

Dr. Gbenga Ajilore, Senior Advisor Office of Undersecretary, Rural Development - Transcript

- Arnetta: It is now time for our second presenter for this afternoon. And forgive me if I mispronounce this. Someone can help me. I want to say Dr. Agila, Agilor.
- Gbenga Ajilore: Gbenga Ajilore.
- Arnetta: Gbenga Ajilore.
- Gbenga Ajilore: Yes. Thank you.
- Arnetta: So, [inaudible 03:46:49]. He is the senior advisor from the office of the Undersecretary of Rural Development. Thank you and welcome to the Advisory Committee on Minority Farmers meeting. We welcome you and are so excited about what you're going to present this afternoon. It's in your-
- Gbenga Ajilore: Go ahead. I'm sorry.
- Arnetta: ... It's in your hands.
- Gbenga Ajilore: Thank you very much. A little bit under the weather today, so I apologize for my voice, but very excited to be here and thank you for the invitation, looking forward to talking about rural development and some of the work that we're doing. It's been pretty exciting. So in this, I'm going to start by talking about just the structure of rural development and talk about what it looks like, and how it works, and then get into our equity work, and then some of the specific things about some of the things that we are working on. So again, my name is Gbenga Ajilore. I am a senior advisor. I work on a lot of our equity and climate initiatives. So with a lot of the executive orders, how we implement that through Rural Developments, programs, policies and procedures. I've also worked on, at the department level, helping stand up the equity commission, and the work that they've been doing over the last two years. Go to the next slide.
- So Rural Development is comprised of three main agencies. Our Rural Business Cooperative Service, our Rural Housing Service and Rural Utility Service. So Rural Development basically provides programs to help out rural communities throughout the country. And so we have these three different categories. So Rural Business Cooperative Service focuses on helping to develop businesses, industries. One of the things that we've been working on a lot over the last year is a lot of processing work. So, meat and poultry processing and working on helping out farmers develop their products and taking those products to market. We also have a cooperative service where we help with development and helping cooperatives to reach the market and focus on a lot of different things like that. And then also business services to help out entrepreneurs. Our Rural Housing Service, we have three major programs where we have single family housing where we help people who have difficulties obtaining mortgages and being able to get mortgages, get it through the federal government.

We have our multifamily housing where it provides rental assistance, number of other things with the multifamily housing. And then finally community facilities, so any sort of facility that you need in your community. So, if it's a [inaudible 03:49:20] center, it's a fire station, a hospital, a lot of those things. And then finally, Rural Utility Services, which focus on our water and waste disposal, our electric. And one of the big things that we've been working on the last two years is high speed internet and broadband. And so any community can come, and any nonprofit can come to rural development and apply for programs and reach out for... We provide grants, loans, and loan guarantees. We work a lot of times through community develop institutions, minority depository institutions, a lot of mission-driven CDFIs to be able to reach rural communities, and one of the biggest things we've had a focus on is trying to reach underserved communities. And so I'll talk a little bit more about that. Next slide please.

I think one of the biggest strengths of rural development, so rural development is one of eight mission areas at USDA, and along with service agency and natural resources conservation service, we have state directors. So we have individuals who represent the state, represent rural development USDA at the state, and help to give that one local reach out to the community. And so we have our main state offices, and then we have a lot of field offices, and regions, so that people in those communities can go to their field offices and get a mortgage through single family housing, or apply for... Look to get high-speed internet, things like that with our state offices. So we have 47 state directors. Some state directors cover multiple jurisdictions, but one of the other things about this, and these are one of the reasons why I really like this slide is that it shows the diversity of our state directors and how we have all kinds of people who represent each of the states. Next slide please.

So, in addition to our three agencies, RBCS, RHS, and RUS, we also have new agencies within that's kind of centralized a lot of our operations. So we have a business center, which does a lot of operations and our HR functions, and then we also have the innovation center. The innovation center centralizes focus on three main aspects. So first is centralization of regulations management. So when we have to update our ranks or develop new regulations, whether it's in either of those agencies, the RBCS, RHS, or RUS, our innovation centers helps shepherd that process, the regulation process. Next is the strategic engagement division. And so here as we work with external stakeholders and doing outreach, developing webinars, creating resource guides, and just basically our connection to all our external stakeholders. And then finally data analytics division.

