

2025 Strategic Communications: H2O Workshop

Speaker Profiles



AJ Axtell

Director of Community Relations
Western Lake Superior Sanitary District
Duluth, MN

Joining the Western Lake Superior Sanitary District (WLSSD) in 2006, **AJ Axtell** works to establish mutually beneficial relationships in the region to ensure WLSSD achieves its clean water and landfill abatement goals. She is responsible for the development, planning, management, and execution of strategies for all aspects of public and legislative affairs for WLSSD. Additionally, she leads the daily operation and development of WLSSD's environmental programs related to pollution prevention, recycling and waste reduction, composting, hazardous waste management, biosolids management program development and education, and water quality programs. She also oversees the organization's Administrative Team, responsible for various internal and external support activities, including support for WLSSD's Board of Directors.

Ms. Axtell holds a BS degree in Biology and an MS degree in Microbiology, both from Central Michigan University. She serves on the Duluth Area Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors and the Leadership Duluth Steering Committee, and formerly served on the Fuse Duluth Leadership Council. She is also a long-time member of Business Networking International.



Emily Barnett

Communications and Government Relations Manager
Central Contra Costa Sanitary District
Martinez, CA

Emily Barnett is the Communications and Government Relations Manager for Central Contra Costa Sanitary District (Central San) located in the East San Francisco Bay Area. She brings experience working in both the public and private sectors in communications, media relations, issues management, stakeholder/community engagement, government relations, and advocacy. Ms. Barnett previously worked as a Government Relations Manager for Pacific Gas & Electric Company, and a District Representative for the CA State Senate. Ms. Barnett has a Master's Degree in Communication Studies from San Jose State University and a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science from California State University, Stanislaus.

**Brantley Bissette**

Community Education and Outreach Specialist
Hampton Roads Sanitation District
Virginia Beach, VA

Brantley Bissette is the Community Education and Outreach Specialist at Hampton Roads Sanitation District (HRSD). The newest member of the HRSD's communications department, Mr. Bissette works to promote the value of the wastewater utility to citizens throughout the service area, encompassing roughly 5,000 square miles of southeastern Virginia and serving nearly 2 million residents. He leads tours of HRSD's SWIFT Research Center, engages in public outreach and education, assists with strategic and internal communications, helps foster partnerships with scientific and nonprofit groups, and oversees the HRSD Ambassador program.

Previously, Mr. Bissette worked in the environmental nonprofit, research and ecotourism fields. He has a BS in Marine Science with a Minor in Journalism and Mass Communications from the University of South Carolina and is currently pursuing a Master of Natural Resources at Virginia Tech.

**Holly Bomba**

Community Education and Outreach Specialist
Hampton Roads Sanitation District
Virginia Beach, VA

Holly Bomba is part of Pittsburgh Water's Public Affairs team, through which she manages Pittsburgh Water's K-12 Scholastic Outreach Program and works to build public awareness around the many Pittsburgh Water initiatives underway to provide the communities we serve with safe, reliable water services. She's responsible for working directly with our community members to educate about water quality, our drinking water treatment process, stormwater management, and our city's sewer system.

With a background in environmental science and a keen interest in history, Ms. Bomba loves the process of taking a big, technical topic, breaking it down into its essential parts, and bringing it "home" by incorporating shared experiences and local stories to increase relatability.

In her free time, Ms. Bomba is a geology-enthusiast and always up for a good adventure outdoors backpacking, hiking, kayaking, mountaineering or canyoneering!

**Mack Bradley**

President
StandPoint Public Affairs
St. Louis, MO

Mack Bradley has built a reputation as a thoughtful strategic partner who can help envision and defend one's StandPoint. He focuses on strategic communications, crisis management, public affairs and media relations, and he's a broadly trusted ally and sounding board to clients and colleagues alike. He's worked for corporate clients large and small, local and regional government agencies, charitable foundations, not-for-profits and religious institutions. His expertise ranges from billion-dollar real estate development projects to large festivals (keep an eye out for him at Mardi Gras!), to complex public policy issues.

A frequent trainer and speaker, Mr. Bradley has conducted media and/or crisis training for hundreds of participants in North America and Europe in various industries, including emergency risk communications training related to chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear threats. Part of this curriculum, sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, focuses on the psychology of risk communications in a public crisis.

Mr. Bradley is an active member of the community. He currently serves on the St. Patrick Center Board of Trustees and is president of the Mardi Gras Foundation. He is past president of AmeriCorps St. Louis, and a past member of Mid-America Transplant Services Board, the Cardinal Glennon Foundation Development Board and the Mayor's Commission on Violent Crime. He has served as an adjunct professor in the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University, teaching a graduate-level course on Social, Economic and Political Environment.

