Opportunity in Urban America
Speaker Biographies

Ralph Becker was first elected mayor of Salt Lake City, Utah, in 2007 and was reelected in 2011. He also serves as president of the National League of Cities and is part of the White House Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience.

Becker has been an outspoken advocate for sustainable development, as well as an aggressive leader in protecting and improving air quality in the Salt Lake Valley. Becker’s administration has also built a reputation for its emphasis on social justice, human rights, and landmark legislation aimed at protecting the rights of the city’s LGBT community.

Before serving as the chief executive of Salt Lake City, Becker was a member of the Utah House of Representatives, where he spent five years as the House Democratic leader.

Julían Castro was sworn in as the 16th secretary of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development on July 28, 2014. In this role, Castro oversees 8,000 employees and a budget of $46 billion, using a performance-driven approach to achieve the department’s mission of expanding opportunity for all Americans. Castro’s focus is ensuring that the department is a transparent, efficient, and effective champion for the people it serves. Utilizing an evidence-based management style, he has charged the department with one goal: giving every person, regardless of their station in life, new opportunities to thrive.

Castro is a former mayor of San Antonio, Texas. During his tenure, he became a national leader in urban development. In 2010, the city launched the "Decade of Downtown," an initiative to spark investment in San Antonio’s city center and older neighborhoods. In addition, San Antonio’s East Side is the only neighborhood in America that has received funding to implement major projects under three key Obama Administration revitalization initiatives: Choice Neighborhoods, Promise Neighborhoods, and the Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation program.

Previously, Castro served as a member of the San Antonio city council. He is also an attorney and worked at Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer & Feld before starting his own practice. Castro received a BA from Stanford University and a JD from Harvard Law School in 2000.
Karen Freeman-Wilson is the first woman to lead the city of Gary, Indiana, and the first African American female mayor of Indiana. She was elected in 2011. Freeman-Wilson previously served as the CEO of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals and executive director of the National Drug Court Institute.

Freeman-Wilson is also the former Indiana attorney general and was twice elected as Gary city judge. She graduated with honors from Harvard College and earned her law degree from Harvard Law School.

Alexander von Hoffman is a senior fellow at the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University and a lecturer in urban planning and design at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design. He is the author of *House by House, Block by Block: The Rebirth of America’s Urban Neighborhoods* and *Local Attachments: The Making of an American Urban Neighborhood, 1850 to 1920*.

Von Hoffman has written extensively on urban history, housing, and community development. Von Hoffman’s current research topics include collaborations among nonprofit housing and community development organizations, a short history of urban redevelopment in the United States, and the politics and policy of American low-income housing from 1840 to 2000. He received a PhD from the department of history at Harvard University.

Sarah Rosen Wartell became the third president of the Urban Institute in February 2012. Wartell was President Bill Clinton’s deputy assistant for economic policy and the deputy director of his National Economic Council. At the Department of Housing and Urban Development from 1993 to 1998, she served as a deputy assistant secretary and advised the federal housing commissioner on housing finance, mortgage markets, and consumer protection. In 2012, she was named a "Woman of Influence" by HousingWire. Wartell cofounded the Center for American Progress, serving as its first chief operating officer and general counsel. Later, as executive vice president, Wartell oversaw its policy teams and fellows. Her work focused on the economy and housing markets, and she directed the Mortgage Finance Working Group and "Doing What Works" government performance program. Wartell practiced law with the Washington, DC, firm of Arnold & Porter and was a consultant to the bipartisan Millenial Housing Commission. Wartell has an AB degree with honors in urban affairs from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and holds a JD degree from Yale Law School.