And so here what we've done is collected all our data. So we have our data on obligations, and for all our programs over time, and so we collected all that data, put that data together, and this way we can look at do performance analysis and do evaluation of our programs and our processes. But one of the other really cool things about our data analytics division is that we can take our existing data of obligations and stuff that we do at rural development, but match it up with census data, demographic data to see if we want to focus on equity, see how we're doing. We could look at where our money's going, and

we could look at the demographic of those communities of where our money's going, and then to figure out how are we doing and use that.

So with the innovation center, we're able to do a lot of work to be able to basically hold ourselves accountable and work towards transparency. And that's something I'm actually going to get to towards the end of this presentation. So that's basically the structure of rural development, what rural development looks like. So next slide please.

So one of the things we talk about equity work, so on day one of this administration, the president had executive order 13985, which was to do an equity review and kind of centralize equity at the administration. And so what this basically was, is to basically look at all our processes, our programs, our procedures, our policies, our personnel, and basically do an equity review of that. And so the first year we basically went through and looked at everything and did an equity review to see how are we doing in terms of equity, and where are we falling behind. And so when we talk about equity, one of the things that's helpful... And so what this diagram shows is that this is from 20, probably end of 2021, there are a number of executive orders in addition to the first one equity. We had one on climate, so tackling the climate crisis abroad and at home. We also had a gender equity executive order, one on disability, one on diversity, equity, inclusivity and accessibility.

And so we had a number of different executive orders and this diagram is to help us put it together to see how do these things work together. And so we look at this, and we have these four different pillars where we talk about climate justice, tribal justice, gender sexual orientation justice, racial justice and justice for underserved communities. So instead of looking at each of these executive orders as kind of what offs and working on each one separately, it's all part of the equity work. It's all a part of the things where we focus on, and basically want to look at everything working together.

So in that executive order about climate justice, there was a justice for the initiative, which has been really doing a lot of work on trying to be intentional about where our money goes to and figure out ways of how we maximize benefits and disadvantaged communities. Part of it's defining what we mean by disadvantaged communities. Part of it is seeing what are some of the structural barriers that we have? How do we tackle those structural barriers? Some of it may be statutory, so we have to do legislative changes. Some of it may be regulatory, so we can do that. Some of it may be just changing how we do business. And so this has kind of informed a lot of the work that we've done over the last two years to try to advance equity in rural communities. Next slide please.

So out of that first executive order, the equity executive order, we had to... Once we did a review, we had to create an equity action plan and say, "Okay, what are some of the things that we're going to do to be able to advance equity in our mission area?" And then with this equity action plan, we have a lot of

different action items, and then every year we review them to see how if we've made progress, and how we've made progress. So at rural development, we have seven different action items that's part of our equity action plan. So we have the equity project. And so what this does is that we looked at using our data, and we looked at communities that were consistently poor. We looked using the CDC Social vulnerability index, looked at those that have high SVI, high on the Social Vulnerability Index.

And that economic innovation group created a distressed communities index. So we basically created this kind of tiers of need for communities. And so in each state we looked at the 10 most, or 10 most in need. And then said, "Okay, well," and then we also paired that up with saying, "Okay, which communities have received rural development money? Which have not?" So if we have these communities that are high in need but have not received any funding from rural development over the last five years, we basically took it on ourself to say, okay, well why is that? And so this is where we kind of paired a quantitative approach to a qualitative approach. And this is where our state directors came in. And so they would come into these communities and basically try to figure out what were some of the barriers and engage with members of the community.