Mr. Bradley earned a BA in Political Science from Illinois Wesleyan University and an MA in International Affairs from Washington University in St. Louis. He was a National Security Forum participant at the Air War College, and a Coro Public Affairs Fellow.

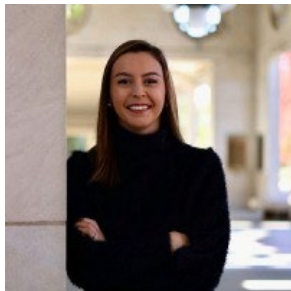
**Leneyde Chavez**

Engagement and Public Affairs Manager
Carollo Engineers
Los Angeles, CA

Leny Chavez is a fervent advocate for the built environment and for economic development. As the daughter of a civil engineer and a junior high teacher in a developing country, from a young age Mrs. Chavez understood the opportunities this could afford disadvantaged communities. Today, she represents Carollo Engineers—a premier design firm specializing in water projects and handles the community engagement and government relation initiatives for Carollo in the Los Angeles region.

At the age of 16, Ms. Chavez moved to Los Angeles from Honduras, Central America. Like many recent immigrants in the Latino Community who start from humble beginnings, she lived in the garage of her extended family's home while finishing up high school. She became a mother at a young age but remained committed to her education and earned a BA in Political Science and an MA in Urban Planning both from the University of California, Los Angeles. Mrs. Chavez is the mother to three young men: Eduardo (25), Benjamin (14), and Marcus (11).

Mrs. Chavez is an avid supporter of corporate social responsibility and has worked with Pacoima Beautiful for the last 6 years. She is experienced in contract management and economic development professional. She has participated in a multitude of community engagement efforts including education and outreach, non-profit management, government relations, and ordinance compliance. Today, she is Pacoima Beautiful's functioning Chair supporting the organization in its mission as a grassroots environmental justice organization providing education, impacting local policy, and supporting the Arts to promote a healthy San Fernando Valley. She is committed to environmental justice and to promoting collaboration among strategic partners to develop a sustainable future for Los Angeles. She is committed to environmental justice and to promoting collaboration among strategic partners to develop a sustainable future for Los Angeles.

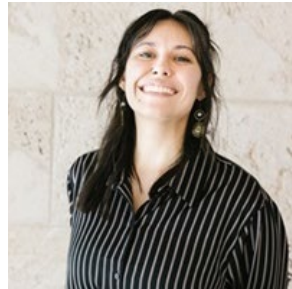


Gabrielle Cherre
Chief of Staff
StandPoint Public Affairs
St. Louis, MO

Gabrielle Cherre is the Chief of Staff at StandPoint. Ms. Cherre supports clients through crisis management, brand management, and strategic communication. She creates brand-focused content, stays up to date with industry-specific best practices, and fosters strong client relationships based on her ability to understand and promote her clients' interests. Ms. Cherre has significant experience leading communications for membership-based not-for-profits, where she developed and launched new brand and communication platforms, guided senior leadership through internal and external communications, and oversaw major projects. Ms. Cherre has a degree from the University of Missouri.

**Erin Collar**

Public Affairs & Education Specialist
NEW Water
Green Bay, WI

**Chantel Dominguez**

Community Campaigns and Engagement Director
American Rivers
Reno, NV

Chantel Dominguez is a campaign director and community engagement specialist with a deep love of people and the planet. She has worked at American Rivers for the past two years, leading high-profile and multi-faceted advocacy and movement-building efforts, including America's Most Endangered Rivers® and Equitable Community Engagement initiatives. Prior to joining American Rivers, Mrs. Dominguez worked as the Programs and Events Director at Truckee Meadows Parks Foundation, overseeing Healthy Parks Healthy People programming and public awareness campaigns for environmental and community stewardship. She is a Certified Interpretive Guide (CIG™) and has extensive experience in communications strategy, project management, program development, community advocacy, and environmental outreach. She launched her environmental justice career through AmeriCorps VISTA, serving as Community Engagement Coordinator, and since then has grown increasingly passionate about intersectional environmentalism. She strives to support systemically marginalized and underserved communities through collaborative and community-driven initiatives, and fight for the protection of people and the beautiful planet we live and depend on.

Mrs. Dominguez lives in Reno, NV and in her free time enjoys hiking with her partner and their dog, game nights, cooking with loved ones, and eating tacos and donuts (and any other tasty treats).

**Alyssa Downs**

Manager of Communications
California Association of Sanitation Agencies
Sacramento, CA

Alyssa Downs is the Manager of Communications for the California Association of Sanitation Agencies (CASA) providing timely, relevant information to both members and legislators on clean water and beneficial reuse issues. Her responsibilities include developing

CASA's communication strategies, producing the CASA Connects newsletter, developing content for traditional and social media, and handling graphic design and outreach materials that support CASA's statewide advocacy efforts. Ms. Downs holds a BA in Communication Studies from California State University, Stanislaus.



