

# **WATER EQUITY TASKFORCE**

## Insights for the Water Sector





# PREFACE

The US Water Alliance aims to drive breakthroughs on entrenched issues that no one group can solve alone. Advancing an equitable water future in the United States has been a hallmark initiative of the Alliance since 2015. It has required drawing upon a diverse network of partners, bridging geographies and diverse interests, and investing in relationships.

The Water Equity Taskforce demonstrated that bringing together the right partners with a shared set of values leads to outcomes that better reflect the needs and goals of vulnerable communities. The Taskforce's learning teams are forging meaningful progress to foster more equitable water management in their communities. This work can be more effective if implemented on a larger scale and with opportunities for city-to-city exchange.

This report presents the enabling conditions for advancing water equity. The insights from this two-year project demonstrate that the water industry has the capacity and the appetite to build credibility with local partners, solve water equity challenges, and make these approaches standard practice in the sector.



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The learning teams of the cities of Atlanta, Buffalo, Camden, Cleveland, Louisville, Milwaukee, and Pittsburgh were instrumental in moving this work forward, and we are deeply grateful for the combined work of the organizations listed on page three.

# WATER EQUITY TASKFORCE

## LEARNING TEAMS

### Atlanta

- American Rivers
- Atlanta Department of Watershed Management
- Collective Wisdom Group, Inc.
- Environmental Community Action (ECO-Action)
- Partnership for Southern Equity
- The Conservation Fund
- West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA)

### Buffalo

- Buffalo Sewer Authority
- Buffalo Water Board
- Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo
- Groundwork Buffalo
- PUSH Buffalo
- Western New York Environmental Alliance

### Camden

- American Water
- Camden County Municipal Utilities Authority
- Camden Lutheran Housing, Inc.
- City of Camden
- Cooper's Ferry Partnership
- District Council Collaborative Board
- Dreamcatchers International, LLC
- New Jersey Conservation Foundation
- New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection
- The Trust for Public Land

### Cleveland

- Burten, Bell, Carr Development, Inc.
- CHN Housing Partners
- City of Cleveland
- Cleveland Water
- Cleveland Foundation
- Cleveland Neighborhood Progress
- Cleveland Water Alliance
- Cray Consulting Group, Inc.
- Drink Local. Drink Tap.
- Emerald Cities Cleveland
- Environmental Health Watch
- Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District
- Slavic Village Development
- The George Gund Foundation
- Sustainable Cleveland

### Louisville

- Jacobs Engineering Group
- Louisville-Jefferson County Metro Government
- Louisville Urban League
- Louisville Water Company
- Louisville/Jefferson County Metropolitan Sewer District
- Transit Authority of River City (TARC)
- Where Opportunity Knox

### Milwaukee

- Century City Triangle Neighborhood Association
- Cream City Conservation Corps
- Employ Milwaukee
- Greater Milwaukee Foundation
- Groundwork Milwaukee
- Milwaukee Area Technical College
- Milwaukee County Register of Deeds
- Milwaukee JobsWork
- Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District
- Milwaukee Water Commons
- Milwaukee Water Works

### Pittsburgh

- iThink Water
- Neighborhood Allies
- Pittsburgh United
- Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority
- PolicyLink
- University of Pittsburgh
- UrbanKind Institute



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# INTRODUCTION

Communities across the United States face water challenges like flooding, water quality concerns, unaffordable rates, climate change vulnerabilities, and more. These challenges have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable: low-income people, communities of color, and those facing health issues. Water can also be a force for equity and opportunity. It can revitalize communities, making them more inclusive and resilient. Investments in water infrastructure can stimulate jobs and local economies. No one entity can solve these challenges or harness these opportunities alone. Building more equitable water systems will require leaning on the diverse talents and resources from water utilities, environmental groups, nonprofits and philanthropy, and community-based organizations.

In response to these crises, the US Water Alliance launched a national initiative to lift up and advance promising practices and policies that ensure all people have access to safe, reliable, and affordable water and wastewater systems, and can benefit from their operation. The Alliance released *An Equitable Water Future: A National Briefing Paper* in 2017. The report proposed three pillars for advancing water equity: ensuring all people have access to clean, safe, affordable water service; maximizing the community and economic benefits of water infrastructure investment; and fostering community resilience in the face of a changing climate. With this national framework in place, coupled with a toolbox of promising practices to scale this work, the US Water Alliance turned to partner with local leaders to accelerate equitable water policies and programs.

In 2018, the US Water Alliance launched the first-ever multi-city endeavor dedicated to advancing more equitable water management. The Water Equity Taskforce was a network comprised of cross-sector learning teams from seven US cities to uncover new models, methodologies, and collaborations on a range of equity-related issues. The Taskforce began with teams from Atlanta, Georgia; Buffalo, New York; Camden, New Jersey; Cleveland, Ohio; Louisville, Kentucky; and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and expanded to include Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2019.

Working together, community-based organizations and utilities defined the challenges they faced and shared priorities and solutions for how to overcome them. The US Water Alliance supported learning teams to surface opportunities and set priorities in a city-specific water equity roadmap. The teams focused on the three pillars of water equity outlined in the [national briefing paper](#).

Building upon these roadmaps, teams championed new processes, initiatives, and policies. In Atlanta, the learning team designed new approaches to community engagement to inform the distribution of a \$14 million environmental impact bond. In Buffalo, the learning team designed and launched a new affordability program. The Louisville team expanded and institutionalized equitable policies including formal community benefits, local labor preference, and supplier diversity policies. And in Pittsburgh, the team evaluated demographic and community representation in the utility's workforce and has been designing structures to ensure a more representative and accessible workforce pipeline.

Recognizing the national significance of this work, philanthropic organizations rose to support Taskforce efforts. The financial support and thought partnership provided by Berkman Charitable Trust, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Heinz Endowments, the Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, Richard King Mellon Foundation, and Turner Foundation, Inc. were invaluable in this experiment becoming successful.

