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Communities Unlimited Announces Three New Leadership Appointments

Communities Unlimited (CU) has announced three new leadership appointments: James Hopper, Director of Community Sustainability; Valerie Miller, Senior Director of Community Infrastructure; and Ashley Miller, Director of Contract Management & Compliance. The appointments strengthen CU's leadership as the organization works alongside rural communities across the rural South to build stronger local economies and sustainable prosperity.

Hopper oversees CU's Community Sustainability Team that helps communities identify local strengths, build leadership, and develop community-driven strategies. In FY2025, the team worked in 97 communities, serving 319,070 people and leveraging \$2.4 million for community efforts.

"We are excited to welcome James as Director of Community Sustainability and to our Senior Leadership Team here at Communities Unlimited," said Ines Polonius, CEO. "James brings a strong background in community development, partnership building, facilitation and strategic planning. His experience developing programs, convening leaders and connecting communities with resources will be an asset as we continue strengthening our community-driven model across the rural South."

Hopper previously served as Director of Outreach for the Alice L. Walton School of Medicine and holds an M.S. in School Psychology from the University of Central Arkansas. James earned his Professional Community and Economic Developer (PCED) certification through the Community Development Institute (CDI) in 2023.

"I'm honored to join Communities Unlimited as the new Director of Community Sustainability and to work alongside a talented team dedicated to helping rural communities build momentum, strengthen local leadership, and achieve the goals that matter most to their residents," Hopper said. "I look forward to working with our team, partners, and community leaders to turn local priorities into meaningful results and sustainable community growth."

Valerie Miller leads CU's Community Infrastructure Team, which provides technical, managerial and financial assistance to rural water and wastewater systems. In FY2025, the team served approximately 1.6 million people in 932 communities and helped leverage \$85 million for infrastructure projects.

"We are fortunate to have Valerie join as Senior Director of Community Infrastructure and as a member of our Senior Leadership Team," Polonius said. "Valerie brings extensive knowledge of the water ecosystem, infrastructure planning and sustainability. Her technical expertise, experience working with communities and her trust among regional and national partners strengthens our ability to support rural water and wastewater systems to expand and maintain their infrastructure and ensure quality of life."

Valerie previously worked as a Technical Expert in Water + Planning with Olsson and holds a Ph.D. in Public Administration from the University of Texas at Dallas.

“I’m excited to join Communities Unlimited as Senior Director of Community Infrastructure, working alongside a team dedicated to keeping rural water and wastewater systems safe, compliant, and built to last,” Valerie Miller said. “As challenges facing our communities grow beyond water, I look forward to working across the CU family to expand resources and build stronger, more resilient communities.”

Ashley Miller joins the Community Infrastructure Team to lead a multi-state portfolio of federal, state and philanthropic grants and contracts, overseeing compliance, reporting and grant management systems.

“We are pleased to welcome Ashley to our Community Infrastructure Team,” Valerie Miller said. “Ashley brings the experience and leadership needed to help us strengthen our processes, meet our commitments to funders and partners, and make sure our team can stay focused on delivering quality technical assistance to the rural water and wastewater systems we serve.”

Ashley previously served as Director of Contracts & Subcontracts at Goldschmitt and Associates and holds an MBA from Trinity Washington University.

“I’m grateful for the opportunity to join Communities Unlimited and support the important work happening across the Community Infrastructure Team,” Ashley Miller said. “I look forward to building effective systems, working collaboratively across teams and helping ensure we meet our commitments while continuing to grow the impact of this work.”

About Communities Unlimited: Communities Unlimited, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with 115 employees, delivering programs and services that impact 2.1 million people across more than 1,300 rural communities in the South. Founded in 1976, CU operates in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas. The organization connects rural Americans to solutions that foster healthy businesses, thriving communities, and an improved quality of life. Through a holistic approach that integrates human connection, technology, and expertise, CU supports small businesses, sustainable water systems, rural housing, and economic development.