Sinjin Eberle
Managing Director
American Rivers Action Fund
Durango, CO

Sinjin Eberle serves as the Managing Director of the American Rivers Action Fund, the 501(c)(4) affiliate of American Rivers, the nation's leading advocacy organization for the protection and restoration of rivers. He also holds the role of Southwest Communications Director for American Rivers, where he leads regional communications strategies and community engagement initiatives.

With a deep commitment to conserving natural landscapes and protecting free-flowing rivers, Mr. Eberle works to elevate the visibility and impact of both organizations through strategic outreach, coalition building, and policy advocacy. His work includes advancing ballot initiatives, securing public funding for water infrastructure, and promoting sustainable water management across the Southwest.

Mr. Eberle holds a bachelor's degree in environmental science from Ball State University and brings a broad background in fitness and the outdoors, including mountain biking, mountaineering, and mountain rescue, and holds a Level 1 CrossFit coach certificate. In addition to his advocacy work, he is an accomplished writer, photographer, and filmmaker whose creative projects focus on environmental storytelling and water issues across the American West.

He is particularly engaged in conservation efforts within the Colorado River Basin, with a focus on sustainable water supply, policy innovation, and ecosystem protection throughout the region.



Tricia Garrison
Public Affairs & Education Manager
NEW Water
Green Bay, WI

Tricia Garrison is the public affairs and education manager for NEW Water, the brand of the Green Bay Metropolitan Sewerage District.

She launched her career as a journalist, eventually segueing into communications and public relations for organizations, including Habitat for Humanity International and as a Hollywood film publicist.

Ms. Garrison has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a master's degree in sustainable management from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is accredited in public relations with the Public Relations Society of America.

She serves on the Green Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve Site Evaluation Committee and volunteers for the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Green Bay.



Daniel Gold

Management Professional – Watershed & Systems Planning
Great Lakes Water Authority
Detroit, MI

Daniel Gold is a Michigan native with nearly 20 years of environmental management experience spanning the private, public, and non-profit sectors. He began his career leading trail crews in national parks and then spent several years carrying out subsurface investigations as a consultant. Prior to his current role, he served as the Senior Water Quality Specialist for the Great Lakes Commission where he managed collaborative policy and planning initiatives related to source water protection, agricultural runoff, environmental markets, and urban water infrastructure. He currently manages the Member Services Program at Great Lakes Water Authority where he engages representatives of over 100 local communities to increase coordination and transparency across the regional system and advance collaborative water quality and infrastructure planning initiatives. While his resume demonstrates a strong background in environmental science, his current work speaks to a belief that clear communication and a sense of trust among stakeholders are equally important to the success of technical initiatives as engineering specs. Mr. Gold holds a BS degree in Geology from the University of Michigan and a Master of Environmental Science and Management degree with a focus on Water Resources Management from the University of California, Santa Barbara.

**Andrew Gustafson**

Curator of Interpretation
Johnson County Museum
Overland Park, KS

Andrew R. Gustafson is the curator of interpretation at the Johnson County Museum (JoCoMuseum) in Overland Park, KS. In that role, he helps people access their history, or as he likes to say, the title means he loves history and it is his job to make the visitor love it, too. Mr. Gustafson earned his MA in History from the University of Houston and has worked in the museum field as a public historian and curator for thirteen years, eight of them at JoCoMuseum.

Although he has curated more than a dozen major exhibitions in his current role, Mr. Gustafson and JoCoMuseum might be best known for their 2022 special exhibit, REDLINED: Cities, Suburbs, and Segregation, which explored the roots, history, and legacies of the federal policy. REDLINED earned seven local, regional, and national awards, including from the Kansas Museum Association and the American Alliance of Museums. Mr. Gustafson served as curator and project lead for the Museum's current special exhibit, Ripples: Water, Community, and You, which takes a deep dive into the region's water history, from natural waterways to man-made water systems and modern water management practices.

Mr. Gustafson is active in the public history and museum fields, regularly attending and presenting at conferences, delivering public presentations, and collaborating whenever possible. He is the immediate past president of the Heritage League of Greater Kansas City and serves on the Council of Advocates for the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education. He lives in South Hyde Park in Kansas City, MO.

