with 4H and FFA, we have been having conversations with them because we do want to increase the diversity of the participants in those organizations.

And so, we actually will be at the National Conference as well. We'll be in April as the National Conference in DC. So we will be continuing this-

Arnetta Cotton: Do me a favor, keep this on your mind that I've been given all these references by parents and by some of our partners of the 4H leaders, directors, FFA teachers in the ad in the class. I've been given all of this information. And they will not return the calls. They will not engage, they simply will not. And I want them to know that, because it is a barrier to our minority. Because if many of those minorities live in housing, so there's no place for them to do the work. We offer portions of our land to be able to do that. Some of the schools I mentioned on Monday, the school, particularly in the town where our church is, they were given a grant for an aquaponics program. They got it, big deal, for doing absolutely nothing with it. Won't even allow us to come in. That's why being named in something matters because we're not just a free willy organization just trying to get benefits. We're really trying to move the dial forward in taking advantage of and stimulating some desires in some of these young people to get into agriculture, in some way.

Speaker 2: Going back to the farm worker coordinator, I feel like many of us also are producers ourselves, the farm workers are rooting for our success. I'm really trying to understand what the role of that farm worker coordinator is, how can funding an organization like [inaudible 00:34:14] or does funding come trickle down to individual producers for support for those farm workers and for that minority community to be successful? My dad's 80 years old. Those 80 year old ranchers need those farm workers to be honest with you because there's only so much capacity they have. My dad doesn't [inaudible 00:34:41]. How does that going to help the minority ranchers and farmers? What is that work?

Speaker 3: So, the farm worker coordinator can initiate those conversations such as the issue that you're talking about right now, and we can coordinate with other agencies that are also doing some of this. As we have a couple of different things. We have the farm labor program right now that has recently closed in. They'll get funding to their laborers. We have the H-2A pilot. There are other ways of looking at this, but that doesn't mean that it's the only way it can be done. I think conversations like this help us to get there [inaudible 00:35:26].

Speaker 2: Getting migrant workers is a whole lot of paperwork, and a lot of it takes community involvement sometimes, having a migrant worker. For example, I might be able to work with a community of producers to get a migrant worker on [inaudible 00:35:42] situation. And that's one thing I've been advocating because sometimes we have producers that have a hundred acres, but hundred acres here. But if there's a way to group us as five workers and get a migrant board and that's what the minority community means and if that's a role that this person can help with, it would be so beneficial for our minority.

Speaker 4: If I would add on that. That's the challenge we have. My rural farmers between 72 and 90 years old, they have anywhere between 30 to a 100 acres and they can't work those [inaudible 00:36:22] anymore. So we've been trying to figure

out a way to find the labor and it's been even challenging trying to get it locally. But there's got to be some program which we can work.

Speaker 2: A lot of times it's hard if it's not an individual person [inaudible 00:36:34] 'cause that paperwork, you generally have to go through that operation. So it's hard to have, let's take this group up here and let's try to get rubs [inaudible 00:36:43] for this group. So how can we work the system to help them? 'Cause I think it would actually help keep land, it could be huge just for the community as far as sustaining agriculture.

Speaker 3: And so I won't go on a tangent and I know, [inaudible 00:37:05] but I was the director of micro and I think there's opportunities for us to coordinate with other government agencies such as Department of Education, such as the Department of Labor. There's ways that we can look at this a little different from a different lens to help with this very problem. That is one of the reasons we were very excited to be able to work with the Heaven Camp Association as well as you know, those students that are part of those programs by virtue of eligibility for the program, they had to have had agriculture experience.

And so there's a whole group of students that we're not accessing in their families that do this part. And so I'm hoping we will continue this conversation and I'm happy to continue this.

Speaker 2: I just think it needs to start being a forum in our communities. I just feel like it needs to be a topic that we bring to many of these CEOs into these [inaudible 00:38:09] a assistance to them. It's almost like a best practice to me. It's a best practice to have this minority, these assistants as workers to help do some things that we might not have the ability to do.

Speaker 5: Kimberly, about two years ago I was fortunate enough to have a conference with the director of Rural Development, because I was talking on this very subject and the Department of Labor. And I don't remember the third department, but there were three departments that were on the line and then other people that they called to be on the line and I was asking these varying things. They suggested to me, we weren't in a position, we just wanted to know how to get in position to do it. And they suggested that I develop a holistic plan and give my logic for the plan and submit it directly to them because it's not the same everywhere. In our area, I keep saying we're less than 2000, the most than 15,000 and we need this very thing.

And I knew we did, but I just didn't know how to approach it because all of the language is for farmers who have 1000, 2,000, 5000 acres and so forth and so on. And well, you'll need land to provide housing. We have the land, can you provide that housing? And yes we can. So they suggested that we actually develop a plan, give it to them to consider, look at and then they would give us feedback. I haven't done, but I'm just sharing that information because perhaps for Carrie and Kim that can be done.

Chairman Reed: I've got one more person and Delmar Stamps been waiting.

Mr. Chance: Good morning everyone.

Speaker 5: Good morning.