This two-year process had been an incredible time of discovery for the US Water Alliance and partners in the Taskforce. The Water Equity Taskforce laid a long-term foundation for forging understanding, collaboration, and action on water equity in these seven cities that will last far beyond this experience. Together, the Alliance and Taskforce partners learned how to build trust, tackle issues of racial and economic inequality, and push beyond entrenched divides to find common ground solutions that better serve all communities.

The broader water sector can learn and benefit enormously from the many lessons revealed by the process these teams went through and the outcomes they realized. The US Water Alliance developed this report to document the strategic insights and lessons learned from this journey so they can be of service to the entire water sector, including the following:

- Philanthropic leaders who want to invest in field-building efforts like this to spread equitable water management in communities across the US.
- Water utilities and environmental leaders wanting to apply an equity lens to their work and build productive partnerships with the diverse stakeholder groups they serve.
- Community and environmental leaders who want to grow their capacity to partner with water managers.

The report is organized in the following sections:

- **Foundations of Cross-Sector Partnership** shares the vision and design of the Water Equity Taskforce and the outcomes that this work delivered.
- **Key Insights for a Collaborative Approach to Water Equity** presents six core takeaways and best practices for leaders committed to driving water equity in their communities.
- **Principles into Practice** illustrates key insights that tell the story of each learning team's water equity journey and highlights how putting best practice into action delivered meaningful outcomes.
- **Implications for the Future** discusses how the water sector can draw on these learnings to usher in an equitable water future in the US.

# WATER EQUITY 101

While water resource challenges affect all communities across the nation, those already overburdened with economic, environmental, and health challenges are especially vulnerable. Those most affected are often lower-income people, communities of color, children, and the elderly, among others. The effects of water stress on physical and mental health, child development, and economic mobility are cumulative, and often compounded by underlying challenges such as poverty and unemployment.

**Water equity:** Equity refers to just and fair inclusion—a condition in which everyone has an opportunity to participate and prosper. Water equity occurs when all communities have access to safe, clean, affordable drinking water and wastewater services; are resilient in the face of floods, drought, and other climate risks; have a role in decision-making processes for water management in their communities; and share in the economic, social, and environmental benefits of water systems.

**Water stress:** Water stress occurs when individuals and communities face difficulty in accessing water services. It can include inadequate access to drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater services for everyday needs, whether due to lack of infrastructure, difficulty paying for services, or poor water quality. Water stress encompasses water-related climate impacts such as floods, droughts, and rising sea levels. Facilities like wastewater treatment plants can cause stress to residential communities in the surrounding areas. Water stress also affects people who rely on water for their livelihood, such as farming communities.

**Vulnerable communities:** Vulnerable communities face historic or contemporary barriers to economic and social opportunities and a healthy environment. The principal factors in community vulnerability are income, race or ethnicity, age, language ability, and geographic location. This may include low-income people, communities of color, immigrants, seniors, children, people with disabilities, people with limited English-speaking ability, rural communities, tribal communities, people living in unincorporated areas, people living in public housing, and people currently or formerly incarcerated.

The US Water Alliance outlines three pillars for advancing water equity in the US:

## PILLAR 1

Ensure all people have access to clean, safe, affordable water service.

- Affordability
- Access to Infrastructure
- Water Quality

## PILLAR 2

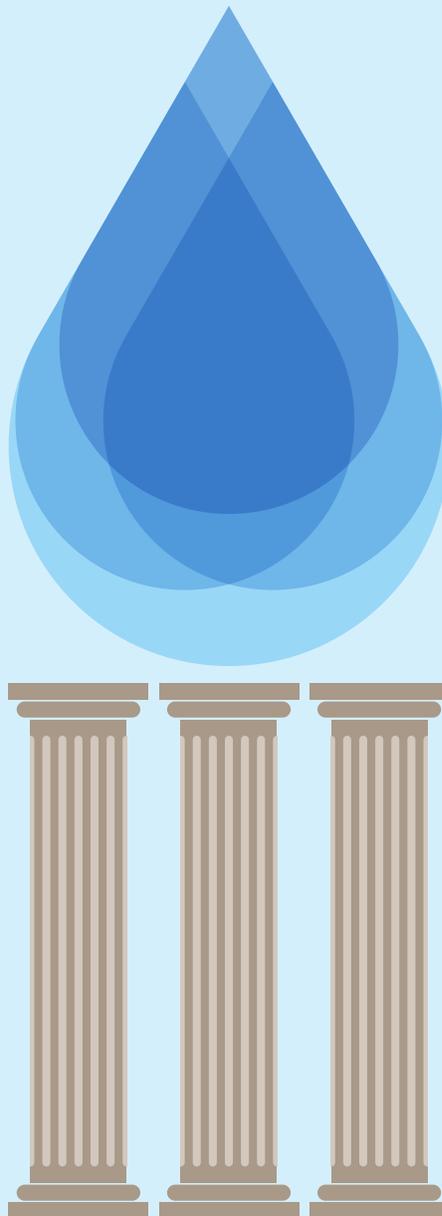
Maximize the community and economic benefits of water infrastructure investment.

- Workforce Development
- Contracting and Procurement
- Neighborhood Revitalization

## PILLAR 3

Foster community resilience in the face of a changing climate.

- Planning and Assessment
- Funding
- Project Delivery





# FOUNDATIONS OF CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIP

## A Vision for Collaboration

The nation's compounding water challenges hit low-income communities and communities of color first and worst. The US Water Alliance's research on these water equity challenges revealed that while organizers and practitioners around the country are striving to address the growing water and climate challenges that affect vulnerable populations, much of the work is isolated, hyper-localized, and small-scaled. There is also a lack of communication and understanding between utilities, community-based organizations, and affected communities. At the same time, there is an enormous willingness to come to the table in good faith and work with other stakeholders toward better outcomes. This presents an incredible opportunity for uniting shared interests, building trust, and progressing equitable policy initiatives.

The US Water Alliance recognizes that building authentic relationships across sectors requires committing to sustained engagement and sharing power with under-served communities to co-create shared priorities. Acknowledging a need for a multi-faceted approach that forges more equitable outcomes, the Alliance established the Water Equity Taskforce as a forum for learning and action.