And so it wasn't just municipal leaders, but all different types of leaders in the community. And so basically figure out what were the barriers? And then once we looked at those barriers, said "What are the things that we can do to be able to overcome those barriers, and then make sure that they're able to access our programs?" So some of it sometimes is that they just don't know about our programs, so a lot of people are not well-versed in rural development programs. We have over 50 programs. Some of it is that there's no trust in the government that a lot of times people have had... Well, I mean I probably don't need to tell this group about the experiences with the federal government. So it's like sometimes it's about building up trust. In other words, there's the capacity issue where it's like they might want to apply, but our applications are very complicated and complex. And so it's like, "Well, what are some of the things that we can do to help build capacity of communities to be able to access these programs?" Our second action plan is a Rural Partners Network. And this is an initiative where kind of similar to The Equity Project, where we do a deep dive and reach communities of need. But the difference here is that, instead of being focused on Rural Development, this is an all-government approach. Where you want to think about, there's no wrong door in terms of access to federal government. So with the Rural Partners Network, we are in 10 states and Puerto Rico, and there's 36 community networks. And what we have is, we have community liaisons in those communities who then work with the federal government. But these are 20 different agencies. So it's not just USDA, but commerce, labor, treasury, HUD. All these different federal governments are a part of this. So that in the community, we look at and assess their needs, and say, "Okay, we have housing issues. Or we're going to connect you with our HUD rule desk officer who'll get you the information about programs, if it's something about economic development, we'll connect you with the commerce rural desk officer.

So this is kind of a broader way of helping to build capacity and helping these communities that don't have grant offices, don't have money for consultants to be able to access federal programs to be able to access things that they need. Our third one is a priority points framework and so here we kind of have three different priorities where one about economic recovery and building up more and better markets to be able to have people in the community to be able to compete in terms of different industries. We have equity priority and then a climate priority and what we have is that depending on different metrics is to be able to say if your project meets one of these priorities, we give you extra points for that. So that makes their applications more competitive and it helps us to be able to really focus on the priorities that we care about.

Fourth one is internal equity work. So the first three is basically outward in how we deal with the public and external stakeholders, but a lot of it is internal. So I showed the slide before with the state directors and we have a diverse group of state directors, but we also need to know how are we working with our staff. So we have national staff, we have state staff, local staff. Are we able to give them the tools that they need to be able to do well? Do we have people who focus on certain priorities? And so a lot of it is just trying to think about morale things about what are some of the things that as a missionary do we need to do to make our staff feel welcome at the department and also to feel that their work matters. So there's a lot of that work that we're doing too.

Fifth RD modernization. So we have a lot of antiquated equipment, a lot of antiquated programs, and it makes it difficult to deliver our services. So are there ways that we could be able to improve our technology infrastructure to be able to be more competitive? So we need to update our systems. Six tribal trust and responsibility. So while we focus on equity with tribal communities, because they're sovereign nations, there are things that we need to learn and understand about working with them to be able to help them achieve prosperity for themselves. So there's a lot of work that we do through consultations. We have our USDA Office of Tribal Relations at the Innovation Center, we have our tribal coordinator. So one of the things we do is learn about what is it in our programs that make it difficult for certain tribal entities to be able to apply.

Are there some eligibility issues, talking to the community, hearing from them, learning from them, and then figure out how do we make it more accessible? All our programs more accessible to them and so that's part of that. Then finally regulatory review where we can advance equity through our regulations and things that we put in our notice of funding opportunities, solicitation, things like that. So every spring and fall we do regulatory agenda review and so we go through all of our regulations and say, okay, is there something that we can do that advances equity, that advances environmental justice, that has this climate issues, things like that. And just kind of look over that and see what is it that we can do to really be able to advance in it and be able to reach underserved communities. This is ongoing because with this work is that this is not an initiative that's going to be for this administration, this is the mission of role development.

These are the things that we do and so we want to build up the muscle, be able to say there's communities that don't get money from Rural Development and we have to figure out a way why that is, that doesn't happen. And then make sure that we are able to build our capacity so that there's going to be that community that gets that first grant. The next time they apply it's going to be a little bit easier and then in five years it's going to be much easier. So now they're going to be able to take advantage of Rural Development programs. So with this equity action plan, it kind of gives us a roadmap and a blueprint to be able to ultimately institutionalize this work. Go to the next slide.