**Heather Haskell**

Senior Consultant
EMA, Inc.
Grand Rapids, MI

Heather Haskell brings more than 21 years of utility industry experience working with municipalities and utilities to optimize business processes and implement asset management tools and strategies. Her expertise includes integrating geographic information systems (GIS) spatial data with enterprise asset management systems (EAMS) and customer information systems (CIS). Ms. Haskell is experienced with data conversion and system implementations for water production and distribution, wastewater treatment and collection, stormwater collection, transportation, and facilities management using a variety of EAM solutions. Ms. Haskell has led the development of key performance indicators (KPIs), metrics, and dashboards to improve organizational effectiveness, data visualization, and to identify assets needing repair or rehabilitation. Ms. Haskell is

a skilled facilitator with solid written and verbal communication skills and excellent listening skills for individual interactions and in group settings.



Melia Howard

Deputy Mayor of Detroit
City of Detroit
Detroit, MI

Melia Howard, a lifelong Detroiter, serves as the Deputy Mayor of Detroit.

Ms. Howard is Detroit's second woman to serve as Deputy Mayor in the city's history. Nettie Seabrooks was the first woman to hold the position from 1994-1997 under Mayor Dennis Archer.

Before becoming Deputy Mayor, Ms. Howard served as the mayor's Director of Community Engagement, where she has played a key role in building community support for many of the city's marquee development projects by making sure they had a voice in the process and a role in shaping each project's community benefits agreement. Prior to that, she was Director of Special Projects and also served as Department of Neighborhoods manager for District 5.

Prior to becoming Director of Community Relations, Ms. Howard was the Mayor's Special Projects Manager, where she began serving as advisor to Mayor Duggan on large-scale development projects, a role she will continue as Deputy Mayor. Ms. Howard has also worked as a District 5 Manager for the Department of Neighborhoods for more than three years, where she managed community relationships and helped residents with their daily concerns.

Ms. Howard also spearheaded the Saturdays in the D program, which provides Detroit youths and adults on-campus educational activities at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor. The program, which is partnership with UM and Ally Financial, gives 100 high school students and 100 adults each year access to educational and experiential opportunities at UM in fields like robotics and climate change.

In her role, Ms. Howard also continues the Community Violence Intervention (CVI) work. Over the first three quarters, the "Shotstoppers" initiative has resulted in dramatic reductions in homicides and non-fatal shootings in most of the six areas served by CVI community organizations.

Her passion for Detroit's future, combined with her professional expertise, makes Ms. Howard a vital force in the city's ongoing transformation.



David Kennedy
Marketing Manager
Pittsburgh Water
Pittsburgh, PA

David Kennedy joined Pittsburgh Water's Public Affairs team in 2024, bringing a dynamic perspective to the utility's communication strategies and processes. Prior to joining Pittsburgh Water, Mr. Kennedy spent more than a decade developing his digital marketing and communication skills while working with live event organizations and tech start-ups. As Marketing Manager for Pittsburgh Water, Mr. Kennedy's background and experience uniquely equip him to help the utility navigate the evolving landscape of strategic communications. A lifelong Pittsburgh resident, Mr. Kennedy understands the value of building and strengthening a trusting relationship between this public utility and its ratepayers, particularly when it comes to highlighting major water quality and infrastructure achievements. Through initiatives like enhancing Pittsburgh Water's digital presence, optimizing content creation processes, and strategizing more effective communication campaigns, Mr. Kennedy's primary focus is on building stronger connections between Pittsburgh Water and the communities it serves.



Courtney Kubu
Strategic Communications Specialist
AECOM
Virginia Beach, VA

Courtney Kubu is a strategic communications specialist with five years of experience at AECOM. She is part of the firm's Strategic Communications Services group, which functions like a public relations agency within the infrastructure firm, moving projects forward and supporting communities through strategic communications.

Ms. Kubu supports the public relations, marketing, and content development needs of our water clients. She has led the planning of numerous in-person and virtual meetings, helping her clients deliver effective and engaging live and online presentations. Her work consistently aims to connect clients with their stakeholders, enhance project visibility, and drive meaningful outcomes for clients and communities.



Karyn Le Blanc
Chief Executive Officer
KGL Communications
Washington, DC

Karyn Le Blanc is the Chief Executive Officer and founder of KGL Communications, a full-service, woman-owned public relations firm she founded in 2019. KGL is based in DC but serves clients regionally and nationally with a special focus on government and transit. She spent nearly a decade leading high profile communication and public relation efforts for the District of Columbia Department of Transportation and as the Director of Communications with the DowntownDC Business Improvement District. While there she helped elevate the profile of both organizations with creativity, responsiveness and attention to detail.

Ms. Le Blanc brings more than 20 years of experience in public relations, creative and marketing strategies and brand influence in both the public and private sectors to the KGL team. Her specialty remains transportation, infrastructure and economic development in urban centers, where she is widely considered an expert in the field. She is a 2019 graduate of Leadership Montgomery and serves on the board of directors for the National Cherry Blossom Festival.



