

# “Electricity Has to Be for Everybody”: Industry Leaders Discuss Customers, Innovation at Powering the People

**O**n November 28, the Institute for Electric Innovation (IEI) convened a group of industry executives, government stakeholders, and other thought leaders for the 13th annual Powering the People forum. The event featured several panel discussions focused on how customer partnerships and new technologies are creating new opportunities to advance a resilient and affordable clean energy future.

“It is a transformative period right now in the energy sector. There is so much opportunity and so much excitement,” said IEI Executive Director Adam Cooper as he welcomed speakers and attendees to the forum in Washington, D.C. “Customers are a critical piece of our success.”

Cooper’s remarks were followed by an introductory address from the Honorable Emile Thompson, chairman of the Public Service Commission of the District of Columbia. Chairman Thompson noted that “affordability is still a key topic” in the nation’s capital, which, in 2018, committed to adopting a 100-percent renewable energy portfolio by 2032. Maintaining customer affordability in pursuit of that goal was complicated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, considering the number of households that were “one check away from homelessness,” he said.

Chairman Thompson outlined the city’s efforts to support low- and moderate-income residents, in partnership with electric companies, since the onset of COVID-19. Income thresholds were increased from 75 percent to 85 percent of the area’s median



**Left to right: IBM Vice President and Senior Partner Caroline Roche, Biddely General Manager for EVs and Analytics Maria Kretzing, and AES Corporation Chief Utility Innovation Officer Ralford Smith.**

income based on family size, allowing more residents to qualify for bill support. Electric companies worked to implement arrearage management programs for those who fell behind on bills. And, discounts were offered to nonprofit organizations and places of worship to help them continue to serve the community.

The Public Service Commission, under Chairman Thompson’s leadership, also worked with electric companies to expand efficiency programs, noting that “the cheapest kilowatt-hour is the one not used.”

## Advancing Energy Affordability

Former NorthWestern Energy CEO Bob Rowe opened the first panel discussion of the day, which focused on the role of data analytics, automation, and personalization tools to better engage customers in energy assistance,

energy management, and weatherization programs. Rowe expressed pride in “the way every company in the sector worked with regulators, with other agencies, with nonprofits, and stepped up to support our customers and our communities” following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rowe was joined on the panel by DTE Energy Federal Affairs Director Jonathan Hirte, U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Director for the Office of State and Community Energy Programs Dr. Henry McKoy, Oracle Energy and Water Group Vice President and Head of Opower Matt O’Keefe, and E Source Independent Director Ted Schultz.

Panelists discussed how data analysis can be used to better target support to customers who need it, particularly moderate-income customers who may be having trouble

keeping up with their energy bills for the first time.

“Historically, our industry’s support programs have been designed to meet the customer when they’re in crisis and in a moment of great need. And, we’ve thought for some time that there’s a real opportunity here to better support customers before they get deep into arrears,” said Hirte, who has worked at DTE Energy to develop a “deeper-than-income understanding” of the company’s customer base.

### Customers as a Resource

The next panel was moderated by IEI Co-Chair and Fortis Inc. President and CEO David Hutchens, with panelists discussing the technology, market, and policy dynamics shaping demand flexibility, virtual power plants, and the evolving relationship between electric companies and customers as demand for electricity and reliance on

variable renewable energy generation rise.

Hutchens was joined by Southern Company Director of Load Flexibility and Economics Lee Evans, DOE Loan Programs Office Senior Advisor David Nemtzow, Sparkfund Associate Vice President for Growth Brendan Reed, and Uplight Senior Director of Market Development Neil Veilleux.

“It’s a really big opportunity for energy companies, not only from a growth and economic standpoint, but also from a customer engagement and satisfaction standpoint,” Reed said.

### Potentials and Perils of AI

The final session at Powering the People focused on the potential for artificial intelligence (AI) to empower customers and drive efficiency through the industry’s value chain.

Panelists included SAS Institute Principal Industry Consultant for Energy

and Utilities Sacha Fontaine, Bidgely General Manager for EVs and Analytics Maria Kretzing, IBM Vice President and Senior Partner Caroline Roche, and AES Corporation Chief Utility Innovation Officer Raiford Smith. IEI’s Cooper moderated the discussion.

“One of the most exciting aspects of AI is the ability to better understand our customer, which should be compelling for all of us,” Smith said. “The idea here is not the complexity or the technology, but how it can be of service to the customer.”

Still, panelists noted that electric companies will need to use AI judiciously, particularly as it relates to privacy and protecting customer data.

“We all need to be responsible for educating ourselves about AI. It cannot just be IT’s domain,” said Roche.

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