The Water Equity Taskforce was a two-year commitment to build organizational, policy, and partnership capacity to guide cities—and the nation—towards an equitable water future. Convened by the US Water Alliance as learning teams from seven US cities, the Taskforce aimed to do the following:

- **Build a shared understanding** of the challenges, opportunities, and promising strategies to promote equitable water management in participating cities and at the national level.
- **Establish a peer-exchange platform** to support collaboration, capacity building, and knowledge exchange on water equity between different regions and cities.
- **Accelerate the development and adoption of equitable water policies and practices** by utilities, community-based organizations, and other stakeholders.

## Enabling Conditions for Deeper Exchange

Leaders from each of the seven cities agreed to form a “learning team” and work together over two years to advance water equity policies and programs within their service area. Each learning team included participants from the utility, local government agencies, community-based organizations that work with vulnerable populations, and additional civic organizations that are committed to water issues (e.g., environmental groups, community foundations).

The US Water Alliance was well-positioned to lead the work, given that it had convened leaders and created a diverse cross-sector stakeholder network. As the convening entity, the Alliance provided research support and guidance on specific water equity priorities for policy and program development. Most importantly, the Alliance gave structure to the process and helped participants navigate the challenges of bringing change to long-standing systems and ways of working. In designing the Taskforce, the Alliance was intentional in taking lessons from the field to craft a framework and build a process around core conditions that enable deeper understanding, trust, and capacity.

The enabling conditions include:

- **Support and commitment from senior utility leaders.** Historically, utilities have not considered social equity a core component of their mission. The struggle for fair and just inclusion and outcomes has typically been relegated to and championed by community-based organizations. Anchoring each learning team with a US Water Alliance member utility was a strong signal of the utility’s commitment to equity and action. It was also important that the utility leaders involved had decision-making power to ensure the outcomes from the Taskforce moved beyond dialogue to on the ground implementation.

- **Signed memorandums of understanding.** As another signal to the commitment to the process and its outcomes, teams signed memorandums of understanding that designated utility staff to serve as project coordinators and serve as liaisons between the city-based learning teams and the Alliance.
- **In-person learning exchanges.** For building relationships, coming together in person for effective communication and team-building is vital. In addition to regular local meetings, city learning teams also agreed to participate in six in-person learning exchanges with the entire seven-city Taskforce. The two- to three-day learning exchanges allowed teams to strip away distractions and dedicate significant time to making progress. This also fostered opportunities for cross-city exchange via trainings, site tours, and peer-to-peer dialogues.
- **Tangible deliverables.** While the Taskforce was designed to prioritize learning and understanding over outcomes, setting the expectation of a deliverable—a site-specific water equity roadmap—gave teams something to organize around. With a concrete goal and regular points of contact to discuss progress with other cities, teams pushed to confront their issues and find common ground on their shared goals early.
- **National cohort.** By design, the Taskforce honored the unique challenges and structures of each community while standardizing the process and practice. Operating as a national cohort under a parallel process gave cities a shared identity and national-scale accountability. The national model also fostered sharing of best practices, data, and partnership opportunities across cities.



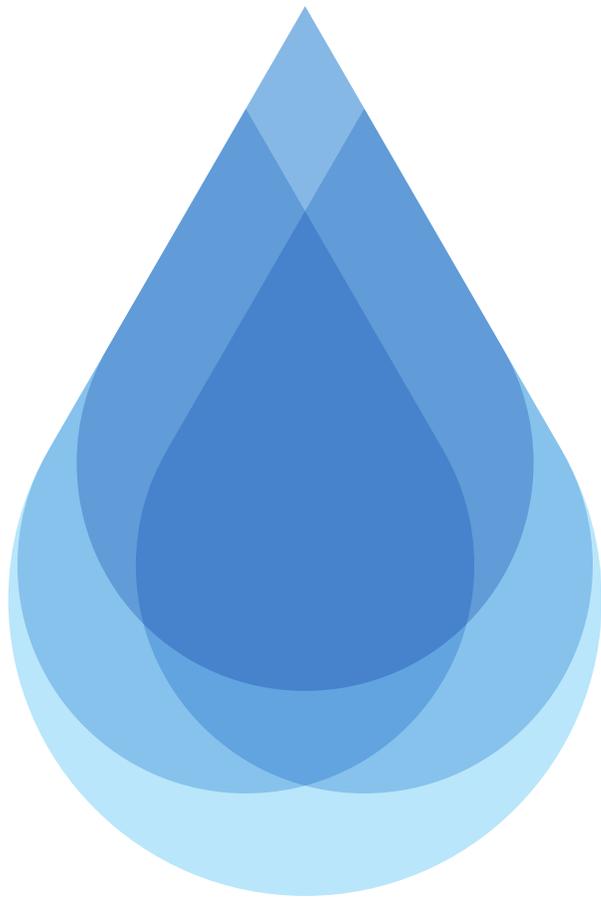
**The Water Equity Taskforce shows you a roadmap of how you can bring together various partners and how you can establish different policies and approaches that will allow you to utilize your economic power to be able to grow jobs locally, grow businesses in your community, and to develop a diverse workforce for utility going forward.**

—Tony Parrott, Executive Director, Louisville/Jefferson Metropolitan Sewer District

## Local Initiatives Lead to Broad National Influence

While the Taskforce helped each of the seven cities adopt new approaches and policies, it also aimed to advance the principles of equitable water management nationally. The Taskforce cultivated early national scale influence by sharing frameworks and learnings throughout the process at leading water sector conferences and events. In the past few years, others in the sector have moved towards adopting a water equity approach. These changes to the sector include the following:

- **Water equity is being acknowledged as a deep-rooted issue in water management** and established as a core industry priority.
- **Water agencies are being redefined and reimagined as anchor institutions** as utility leaders expand the scope of their mission to deliver equitable water and wastewater services, safeguard public health, and protect the environment.
- **Community organizations and residents are building their capacity and being recognized as the experts they are.** These stakeholders are expanding their networks of support and breaking into traditional water industry spaces to share their experiences and insights.
- **Utilities beyond the Taskforce and adjacent city agencies are pursuing equitable policies and practices,** inspired by stories from the Water Equity Taskforce.
- **Appetite for cross-sector collaboration between water agencies and diverse community stakeholders is growing.** Community organizations and the residents they represent are finding more ways to participate in water management.
- **Additionally, more utilities, private companies, philanthropy, and environmental groups approached the Alliance** to learn from this experience, offer to support the effort, or start Taskforce teams for their cities.



