

# STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: HOW SMALL & MEDIUM UTILITIES BENEFIT FROM AND PROVIDE VALUE TO NACWA

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Several years ago, NACWA contracted with a national firm to perform an organization-wide communication study. The purpose of the study was to focus on how the organization was communicating with its members. The results of the study were startling. While a third or more of the members were small to medium-sized utilities, the perception of all members and the public was that NACWA focused only on large utilities.

Since that time the Board of Directors has established major steps to change that paradigm, and NACWA has initiated an “every utility a member” campaign. One of the first steps was to create a small to medium-sized utility workgroup.

## Unique Challenges for Small Utilities

As co-chairs of that group, it has been exciting to work with other small and mid-sized utilities to

promote and address the specific needs of these utilities. One of the first steps the Board initiated included reducing the membership fee for the smallest utilities to encourage participation in and utilization of NACWA’s valuable resources. Many small utilities must work within very tight constraints, and officials in charge of approving budgets have not historically understood the importance of the national perspective or value of national advocacy from an organization such as NACWA.

Due to these very tight budgets, small- and mid-sized utility staff members often do not receive the opportunity to attend national conferences and, therefore, miss out on the networking and idea germination opportunities that these conferences afford.

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## Benefits for Small Utilities

In lieu of travel, NACWA's online Engage network has benefited both authors' organizations. When Central Davis Sewer District (CDSD) had a major concern about land application and their biosolids program, CDSD staff was able to reach out to NACWA staff and other utilities for answers to questions and through the Engage forum

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to get help and valuable ideas from both large and small utilities across the nation. When Avon Lake Regional Water was considering implementing the quality improvement standard, ISO 9001, staff also reached out through the Engage forum to learn what utilities were implementing nationally.

Taking to heart the importance of communication and increasing the focus on the smaller utilities, the





NACWA Board has also helped address the financial concerns and challenges of the small- and mid-sized utility members in attending national conferences. NACWA has established funding to help offset some of the costs for these constrained utilities' representatives to attend national conferences, thereby allowing them to learn from other small, mid-sized and large utilities. Both authors have benefited from that program and have gained insights to help lead their utilities through new and challenging situations. This is a vital service as we face the same workforce training, technology advancement and retention issues as bigger utilities but face it without large HR departments and developed HR peer groups.

Similar to having small-to-non-existent HR departments, small and mid-sized utilities often do not have government affairs groups to track what is going on in Washington, even when it can have immediate and critical impacts.

Avon Lake Regional Water, located on the shores of Lake Erie, is a combined sewer community. A few years ago, a Member of Congress from another state introduced a bill that would require immediate notification regarding Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) into the Great Lakes – something that presents serious technical and operational challenges to CSO utilities of all sizes. NACWA alerted Avon Lake Regional Water and all other Lake Erie dischargers to this concern and coordinated an advocacy response to modify the legislation and helped utilities craft language to reach out to their federal elected representatives. The efforts led to significantly improved legislation that made reporting more manageable for utilities, especially smaller ones, while still protecting public health and the environment.

Another benefit CDSD utilizes is the NACWA awards program to show state water quality leaders, as well as state and national legislators, that CDSD actively and conscientiously tries to maintain a proactive, environmentally friendly and economically viable approach to clean water. This is especially important since CDSD discharges into the Great Salt Lake in Utah. In 2019, CDSD received its 19th Platinum award recognizing the utility's dedication to excellence. In addition, representatives of CDSD have received other NACWA awards including ones for public service, the President's award and environmental



awards. By focusing on achieving the steps to secure these types of honors, CDSD can save staff valuable time and effort and ensure stakeholders receive quality service.

## Providing Opportunities for Engagement

In addition to saving valuable resources, CDSD, Avon Lake Regional Water and all small to mid-sized utilities have been able to enjoy focused working group conference calls with other NACWA members. During one recent call, we learned how to implement internet protections and security solutions at low or no cost and still provide our personnel internet access to maps, repair lists and treatment SCADA systems. For utilities that often do not have fulltime IT staff, simple guidance such as this can be immensely helpful.

The “every utility a member” campaign is paying off. As NACWA has helped small to mid-sized utilities realize that membership is not just for the large utilities, NACWA has grown significantly. More than 10 small to mid-sized utilities joined in 2019 alone, leading to NACWA now having members in 268 of 435 Congressional Districts across the

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CONGRESSIONAL  
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nation. As more and more Congressional Districts include NACWA members, the potential ability for NACWA to meet member needs and advance strong advocacy on behalf of the entire public clean water utility sector is multiplied.

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