Jason Matthews
Public Affairs Specialist
Great Lakes Water Authority
Detroit, MI

Jason Matthews is a Management Professional on the Great Lakes Water Authority's (GLWA) award-winning Creative Services team. His responsibilities include serving as the producer for a variety of video projects and acting as the project manager for all Creative Services initiatives. Prior to joining GLWA in 2019, Mr. Matthews worked for Ford Motor Company's Communications Department and spent nearly 15 years working in TV News, both in front of and behind the camera. He is a five-time *Emmy Award winner* and two-time *Edward R. Murrow Award winner*. Jason holds a BA in Telecommunications from Ball State University. He is married to his wife, Beth. Together they have a son, Landon.



Bess McCoy

Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee

Public Affairs Manager

Metropolitan St. Louis Regional Sewer District

St. Louis, MO

Bess McCoy serves as the Manager of Public Affairs at Metropolitan St. Louis Regional Sewer District (MSD) Project Clear in St. Louis, MO, where she leads communication and outreach initiatives to protect our most vital resource – water. With a focus on strategic communication, stakeholder engagement, and media relations, Ms. McCoy effectively engages over 1,000 employees and 1.3 million customers in MSD’s clean water initiatives. As a dedicated advocate for clean water, she is honored to be the Co-Chair of the National Association of Clean Water Agencies Communications and Public Affairs Committee.

Before joining MSD, Ms. McCoy was the Public Information Officer for the City of Creve Coeur in St. Louis County. She also spent four years in the advertising industry, specializing in online marketing and strategic research. In addition to her professional roles, Ms. McCoy actively contributes to her community as the public relations lead and spokesperson for St. Louis Mardi Gras. A proud St. Louis native, Ms. McCoy earned a BA in Communication from Saint Louis University.



Brett McDonald

Public Affairs Specialist

Great Lakes Water Authority

Detroit, MI

Brett McDonald is a Public Affairs Specialist on the Great Lakes Water Authority’s (GLWA) award-winning Creative Services team. His responsibilities include photo/video shooting, editing, equipment prep and management. Combining these elements to tell GLWA’s stories and Public messaging within the water sector. Prior to joining GLWA in 2022, Mr. McDonald ran his current website bmc-photo.com specializing in event photo and video production throughout the United States. Mr. McDonald was a part of the GLWA’s *EMMY award winning* campaign “TAP IN” behind the camera. He received a Bachelors Degree in Film from Full Sail University in Orlando, FL.



Mike McGill
Principal
WaterPIO
Hampstead, NC

Mike McGill is the President of WaterPIO, a public communications firm he founded in 2017 to help water utilities, engineering firms, industry organizations, and state agencies affordably improve their customer, media, and crisis communications.

Mr. McGill also launched PFASComms.com and LeadCopperRule.com to help utilities successfully manage the public communication challenges created by PFAS-related MCLs and the EPA's changes to the Lead and Copper Rule.

WaterPIO and its divisions currently serve clients in more than 20 states. Before starting WaterPIO, Mr. McGill directed public information and customer service operations for major water utilities, including WSSC Water and the Cape Fear Public Utility Authority.

Mr. McGill holds a Dual Degree in Broadcast Journalism and Political Science from Syracuse University. Before joining the Water World in 2007, he was a politics and media writer/producer for CNN and National Journal's Hotline. He also served as Planning Editor for WUSA-TV, the CBS affiliate in DC.



Mary McMurray
Director
Johnson County Museum
Overland Park, KS

Mary McMurray is Director of the Johnson County Museum, a nationally accredited and award-winning institution in suburban Kansas City. A mission-driven leader and strategic thinker, she brings nearly two decades of experience in museums, public history, and nonprofits. Her career is distinguished by innovative programming, thoughtful interpretation, and a values-based approach rooted in integrity, curiosity, collaboration, and excellence. Ms. McMurray is known for inspiring teams, building strong community partnerships, and delivering engaging, relevant public history experiences.

She holds degrees in history from the University of Missouri (BA), the University of Missouri-Kansas City (MA), and the University of Kansas (PhD). Her work is fueled by a belief in the power of history to inspire civic engagement and empower people to build a brighter future.

Before leading the Johnson County Museum, Ms. McMurray served two presidential library foundations in education and engagement, and worked as Superintendent of

Historic Sites and Outdoor Education for Jackson County, MO. She currently serves on the KS State Historic Sites Board of Review and the Friends of the Johnson County Museum. Whether managing site operations or shaping exhibits that connect past and present, Ms. McMurray brings contagious enthusiasm and a deep commitment to meaningful public service through history.