# KEY INSIGHTS FOR A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO WATER EQUITY

One of the most valuable payoffs of the Water Equity Taskforce was the opportunity to better understand what it takes to achieve meaningful results for water equity. What does successful cross-sector collaboration look like? What are the factors that enable that success? How can we change individual perspectives to change organizations and systems? How can we ensure all stakeholders can play a role and use their strengths to advance an equitable water future?

This section presents six best practices that enable participants to envision a more equitable water future, cultivate productive and long-lasting relationships, and take major steps to launch new programs and policies. Water leaders from utilities, community-based organizations, environmental groups, businesses, and philanthropy can all draw on these insights to champion water equity in their communities.

# 1.

## Reduce Risk by Setting the Table with a Trusted National Convener

Given the highly visible water crises of the past few years, there has been a lot of writing and thinking on water and equity. While there is terrific work occurring, there is also a need for distilling this work and helping water leaders build the capacity to apply it. As an influential organization in the water industry, the US Water Alliance felt a responsibility to shine a light on these inequities and call attention and action to the national crisis. After the release of *An Equitable Water Future*, there was an immense appetite for more equitable approaches to water management, but most Alliance members and partners were unsure how or where to begin.

Industry leaders turned to the Alliance for guidance, content expertise, and convening capacity. The research the Alliance conducted on water equity not only gave a deep understanding of the various water challenges happening across the country, but it gave the Alliance visibility on practical solutions being championed at a local level. For solutions to apply to a local context, utilities needed to draw on the diverse perspectives from their communities, and the Alliance uniquely positioned itself to create an environment where community-based organizations and residents could have their voices heard and participate directly in defining solutions.

While the utility members of the Alliance commit to innovation and pushing the industry forward, many are still risk-averse. For most water and wastewater providers, taking on water equity was uncharted territory. The Alliance's position within the industry provided reassurance by giving strategic assistance and building a community of support with peers. It also gave the external validation that some utilities needed when governing bodies or those who did not understand the connections between water service, infrastructure, race, class, and equity questioned their participation.

Community-based groups and local nonprofits also took risks to join utilities in this effort. Because many public-serving and government institutions appear resistant to change, local organizations and stakeholders risked their reputations as advocates and took an opportunity-cost risk by choosing to invest time in these partnerships over other strategies to create change. This was especially true in communities where utilities historically played a role in perpetuating inequitable systems. Too frequently, well-intentioned equity efforts promise ambitious outcomes but leave behind fragmented relationships and few results. For these reasons, the US Water Alliance prioritized building relationships over the prescriptive outcomes when designing the Water Equity Taskforce. The Alliance worked with partners to make space to explore and discuss histories of injustice and other risks openly. At the same time, it rooted discussions in opportunities and took action to make sure it grounded the time spent on these relationships in the pursuit of solutions and policy changes.

Prior to the Water Equity Taskforce, the Alliance's research on water equity put it in contact with community-based organizations working to address local water stresses. It kept in contact with these stakeholders and invited and provided funding for community delegations to attend One Water Summits or participate in industry speaking opportunities. The Alliance does not speak on behalf of any frontline community and instead seeks opportunities to elevate community partners with funders and in the more traditional realms of the water sector. These actions reinforce the Alliance's commitment and reputation for creating opportunities for authentic, collaborative action.

To achieve meaningful, national-scale results for water equity, national partners are valuable in illuminating what is possible. Rather than prescribe strategies to each city, the Alliance's job was to serve them by facilitating team interaction in ways that honored and elevated the diverse expertise each learning team member contributed. The Alliance used its unique position as a neutral convener to ground everyone in shared goals in a way that did not leave utilities or community organizations feeling as if one party had more power than the other. As an honest broker, the Alliance provided a structure that helped to break down silos and challenge entrenched ways of working. The Alliance modeled new ways of communicating. And the Water Equity Taskforce leaned on the organization's credibility, relationships, and technical content expertise to help teams identify opportunities and drive solutions.

## 2.

### Position Water Utilities as Community-Centered Anchor Institutions

Nothing is more localized than water and wastewater systems. Utilities are place-based institutions that safeguard public health, protect the environment, and foster economic vitality. While there is tremendous potential to leverage water investments for local employment and career pathways, business development and contracting opportunities, educational programs, and neighborhood improvements, utilities are just beginning to recognize these connections and consider their role as anchor institutions in addition to their role as service providers.

As engineers, most utility managers are used to focusing on the core elements of providing 24/7 safe, reliable water service: treatment, conveyance, infrastructure, billing, and regulatory compliance. Historically, water utilities have seen their role in the community as providing a commodity service. They have tended to engage only passively, or reactively, with the customers and communities they serve, especially low-income/vulnerable communities.

Increasingly, utilities are realizing this old model is not enough. They are pushing beyond these passive and reactive approaches into an era of positive community benefits, one that takes a proactive approach, rather than reactive, to community engagement. As a result, utility leaders are increasingly participating in conversations about how vulnerable communities are excluded from opportunities to engage in and sharing the benefits of water infrastructure management and how utilities might change those conditions by collaborating around workforce development, neighborhood revitalization, affordability, and community benefits.

In building the Water Equity Taskforce, the Alliance intentionally engaged utilities committed to thinking beyond their historic mandates. The participating utilities had already begun exploring the equitable provision of services, whether related to water quality, affordability, infrastructure improvements, workforce, or community benefits, ready to take their commitments further. The Taskforce provided an opportunity for these utility leaders to deepen their commitment and become catalysts for equity in their cities.