Mr. Chance: I appreciate the presentation. Good morning. I have a question regarding the Farm Workers' [inaudible 00:40:10] program. Not just because, but I guess because as you may know, we've had severe weather situation in Mississippi over the last few weeks. And there are a number of displaced people and many of those persons are farm workers and many of them were renting and not owning homes in the area where they live. And I want to know, and I heard you indicate that this program divide housing and you look at protection of pay and labor and I'm sure at this point in time they do not have housing. They probably are not employed. Any that your agency can do to aid farmers in this perspective?

Speaker 3: Yes. Thank you so much Mr. Chance for bringing that up. Anytime there is a major disaster or incident that will impact any of our population, USDA is working on that and that is an area they're working on right now and several questions have come to USDA and the different agencies will help with that. And of course, FEMA is another government agency that is also assisting with that.

Mr. Chance: If I may follow up, I really want to address the farm workers who does not have housing themselves that they own. They may be living in town for [inaudible 00:41:36] Silver City, Carrollton or wherever. So those homes will no longer exist. And I know FEMA was there doing some things, but what is it that USDA through your organization, are y'all communicating any outreach effort? Let these farm workers know that there's assistance?

Speaker 3: Yes. And so I do want to point out that the housing program is out of rural development and there are certain requirements that need to be met for that housing. But USDA is looking at the situation much broader than just even the ones that are eligible for that particular housing program. They're looking at it holistically and also working with the other agencies that can participate and help and get this messaging out.

Speaker 2: Is there a link or something that they can...

Mr. Chance: Thank you ma'am. Thank you very much.

Speaker 3: Yes sir. Thank you.

Carolyn Jones: Lisa. Carolyn Jones here. You said that they're looking at something. So how will we find out when they make the decision?

Speaker 3: Yeah, I'm writing myself a note right now to add that particular link or website that they can get that information.

Carolyn Jones: Can you [inaudible 00:43:04].

Speaker 3: Thank you.

Chairman Reed: We just have time for a few more question before we move.

Mr. Chance: I could not hear Ms. Nichols comment. You want to restate what she said please That [inaudible 00:43:23].

Chairman Reed: She's going to send a link out to everyone, you're included.

Mr. Chance: Okay. Oh thanks.

Arnette Cotton: I do. This is Arnette Cotton. In your first or second slide, The Center of Faith-Based Organizations was moved to where? I didn't get-

Speaker 3: Oh, yes. There we go. It has now transitioned to the Office of External and Intergovernmental Affairs.

Chairman Reed: Wow. What is that?

Arnette Cotton: External and Intergovernmental affairs?

Speaker 3: And intergovernmental affairs. Yes. And so that particular office, if you think about grass tops and grassroots, in our office, we're doing all of the grassroots, the people that are on the ground, the CBOs, the people that are there all the time. When you think about the grass tops, you're thinking more like elected officials and maybe philanthropic groups or that type of group. So that's where that office now resides. And you would be amazed how very busy both offices are making sure that we're meeting the needs of all the different constituents that come to USDA and need more assistance or more directional, more support to be able to access this.

Arnette Cotton: It really sounds, and I'm expressing an opinion here, but it sounds like the faith based portion of it, since you said elected officials, it has become political. Yeah.

It does. And I say that we were blessed to be in the inaugural faith-based OPPE training under Coach Beatty. And it was a wonderful experience. We were there five days and met all the department heads and all and it was absolutely wonderful. And to hear that now this organization is looked at as faith-based organ... Are looked at as the tops who have been elected, it removed us from where we were in essence because during the pandemic they came to faith-based organizations whose feet were on the ground and those who remain on the ground. I shutter when I think of the elected officials who had biases based

on political parties, extreme one way or the other, being under the heading of faith-based because they believe in something or so on.

Speaker 3: So when I was saying that that might be the elected officials, that was an example. It's not holy. I want to make sure I say that part. And Samantha Joseph is the director for the Office of Faith based and she really is doing an outstanding job and I invite you and encourage you to reach out to her and I'm happy to give you her information. And also Alex Cordova, who you work with is there as well. So we want to definitely let you know that the work is continuing. There was lots of success in that model and so the work hasn't changed. That is critical. And yes, our faith communities were instrumental, always. And many people were watching that [inaudible 00:47:02].

Arnette Cotton: Thank you so much. Yes.

Chairman Reed: And before we close this session here, Dr. Barris, I have one concern. We established all these departments in this new initiatives and what have you, but the main thing is how much you just actually reaching those customers, those communities, that's the main thing. I mean as broad as the USDA is globally, are they actually reaching the people they're supposed to be addressing?

Speaker 3: Yes. So that is actually recommendation number four on the equity commission. That very issue right there. Where is the data that is capturing that? Where are we sharing that? Where's that dashboard? How does the public know that it's actually working? And so you're spot on, being able to tell the story where we're actually reaching and where we need to continue to work and reaching because there are still pockets we're not reaching. That's just the truth. And so we have to do better.

Chairman Reed: And with that being said, I want to thank you for being here this morning. Next [inaudible 00:48:23]. Okay.