So one example here is that it's not enough to have the data, to do the work and look at the stuff that we do and kind of focus on what we do. We also have to be transparent in the work that we do. So the way to do that, one of the things that we've done is created this Rural Data Gateway and this is a public website. And what it does is it says has all of Rural Development's, investments over the last 11 fiscal years. So it looks at how much money that we've put out there, and you could look at it by state, by county, by congressional district, and you could also look at it in how much investments have we done in socially vulnerable communities. So that score high on here. So on this website, it also has stories about what roles development does and some of the projects that we do.

But one point here, what I show here is that this is Arizona and this shows the money that's being from Rural Development that's gone to the different counties in, I want to say this is counties in Arizona and a darker degree and the more money it is. So in this, it kind of tells us where our money's going and so it helps us to and it helps the public to see where our money's going. And so you can do it over the last seven years, you can do it each year. You could do it by housing programs, business programs, community facilities programs, and all these different kind of breaks down to just understand what's going on at Rural Development. So what this does is that it makes it increases transparency and accountability because we could say, "Oh, we have money going everywhere equally," but when you look at the map of Arizona, it's not going there equally.

So we can look at that and so I just saw a question in the chat. This is for all 50 states. So you could do, and you can pick out a specific state, you can look at all 50 states, you can look at specific counties or congressional districts. So now one of the things is that with all this work that we're doing, we are not resting on our laurels with this if we take feedback from the public often. And so we're always trying to figure out what's the best way of doing it. The way we have it here this may not be the best way to show this data. There might be better ways.

So we're always working on it, we're always trying to figure out, trying to get feedback and always try to do more, and if there's other things where it's like, well, it would be better if you did maybe for a number of years or did a five-year period or things like that. So just stuff that we're working on to be able to talk about what we're doing, and why we're doing it, and then showing what is it

that we've done. So this is just an example of just some of the work that we're doing and some of the things that we do in terms of focusing on advancing equity. But next slide. So that's the end of my presentation, but welcome any questions or comments. Thank you again for inviting me to speak here.

Arnetta: And thank you so very much the beautiful presentation. Are there any questions here from the committee? Chair Reid?

Chair Reid: Yes, I have two questions. Number one are unrecognized, I mean just [inaudible 04:06:32] recognized private groups eligible for USDA support?

Gbenga Ajilore: Is that recognized or not recognized?

Chair Reid: Not recognized.

Gbenga Ajilore: So I don't have the answer to that. I'm not certain about it, but I can ask about it and see.

Chair Reid: Second question is on your business cooperative side, are there any data about how many people of color have applied and received a support on cooperatives?

Gbenga Ajilore: So we don't have data on applications and who apply and I don't think we have the data broken down demographically in receive support, but that I know we do a cooperative survey every year and I could take that question back to our cooperative team. So you look at applications and then who receives?

Chair Reid: Yes. Also, I think the grants for cooperatives comes out in February, which is a bad time. Why does it come out once a year for grants to support cooperatives for funding for technical support and what have you? Is it possible that they can do it more than once a year or what have you?

Gbenga Ajilore: I can, so I'll get that answer to that question, but I'm not sure why it only comes out once a year.

Chair Reid: Okay. Could you forward that to our DFO for that information?

Gbenga Ajilore: Yes.

Chair Reid: I appreciate that. Thank you.

Arnetta: Mr. Junior.

Terry Junior: Terry Junior speaking. I have about two questions, well one's a statement, not a question. Just segue onto what the chair was stating. Just so you know, my organization, we are a Black Pharma cooperative in Michigan. A few years ago we applied for that Cooperative Development Grant and we were denied two

years in a row for whatever reason at the time. But I'm kind of interested because I understand when that grant comes out, they set aside a fund for socially disadvantaged organizations and I know for a fact in our state there's only two organizations there and neither one of us have applied for been able to get it in the last 10 years. The question is if the funds aren't being used is it being reallocated somewhere else or is it compiled in there for future grant recipients of the such? That was the first question.