To foster this way of thinking, at least one utility anchored each Taskforce learning team. Teams organized themselves based on the strengths and capacities of their members and shared decision-making power. It was also important that the general managers and senior staff participated in learning teams. Having them at the table meant decisions could be implemented more easily with the full support of executive leaders.

While utility orientation and leadership engagement are important features of leveraging utilities' substantial investments for change, utilities also must navigate other legal, financial, bureaucratic, and political constraints. The nature of the Taskforce encouraged teams to be transparent about constraints and identify areas of flexibility and rigidity. This allowed the teams to develop innovative ways to support each other in overcoming constraints when possible. In some cases, this is where the potential for partnerships with community-based organizations, nonprofits, labor unions, and philanthropic organizations can circumvent challenges and open the door for solutions that would not be possible for the utility to accomplish alone.

For example, in Atlanta, Georgia, the Taskforce team worked with community organizations to make their engagement strategies more inclusive and responsive to community needs. Often, utilities go to communities with plans that are nearly finalized and have little room for modification, and that means soliciting feedback can feel superficial to communities. The utility overcame this challenge by partnering with the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA) to rethink its strategies for eliciting community feedback. One way in which it reimaged and reshaped its strategies was bringing design consultants to community meetings for residents to offer suggestions at the onset of concept design before any plans were on paper. In this instance, the utility's role was to connect the community to design consultants and allow these two groups to make decisions and not leave all the design decision-making to the utility alone.

Helping utilities reframe their role helps unlock new possibilities. The Taskforce showed that utilities do have the power to participate in more ways than their staff originally imagined. More than the sum of any individual activity or on-the-ground result, the Taskforce has fundamentally influenced the discourse in the One Water field to be more open to the notion of traditional water managers as agents of opportunity and equity in the communities they serve. This unlocks the potential of utility leaders to move beyond entrenched views rooted in the impossible and to embrace innovative approaches that ask what *is* possible.



**The Water Equity Taskforce has helped us achieve relationship-building. It has also given me an opportunity to hear from some of our community partners in a very open, direct, and real way.**

—Kishia Powell, Former Commissioner, City of Atlanta  
Department of Watershed Management

### 3.

## Lift up the Wisdom, Voice, and Experience of the Community

Too often, projects that seek to address harms affecting underserved populations fail to include those groups or do so only at a superficial level. When they include them, there is an imbalance of power between community members and larger institutions. Not only do community groups tend to be significantly under-resourced, leading to gaps in funding, staffing, and capacity to take on extra work, the experiences and wisdom they gather from the front lines are often valued less than government bodies or institutions. For the Taskforce to be equitable in design and yield the best outcomes for each city, the US Water Alliance and Taskforce partners had to acknowledge and alleviate these power dynamics to the extent possible.

Inviting community-based organizations to the table is not enough—it is also important to create the enabling conditions for them to be there. Often, leaders doing community or equity-oriented work do not receive compensation for helping other organizations become more inclusive and equitable. The Alliance and philanthropic partners offered stipends to community leaders as compensation for their time and contributions to their learning team. We also provided travel and lodging stipends to lower the financial burden for under-resourced organizations to participate in the in-person learning exchanges.

The Alliance also had to address power dynamics that prevent participants from speaking up or being heard in a seemingly open dialogue. Truly collaborative approaches must ensure that the convening design is inclusive and that it empowers community organizers to participate. For the Water Equity Taskforce, community organizers had to position themselves as decision-makers on equal footing with other participants, like utility and environmental leaders, although in some cases that did not directly lead to all voices being heard.

After the first learning exchange, the Alliance received feedback that teams were not hearing from community groups as much as they would like. It was clear that despite intentionality in the Taskforce design, it still needed explicit structures to elevate the voices of community members and their community-based organization representatives. In response, the Alliance redesigned sessions to provide dedicated time for community groups to share their views. For example, the second learning exchange included a panel of community leaders discussing their experiences in policy and program development. The Alliance also implemented one-on-one conversations with community leaders to allow for ongoing feedback on project structure.

The importance of engaging the community extended far beyond the organizations at the Taskforce table. For many of the participating cities, the activities they undertook required new approaches to engaging with neighbors and utility customers. For example, when the Atlanta Department of Watershed Protection considered expanding its Care and Conserve program, Taskforce team members encouraged the utility to survey multi-family residents and renters who may not be direct utility customers but could benefit from the program expansion.

Listening to and elevating community voices in the Taskforce served as a model for how utilities can better work with the communities they serve. Utilities found great value in the knowledge and insights that the community groups provided. In most cases, these relationships helped utilities design more equitable and effective outreach plans. At the same time, they granted community groups and representatives easier access to levers to forge institutional change by working directly with utility partners.

““

**So many of us are isolated in what we do, whether it is drinking water or wastewater service. We don't often see the direct impact on the communities. The Taskforce helped us get closer to the community, understand how they want us to show up, and how can we make their lives better. For me, it meant a very personal way to touch base with the people I serve.**

—Kevin Shafer, Executive Director, Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District

## 4.

### Embrace an Adaptive Management Approach

When national organizations fail to consult those who are on the front lines, they risk designing programs based on misguided assumptions. That is why the Alliance prioritized taking an adaptive approach to the Water Equity Taskforce from inception to implementation.

To cultivate agreement from participants, the Alliance brought them into the design process from the very beginning. Through research, the Alliance encountered new organizations actively working to address issues of water inequity in their communities. Leveraging these new relationships and its network as part of the brain trust, the Alliance could design the Taskforce to meet the various needs of the participants. By taking a proactive approach of listening to participant ideas from the beginning, the Alliance set the tone for open collaboration and demonstrated a commitment to transformation.

