



# Doing More to Solve Water's Growing Complexity

**H**istorically, we in the water profession have been recognized as the people who collect, manage, clean, and deliver water for our communities. But in August, I was struck by the words of Cathy Bernardino Bailey, the director of Greater Cincinnati Water Works, who declared during the 2018 AWWA/Water Environment Federation Transformative Issues Symposium on Affordability, “The utility *is* the community.”

The magnitude of that simple statement did not escape me. We are more than the caretakers of indispensable pipes, treatment processes, and collection and distribution systems. We are, in fact, both providers and beneficiaries of water, both the workers and the customers, and both a component of and one with the community.

That's why we in the water profession can never be satisfied to simply do our jobs. It is our mission to protect public health and safeguard the environment, even when the challenges lie beyond the traditional boundaries of water utility work.

The past few years have presented several complicated issues that are beyond our traditional and direct control. Lead in water, *Legionella*, nutrient runoff, infrastructure replacement and financing, and affordability—these issues speak to challenges that we can only address as a community. Fortunately for AWWA, we are able to tap into the expertise of more than 51,000 members and, in many cases, by collaborating with other experts and stakeholders outside the water sector.

For example, we all know that the complexity of addressing lead service lines escalated as the Flint water crisis unfolded. Two unique contributions by AWWA's members to “get the lead out” include an AWWA policy statement expressing the position of AWWA's board on protecting the public's health through lead service line management and a new, first-of-its-kind AWWA standard on how to replace and flush lead service lines. Importantly, both contributions recognized the shared “community” responsibility for addressing the concern of lead. But that was not enough. AWWA worked with other stakeholders—many of which were nontraditional partners—to create the Lead Service Line Removal Collaborative, a group of multiple stakeholders focused on accelerating voluntary lead service line replacement in our communities.

Similar to the issue of lead service lines is the broader concern of premise plumbing. In 2018, for the first time, AWWA addressed premise plumbing from a policy standpoint. AWWA's action stems from the reality that water quality concerns such as *Legionella* can arise after water has

left the community water system. The new policy statement adopted this fall encourages utilities to establish policies and goals designed to protect water quality in premise plumbing. It also focuses on the importance of utilities and other stakeholders working collaboratively to educate property owners and consumers on premise plumbing issues.

Collaboration with nontraditional community partners is also key to AWWA's work to protect drinking water sources from nutrient runoff. Throughout 2018, AWWA advocated a Farm Bill that gave agricultural producers the incentives necessary to employ smart conservation practices in their fields. At the same time, our Government Affairs staff in Washington, D.C., is helping utilities identify opportunities to partner with community organizations and farmers to strengthen their source water protection.

Another nontraditional concern for water professionals is the affordability of water and wastewater services. The cost of infrastructure replacement and how to pay for it are always among the top concerns of the water sector, according to AWWA's *State of the Water Industry* report. As water rates rise to meet those challenges, customers with low and fixed incomes may struggle to pay water and wastewater bills. The need to address the emerging issue of affordability led to the aforementioned Transformative Issues symposium and, later, to a new policy statement.

AWWA passed its first Policy Statement on Affordability this past October. The statement recognizes that even with sound planning and budgeting practices, some utilities' customers will not be able to pay for water services—which in turn affects the utility's revenues. Such affordability challenges can occur in any community, regardless of size, location, demographic makeup, and income distribution.

The policy statement recognizes that “fair and reasonable rates and charges to all customers is fundamental to a utility's mission,” and it also “strongly recommends the adoption of policies and procedures by utilities, regulators, and governmental entities to address the affordability challenges experienced by some of their residential customers.”

Again, this AWWA policy statement—like the one on lead service lines and premise plumbing—is challenging us to do more than what was done in the past. It is challenging us to be a key player in solving community-wide problems.

We should welcome that challenge because, as a wise leader once said, “The utility *is* the community.”

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<https://doi.org/10.1002/awwa.1194>