Navid Mehram

Chief Operating Officer, Wastewater Operating Services
Great Lakes Water Authority
Detroit, MI

Navid Mehram is the Chief Operating Officer of Wastewater Operating Services at the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA), bringing over 25 years of leadership and technical experience in water and wastewater systems. Mr. Mehram oversees a wastewater system that serves over 2.3 million residents, approximately 30% of MI's population. Under his leadership, GLWA has built a high-performing team recognized across the water sector for operational excellence and innovation.

Through strategic planning and vigilant management, Mr. Mehram has guided the organization through complex challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of historic inflation, while optimizing operations, improving reliability and leading to over \$600 million in infrastructure investments. He has spearheaded the development of a \$2 billion, 10-year Capital Improvement Plan, while maintaining fiscal responsibility with an average annual revenue increase of only 1.7% over the past nine years.

Before joining GLWA, Mr. Mehram served as Chief Engineer for the Oakland County Water Resources Commissioner's Office. There, he led the transition of the City of Pontiac's water and wastewater operations from private contract management to county-run operations. He also provided strategic oversight across a wide range of departments and facilities, including three treatment plants, over 200 pump stations, community wells, and retention basins.

Earlier in his career, Mr. Mehram was a consulting engineer specializing in the design and construction of wastewater treatment, recovery, and pumping systems. He is a licensed Professional Engineer in the State of Michigan and holds a BS in Civil Engineering from Wayne State University.

**Braxton Payne**

Senior Strategist, Director of Research & Digital Communications
The Kelley Group
St. Louis, MO

Braxton Payne is a seasoned professional specializing in research, digital communications, and strategy. With a keen eye for data-driven solutions and innovative approaches, he has a proven track record of crafting impactful campaigns and delivering measurable results. His expertise lies in blending strategic insights with creative execution to drive engagement and achieve organizational goals.

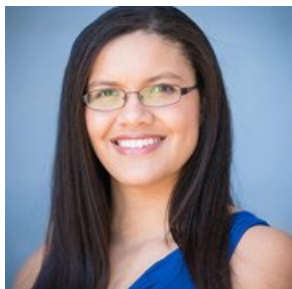
Mr. Payne also specializes in communications, direct mail, press, and fundraising strategy among other areas for his clients. He has earned recognition from The Missouri Times' list "*30 under 30 in Missouri Politics*" and "*Top 100 List in Missouri Politics*."

Mr. Payne earned a degree in Applied Sociology with five minors from Fontbonne University

**Bryan Peckinpaugh**

Public Affairs Director
Detroit Water & Sewerage Department
Detroit, MI

Bryan Peckinpaugh is the Public Affairs Director for the Detroit Water & Sewerage Department overseeing media relations, customer education, marketing, and government affairs. At the department since January 2016, he built out a robust customer education strategy, established collaborative relationships with local and national reporters, and was the architect behind the department's extensive community outreach effort specific to the Lead Service Line Replacement Program. He brings nearly three decades of experience in public relations, including 15 years in the government and political sector, leading communication and campaigns for nine Detroit and Wayne County government leaders and political committees.

**Melissa Reeves**

Community Relationship Manager
Johnson County Wastewater
Johnson County, KS

Melissa Reeves is the Community Relations Manager for Johnson County Wastewater. She is an experienced communications and government relations professional who

previously led communications for a social services agency and served as the head of public relations for the City of Springdale, AR. She is a dedicated public servant with a MA in Journalism from the University of Missouri-Columbia, and is currently working toward a MA in Economics from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. She also has a BA in Journalism and Mass Communications from UMKC and a BA in Interdisciplinary Studies with emphases in history, business and sociology from MU.



Kenetta Ridgell

Director of Communications and Community Engagement
Little Rock Water Reclamation Authority
Little Rock, AR

Kenetta Ridgell has worked in public relations and communications for 25 years, with experience in the public, private, and non-profit sectors. She has been part of the team at Little Rock Water Reclamation Authority for 10 years and was promoted to her current role as Director of Communications and Community Engagement in June 2024. Ms. Ridgell serves on the Advisory Council for the Arkansas Public Administration Consortium (APAC) and the Volunteers in Public Schools Board of Directors. She serves as board secretary of the D'Andre Seals Suicide Prevention Outreach Project and is a member of the Public Relations Society of America and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. She holds a MA in Communications from Webster University and a BA in Journalism from the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. She also earned a Certified Public Manager certification and a Wastewater I operator's license. She is a 2024 graduate of Leadership Greater Little Rock Class XXXIX.



Katie Shea

Communications Specialist
Springfield Water and Sewer Commission
Springfield, MA

Katie Shea is the Educational Outreach Manager for the Springfield Water and Sewer Commission (Commission), overseeing educational and workforce development initiatives, connecting residents to their drinking water, and supporting public communications, media relations, outreach, and community events.