Embracing flexibility was important because it helped highlight that getting it right would likely not happen the first time. The expectation was that the Taskforce process would have to evolve as the Alliance learned more from participants. The Alliance implemented both formal and informal processes for feedback and worked to incorporate and acknowledge the feedback received. For example, at each learning exchange, the Alliance summarized previous sessions and explained to the group any changes made to address the feedback.

The learning teams were also flexible and responsive as they developed their roadmaps and designed policies and programs. They needed to align their priorities with the communities hit hardest by disparities in water infrastructure and service provision. For example, community focus groups and interviews with community members in Milwaukee revealed high barriers to access water workforce opportunities. As the Milwaukee learning team digested this information, they realized there were gaps in the team's capacity to address these barriers. The team brought in new partners with the expertise needed to integrate and develop the appropriate workforce pipeline into its plans.

In addition to community members, the Taskforce also relied on external thought partners to serve as weather-vanes and capacity builders. For example, the Alliance partnered with the Government Alliance on Racial Equity (GARE) to provide several racial equity trainings and resources to help learning teams build the capacity to identify challenges and solutions through a racial justice lens.

Also important was working with philanthropic partners who embraced adaptive management. The Alliance partnered with funders who believed in its theory of change and invested in a process that would derive the best outcome rather than a predetermined outcome. Along the way, philanthropic partners also served as thought partners and offered perspectives and approaches to large-scale social change.

Change is the only constant in any movement building process. By designing the Taskforce *with* and not just *for* partners, stakeholders, and community members, the effort demonstrated how to evolve. By pulling external thought partners into the discussions, teams gained new insights and inspiration. Within individual teams, adaptive management allowed them to be more resilient in the face of change, like staff or team member turnover, new data that shifted priorities, or negative pressure from outsiders. As the Alliance prepares to scale this work beyond the Taskforce cities, the values of iterative design and adaptive management will be more important than ever.

“”

**Progress has been made so quickly, relatively speaking, because people have shown up. It's about having the right people at the table and being willing to stay at the table when it's gotten hard.**

—Elizabeth Cisar, Senior Program Officer, The Joyce Foundation

## 5.

### Build Culture and Capacity for Long-Term Collaboration

All participants in the Taskforce came together because they recognized that any one organization or any one solution could not solve the water challenges affecting their communities. The Water Equity Taskforce breaks down these silos to facilitate collaboration across stakeholder groups. But for productive collaboration to take root, participants and their organizations must transform. Utility leaders must transform the way they view their role in ensuring equitable water systems and embrace new ways of working in neighborhoods. Community groups must transform the way they engage with government and utility institutions. And policymakers must transform the way they listen and respond to community needs.

Addressing disparities and institutionalizing water equity is a long-term endeavor. As a two-year project, the Water Equity Taskforce needed to be very intentional about its goals, not over-promise but meet participants where they were in their journey. It was clear that the priority for these two years was to build a capacity for long-term collaboration and systems change that could continue well past the Taskforce's lifespan. To tackle this, the Alliance focused on three areas of capacity building: setting a shared long-term vision, building sustainable relationships, and coaching teams through change management.

Long-term change to large scale systems takes many steps that, while they seem small in a moment, sum up to a much larger movement. Those driving change can often lose sight of the forest through the trees, motivation can fade, and the movement can lose momentum. That is why one of the first tasks for each learning team was to develop a water equity roadmap for its city. The roadmap required teams to come to a shared understanding of the challenges affecting their cities and co-create a shared vision for the future. In charting a path forward, teams also needed to acknowledge the capabilities present at the table. A shared vision of the future reminds teams of what they are working towards, even as years pass, and they tackle one priority at a time.

Many participants cited the relationships as the greatest outcome of the Taskforce. To get there, teams needed to move past transactional interactions to sustained engagement. Throughout the two years, team members frequently reached out to each other between convenings and on issues beyond the scope of the Taskforce, signaling not only the value of these relationships but the transformation of traditional ways of interacting.

Since relationships are the key to sustaining this work overtime, the roadmap process also reinforced that teams had more in common than not. The Taskforce experience created a forum for participants to understand each other's perspectives, lanes of authority, network, and span of influence. This level of deep understanding contributes to more meaningful and valuable relationships that extend beyond the parameters and time-period of the Taskforce. The Taskforce's success was possible through intensive, time-consuming collaboration and relationship building. Philanthropic partners can support the long-term sustainability of projects like these by supporting continued intensive engagement beyond initial project timeframes.

Culture change is especially difficult, long-term work in older legacy organizations like utilities. If utilities want to show leadership in water equity, they must receive support as they navigate the tough water sector culture they exist within. Unless they are successful in shifting culture and ways of working, progress will not scale.

One of the most significant cultural shifts in this project was acknowledging racial injustice in water management. Training and grounding in racial equity early and often can help utility staff and leaders engage successfully beyond their institutions. Utility staff who can demonstrate this capacity can build credibility with local partners, create more exacting solutions to water equity challenges, and serve as ambassadors to the wider industry about the value of doing so.

The change of culture needed to develop an equitable structure for the Taskforce required a completely different approach than many Alliance members knew. It required listening, building trust, and mutual understanding. It required leaders to come to the table without pride or ego and with humility and vulnerability. Before the Alliance could build that capacity within the teams, it had to model it and be intentional to demonstrate it in facilitating the Taskforce and designing convenings. The Alliance brought in local artists, created a space for open expression and sharing, and was the first to admit its own vulnerabilities. Modeling these behaviors laid the foundation for teams to embrace new ways of working together as they embarked on the two-year journey.

“”

**The US Water Alliance has helped us in setting a more inclusive table where government, community, and others can come together and have a fair, balanced, transparent, and true conversation about the challenges vulnerable communities are facing in Atlanta. Through the process of creating our city's roadmap, we have a clear understanding of how we can work together to begin the process of not only developing a plan that is grounded in equity but also an implementation approach that looks towards the goals we want to accomplish and helps us ensure that the journey is equitable. Engagement, ensuring that all communities have a voice, and working to develop real indicators to guide the process will occur along the way. The Alliance has been extremely invaluable in supporting that work.**

—Nathaniel Smith, Founder and Chief Executive Officer,  
Partnership for Southern Equity

## 6.

### Move at the Speed of Trust

When diverse parties come together with varying perspectives, they can often focus on their differences instead of their common goals. This is especially apparent when there are legacies of distrust between institutions and communities, and teams had to acknowledge their past and work through it. Trust is a holistic belief in an individual or an institution, and it enables that individual or institution to take risks and be vulnerable. Building trust is both the hardest and the most important work of cross-sector equity coalitions.