And the second, it's not a question it's a comment. We are a rural farm cooperative outside city of Detroit. But because we are located in the metropolitan statistical area, we don't qualify for any of the funding that Rural Development is out there Now if we want to service someone outside of our district, we could, which is what we are working on now. But that's one thing I'm [inaudible 04:09:43] what we've had challenges with Rural Development in those two particular areas, but for the most, part now we have a good relationship with the state office now. But just those are two things that we ran across I'm just wondering if any other organization may have had those issues in other states. Thank you.

Gbenga Ajilore: Thank you. And I've heard about the issue with urban farms and I know I believe our program, the Rural Energy for America Program that does for clean energy and renewable energy systems, I believe all agriculture producers are going to be eligible, whether it's rural or urban. I know for a lot of our programs that if you're not within that rural definition, you're not eligible for that program.

Arnetta: I have a question then. My husband and I visited DC and at the time our national director told us that we could build, RD can build an entire community for you, which we were looking to do as an extension of our church, part of our community outreach organization. But when we went to the state director, if I'm not mistaken, are all state directors appointees of the administration?

Gbenga Ajilore: Yes, they are.

Arnetta: When we went to the state director, we were told like Mr. Rome talked about on yesterday that our plan was too ambitious. Now I understand we knew nothing about RD having the capacity to build an entire community. We didn't know it. They told us. So when we went to the state director and laid out the plan for the community, we were told it was too ambitious and maybe you just ought to bite off what you could chew. And needless to say, well, somewhat discouraging, but that's what we were told. What is your recommendation for someone to approach Rural Development for a plan that is all-inclusive?

Gbenga Ajilore: It's a good question and makes me think about, I talked about the Equity Project that sometimes people don't apply because they've had poor experiences and so I don't have an answer for that.

Arnetta: Okay.



Gbenga Ajilore: I will-

Arnetta: Think about it.

Gbenga Ajilore: What I'll do is I'll take it back to the team at Rural Development and just try to see what their advice would be.

Arnetta: Okay. Thank you. What is the method of marketing for the programs that are available through Rural Development?

Gbenga Ajilore: So we have an Office of External Affairs a lot of times where we have announcements, we send that we have different listservs. We use social media. We try to, through our state offices promote it, we try to have our staff, our senior leadership talk about these things. We'll have webinars that are announcing it. For example, that program Arnetta was telling you before, there's going to be webinars on Friday and I think next Thursday that are going to be doing it. So we try to find as many avenues to be able to promote our work and our programs and also to describe how to apply for our programs and who to contact and things like that.

Arnetta: So since if I'm correct, Rural Development's agency or division does not have an office in every county. Correct?

Gbenga Ajilore: We do not have an office in every county.

Arnetta: So do you at any time filter information to the service centers that do have an office in every county?

Gbenga Ajilore: I think we attempt to do that. I think we try to work with our other colleagues to be able to deliver information through those other offices.

Arnetta: Okay. Question about your 504 program where it says on the side it says in your literature that in order to qualify for the 504, you must have a family income within the very low-income limit. We've not been able to find anywhere on-site what that threshold is because it specifies very low. Now it does say you have to be at least 62 years old. I've attended several community outreach meetings where the state director or a representative presented this 504 program to which most of the farmers who were over 62 or over got excited. But then there was none of them qualified because there's this very low-income limit that I can't seem to find a threshold for. Do you know what that income limit is?

Gbenga Ajilore: I think it's going to depend on the location and so I want to direct you to the state office to see if they have that information. So I think it's going to depend that very low might mean one thing in one state and another thing in a different state.

Arnetta: Okay. Okay. Any other questions? Comments? Well, we want to take this time to thank you very much for joining us this afternoon.

Gbenga Ajilore: Thank you very much for having me.

Arnetta: And if you would just follow through with our DFO for any information that was requested.

Gbenga Ajilore: I will do that.

Arnetta: Bye-bye.

Chair Reid: Thank you.