In 2023, Ms. Shea helped launch the Commission's Pipeline Program – a work-based learning paid summer internship program for high school students in Springfield. The program utilizes a rotational model, giving interns the opportunity to explore a variety of career opportunities in the water sector.

In addition to the Pipeline Program, Ms. Shea manages the Commission's other educational outreach and workforce development efforts including facility tours and

programming for school groups and coordinating the Commission's Scholarship Program which helps aspiring water professionals complete coursework and earn licenses as they work to further establish a water sector career. Ms. Shea is also involved in local and regional educational and workforce development initiatives and is a member of the Massachusetts Water Works Association Education Committee.

Prior to joining the Commission, Ms. Shea worked in education and program development, managing educational programs and supporting high school students in planning for college and careers in Springfield Public Schools.

Ms. Shea has a bachelor's degree in communication from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a master's in education from Springfield College.



Jeannie Smith

Co-Chair, Communications and Public Affairs Committee
Director of Administration and External Affairs
Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District
Cleveland, OH

Jeannie Smith joined the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (Cleveland, OH) in 2006 as a Public Information Specialist. She currently serves as Director of Administration and External Affairs, and is responsible for internal and external communications, public outreach and education as well as media relations. She serves as the Co-Chair of the National Association of Clean Water Agencies' Communications and Public Affairs Committee.

Prior to the Sewer District, Mrs. Smith worked for the American Red Cross Northern Ohio Blood Services Region handling communications and media relations for 19 counties. She worked for Clear Channel Communications, including as Promotions Director for 96.5 Kiss FM and Mix 106.5.

A native of Columbus, OH, she holds a Bachelors degree from Baldwin Wallace University and a MPA Degree and a MBA Degree from Cleveland State University (CSU).

Mrs. Smith lives in Lakewood, which sits on the beautiful Lake Erie, with her husband Brad, daughter Harper, son Declan, and pups, Jack, Cooper and Nola.

**Kierra Smith**

Public Affairs Specialist
Detroit Water & Sewerage Department
Detroit, MI

Kierra Smith is a strategic communicator, social media strategist/content creator and copy writer. Within the City of Detroit, Ms. Smith serves as the Media Relations and Digital

Media Specialist for the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), strategically utilizing both traditional and digital communications to proactively educate customers and coordinate reactive and episodic media requests collaborating with the assigned spokespersons. In this role, she also formulates internal communications for DWSD employees. Prior to joining DWSD, Ms. Smith worked within the private sector of the automotive industry facilitating digital stories and internal communications for a global audience. Ms. Smith is a proud Detroit, a Central Michigan University and American University Alumni and the active chair of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Detroit Chapter Diversity Committee.

**Amy Souers Kober**

Vice President of Communications
American Rivers
Portland, OR

Flipping her kayak in the Youghiogheny River taught her humility. Standing on top of Elwha Dam taught her patience. Forgetting a can opener on the Wild and Scenic John Day taught her creativity. Swimming across the Willamette beneath Portland's Hawthorne Bridge taught her perspective. Eating raspberries from a farmer on Kentucky's Green River in a summer rainstorm taught her gratitude. Sitting at Chinook Cove on the Columbia River with the late Ray Gardner, chair of the Chinook Nation, taught her to listen. Alaska's Copper River taught her that rivers aren't channels of water, but dynamic, braided stories of people, time and place.

These are the lessons that drive **Amy Souers Kober's** work directing our national communications and marketing efforts. She has led successful communications campaigns for high-profile river restoration, protection and clean water priorities, and directs America's Most Endangered Rivers®, one of the best-known public engagement initiatives in the conservation community.

Mrs. Souers Kober received a BA from Trinity College in Hartford, CT. She lives in Portland, OR with her husband and two boys.



Karen Thomas

Marketing Manager
City of Dayton Department of Water
Dayton, OH

Karen Thomas is the Marketing Account Management Representative with the City of Dayton, Department of Water. Ms. Thomas has been with the City of Dayton for 19 years. In this position, she is the Department's lead for marketing, communications, and branding of the department's services and value proposition. Ms. Thomas is responsible for telling the Department of Water's story through education, outreach, and awareness of Dayton's great-tasting, high-quality water, services, and expert staff.

In addition, she collaborates with Economic Development to market the Department's capacity for business expansion and relocation using Dayton's 1.5 trillion gallons of water as one of the key economic drivers.

Ms. Thomas works in the community to develop synergies, collaborations, sponsorships, and partnerships with other municipalities, water advocates/agencies, Dayton's local businesses, community organizations, schools, colleges, and universities for workforce development and marketing opportunities.