Building trust begins with honesty. Each team had to have honest conversations. One of the first exchanges focused on racial equity training, which encouraged teams to not shy away from the tough questions. Talking through issues, and not around them, meant community groups had to be honest and direct about the inequitable effects on vulnerable people. It also meant utility leaders had to listen to learn and take ownership of their organizational history, even if they were not at the helm during that time.

The real breakthrough is learning to be more comfortable being vulnerable and transparent with each other. Utilities have historically defaulted to defensiveness when confronted with water and environmental inequities. Through the Taskforce, they are learning to prioritize relationships over the desire for quick vindication or acclaim through the practice of deep listening and exploring criticisms—even when a critique may be unfounded or misdirected. This pushes utilities to take their relationships beyond the usual top-down models of community engagement and embrace participatory interactions where utilities and community groups have an equal stake in setting priorities and making decisions together.

Issues like workforce development and water affordability are big, complex issues that cannot be solved in a vacuum. Achieving shared goals requires different capabilities, and teams must acknowledge the strengths brought to the table by different groups. Participants must acknowledge their blinders and what they can learn from others. In the Taskforce, community advocates benefited from a deeper understanding of water systems and the constraints water utilities must navigate in applying water and climate solutions, while utilities appreciated the nuanced perspective on the challenges affecting vulnerable communities. It required both parties to come to the table willing to share and learn.

One of the core tenets of trust is performance. The more participants continue to show up, participate empathically, make connections, and deliver on their promises, the more they strengthen their relationships. The more they strengthen their relationships, the more progress they make together. Progress fortifies trust, and trust accelerates progress. While positive progress does not always transfer across issues, each experience together is an opportunity for participants to demonstrate their dependability and integrity.



**One of the greater benefits of being involved in the Taskforce is how it accelerates those relationships with community partners. Coming from a utility, it isn't always easy to get an audience with someone who may see things a bit differently than you. It helps you to relate to the community members and understand where they're coming from and what their priorities are, where they've misunderstood us, and where we've misunderstood them in the past. Accelerating those relationships has been a key component in moving forward toward our goals and identifying what those common goals are so that we can accomplish them together.**

—Karen Dettmer, Superintendent, Milwaukee Water Works

## 7.

### Know the Risks and Address Missteps

As with all relationship-based efforts, cross-sector partnerships entail a degree of risk. Diverse groups bring different perspectives, biases, and experiences of power or marginalization. Depending on the positionality of the organization, collaborating with partners outside of their normal sector or comfort zone can bring risks to reputations, funding sources, organizational structure, and relationships. The Alliance took steps to mitigate these risks and ensure safe and productive partnerships, such as grounding the Taskforce in a set of shared principles that include confidentiality, respect for different kinds of knowledge, assuming good intentions, and participatory decision-making. While the partners agreed to these principles at the outset, they did not always embody them in their interactions with one another; for example, by making top-down decisions, making assumptions about utility staff's motives, or undervaluing lived experience. Partners not abiding by the principles for collaboration damaged trust and made it more difficult to achieve equitable outcomes. When these issues arose in the Taskforce, teams discussed them with the partners individually to understand their concerns and attempted to develop common-ground solutions. In some cases, addressing these tensions head-on allowed the Taskforce teams to be honest with each other and form stronger collaborative relationships. In others, however, repairing trust was more challenging.

The Alliance found that community-based organizations were particularly vulnerable when conflicts arose, since they often had less authority and fewer resources than utilities. This risk was most present in communities where the utility was seen as untrustworthy or had not acknowledged past or current inequities. Leaders from community-based organizations operating in these contexts may be risking their credibility with residents, which is fundamental to their ability to be effective change agents. The risk to their reputation could also affect their access to philanthropic funding and contracts with government agencies, like utilities. To mitigate this risk, the Alliance connected community-based organizations to funding opportunities through sharing grant announcements, recommending them for high visibility speaking engagements, and making introductions to funders.

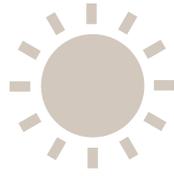
An additional challenge that emerged involved members of Taskforce teams reacting defensively to critique, which posed risks to the relationships being built. Utilities were generally receptive to calls for immediate action in response to water equity challenges. But in some cases, community partners wanted to move faster than utilities because the water challenges being discussed—such as children being exposed to wastewater or families having their water shut off—had real impact on people's daily lives. On some occasions, utilities became defensive and focused on what they had already accomplished rather than considering what still needed to be done. This misalignment on the pace of the work set the relationship back and at times slowed the work. The Alliance addressed this tension by inviting community leaders to speak at Taskforce convenings and convey the urgency of solving water equity challenges. The Alliance also created spaces for utilities to explain the legal, bureaucratic, or budgetary constraints they face that limit the speed and scope of their policies.

Cross-sector collaboration also meant learning how to merge various working styles and organizational norms. In forming community partnerships, it is crucial to understand that a utility's work culture may be very different than that of a community-based organization. Expectations can vary dramatically in terms of communication styles, meeting protocols, problem-solving approaches, work products, and schedules. For utilities, which can have traditional work cultures focused on output and production, it can be challenging to adapt to organizations with more collaborative cultures and inclusive decision-making approaches. Through careful communication, organizations can better understand each other's cultures and find a way to work productively together.