Ms. Thomas graduated from the University of Maryland in College Park, MD, with a BA in Business Administration. She has a master's degree in urban studies from the University of Akron in Akron, OH. Ms. Thomas attended Harvard Kennedy School of Executive Education Program: Kennedy School of Government Executive Education in State and Local Governments. Ms. Thomas is a proud member of Leadership Dayton's 2010 class. She received the City of Dayton's prestigious *Joseph T. Cline Award*, which honors current City of Dayton personnel who display excellence and dedication as City employees.



Josh Weinstein

President & Creative Director
Creative Co-op
Exeter, NH

With 30 years of experience directing communications and building brands, **Josh Weinstein** is a firm believer in the power of the big idea. As President and Creative Director of Creative Co-op, he helps raise awareness, create new relationships, transform reputations and build trust for the agency's clients.

Born and raised in upstate NY, Mr. Weinstein graduated from Union College where he studied both engineering and English. He worked for advertising agencies in New

England as a copywriter and creative director before founding Creative Co-op in 2001. Over the past 23 years, the company has built a reputation for excellence and effective communications while serving as a dedicated, astute, and valuable asset to the organizations it serves.

Mr. Weinstein started the agency based on the belief that the most successful strategic, conceptual and creative work is developed from a partnership perspective. The agency has grown over time and today provides a wide range of services, ranging from planning and consulting to advocacy communications, brand development, integrated marketing, digital communications, video, photography, website design, app development, and more.

When he's not at the office or on the road meeting with clients, you'll probably find him in the mountains, at the beach or on the water.



Matt Wittern

Senior Consultant
Raftelis
Denver, CO

Matt Wittern has a 20+ year public relations career serving clients and customers in the public utility, engineering and construction sectors. He excels at designing and implementing strategic communications campaigns that incorporate stakeholder input to inform, advocate and achieve behavior change. His specialty is successfully translating complex subjects and concepts into messages that are easily understood by target audiences. At Raftelis, he manages strategic communications planning and implementation, as well as stakeholder engagement initiatives. Prior to joining Raftelis, Mr. Wittern managed a variety of public affairs efforts at Denver Water, which included designing the public engagement and public information strategies for nearly a billion dollars' worth of infrastructure projects, spearheading the public process for the utility's policy decision regarding Community Water Fluoridation, and led development of processes to gain stakeholder support for preventative maintenance on critical infrastructure. He earned a BA in journalism, is Accredited in Public Relations (APR) from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and achieved status as a Project Management Professional (PMP) from the Project Management Institute. Mr. Wittern has presented at national conferences including the American Water Works Association's ACE and the City-County Communications and Marketing Association's (3CMA) Annual Conference. Mr. Wittern's work has earned prestigious Gold Pick Awards from the Colorado Chapter of PRSA and SAVVY Awards from 3CMA.



Lara Wyss

President
Responsible Flushing Alliance
Seattle, WA

Lara Wyss is the founding President of the Responsible Flushing Alliance (RFA). Before helping launch RFA IN 2020, she served in a variety of Public Relations leadership roles before starting her own Public Relations consulting firm in 2013. Based in Seattle, she leads a first-of-its-kind consumer environmental education campaign working to support responsible flushing. One of RFA's premier efforts for 2022 is to drive the mission of promoting the "Do Not Flush" symbol and increasing public awareness of what should never be flushed in order to help protect wastewater systems around the country.

With a career spanning over 25 years in the communication advocacy space, she brings an in-depth knowledge of customer-centric communications to the mission of RFA. In her capacity as President, she has built a strong coalition of manufacturers, wastewater, and municipal organizations with the central goal of preserving public infrastructure and empowering families to protect their homes and environment.

Prior to RFA, Ms. Wyss served as the Director of Global Public Relations at Starbucks, the Senior Director for Global Communications at eBay Inc, the Head of Communications for LoanDepot, and as the Director of Public Relations at Chapman University.



Aubrey Ziems

Public Affairs Specialist
Detroit Water & Sewerage Department
Detroit, MI

Aubrey Ziems is a creative professional specializing in branding, graphic design, communications, and public affairs. At the City of Detroit Water & Sewerage Department (DWSD), she led the integration of the City's new branding within all DWSD collateral, stationary and signage, and handles the day-to-day design of impactful marketing, educational and episodic materials, such as billboards, print ads, fliers, door hangers and other publications, intended to reach Detroit residents and businesses. Ms. Ziems is an integral team member within the public affairs division at DWSD, not only creating marketing materials but also advising other divisions on how the materials will be utilized. She also serves as a board member and designer for SON International, a non-profit focused on access to clean water, hygiene and sanitation education efforts. With over 10 years in the industry, Ms. Ziems is known for her strong design skills, brand consistency, and ability to deliver effective, clear, audience-focused communication.