Selecting a good liaison is also important. Each utility had a staff member who communicated and coordinated with the community partner on a regular basis. In selecting this liaison, it is critical to consider personalities and working styles. A utility liaison with a "command-and-control" style, for example, can damage the utility's relationship with a community partner. Similarly, a community partner who is unable to come to a decision or finish a work product can also derail the partnership. Ongoing communication is key. Utility leadership should check in with the community partner's leadership to gauge how the relationship is going and make corrections (e.g., assigning a different liaison) as necessary.

Many Taskforce teams navigated changes in team composition during the project. Whether from promotions, job changes, turnover, or needing to add new partners along the way, these changes affected teams' timelines, capacity, and group dynamics. In cases where participants had to step back from the work, challenges included filling gaps and roles in the work, onboarding new participants, and managing group dynamics. Careful attention had to be paid to how new participants and their perspectives integrated into the team's processes, recommendations, and activities.

In cross-sector initiatives, it is important to accept that things will sometimes go wrong and commit to learning from these challenges. All in all, the Water Equity Taskforce did successfully help both utility and community learn more about each other's needs and capabilities and work together more effectively in the long run. The process was, however, not without setbacks, and future cross-sector partnerships should plan for how to overcome them if and when they arise.



 **Milwaukee**

**Atlanta** 

 **Pittsburgh**

**Louisville** 

 **Camden**

 **Cleveland**

 **Buffalo** 

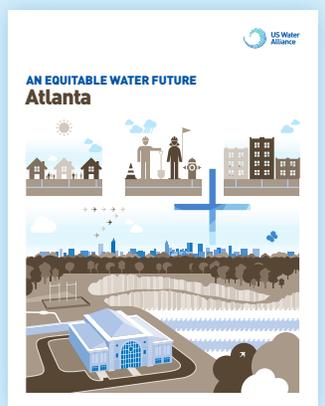


# CASE STUDIES: PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

The Water Equity Taskforce was a network comprised of cross-sector learning teams from seven US cities to uncover new models, methodologies, and collaborations on a range of equity-related issues. The Taskforce teams from Atlanta, Georgia; Buffalo, New York; Camden, New Jersey; Cleveland, Ohio; Louisville, Kentucky; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, each defined the challenges they faced and identified solutions for how to overcome them. Each case study on the following pages examines aspects of each team's journey and breakthroughs.

## Rebuilding Trust through Community Partnerships in Atlanta

Stay tuned for the release of “An Equitable Water Future: Atlanta” which will be available on the [Resources](http://www.uswateralliance.org/resources) section of our website at [www.uswateralliance.org/resources](http://www.uswateralliance.org/resources).



Proctor Creek is the only major watershed located fully within the boundaries of Atlanta, Georgia, and pollution and deterioration have plagued the creek for decades. The watershed includes many low-income and predominantly African American communities such as Vine City and English Avenue, where vacancy rates are 40 to 50 percent and poverty rates are up to 60 percent. Communities have faced several environmental injustices, including urban flooding, poor in-stream water quality, and trash pollution in water bodies. Like many urban streams, fecal coliform levels in these water bodies have been especially high.

In the late 1990s, federal judges issued two consent decrees that would improve Atlanta’s wastewater and stormwater systems due to overwhelming sewer overflows and flooding in the city. Yet even after the completed consent decree projects in the late 2000s, which reduced sewer spills in the neighborhoods around Proctor Creek by 70 percent, distrust remained. Improvements did not erase the legacy of pollution, bacterial contamination from stormwater flooding, illegal trash, and tire dumping and sewer overflows that harmed communities.

The push for the Atlanta Department of Watershed Management (DWM) to rebuild trust with neighbors around Proctor Creek began before the Water Equity Taskforce. In the early 2010s, a team of DWM stormwater leaders began speaking with community-based organizations like Park Pride, Proctor Creek Stewardship Council, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA), and The Conservation Fund to better understand neighborhood concerns and develop a vision for green infrastructure and stormwater investments.

A wave of new city leadership also provided the impetus for change. Beginning in 2016 under the leadership of Commissioner Kishia Powell and more recently the guidance of Commissioner Mikita Browning, DWM leaders prioritized community engagement and empowered their staff to engage with communities in new ways. In particular, there is a focus on implementing the green infrastructure plan that DWM’s stormwater team created with Proctor Creek community leaders. In 2018, Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms took office intending to improve social equity and access to opportunity for low-income communities.

When DWM senior leadership team members joined with community leaders from WAWA, Partnership for Southern Equity, the Conservation Fund, and American Rivers under the Water Equity Taskforce accelerated water equity in Atlanta. The Taskforce provided a framework and a deadline to advance two distinct but related equity agendas: bridging more trusting relationships with residents of the Proctor Creek watershed and soliciting community input to disseminate \$14 million of funding from a municipal environmental impact bond (EIB) for vital stormwater improvements.

The Taskforce provided a neutral forum for DWM to listen to community leaders, ask them questions, and brainstorm strategies for Proctor Creek. DWM leaned on respected leaders from the community to serve as a bridge to other residents. Allyship from these groups helped build trust in the agency's integrity. But DWM also had to back up its intentions with action.

Old ways of public engagement were no longer enough, DWM was not attracting people from the watershed. Used to hosting large public meetings in city buildings, the agency learned it needed to host various events that attract a range of different people. With a long track record for creating spaces for community members to learn about environmental and planning challenges within the watershed, community-based organizations on the team, like WAWA, helped DWM redesign outreach efforts. This included stormwater roadshows to educate residents, as well as attending neighborhood meetings and WAWA forums in small groups with the primary purpose of listening. This dual approach has enabled the utility to reach and build relationships with a larger percentage of residents in the watershed.

Taking a new approach to community engagement also meant DWM had to be responsive to feedback about stormwater infrastructure design early on. Often, utilities go to communities with plans that are nearly finalized and have little room for modification. That means of soliciting feedback can feel superficial to communities. So, when DWM launched its Environmental Impact Bond, it sought community input from the onset. For some projects, that meant bringing design consultants to community meetings so that residents could offer suggestions for the concept design before a plan went to paper. In other cases, that meant soliciting feedback along the way and revising plans so they aligned with residents' needs and vision.

Through the Taskforce, the utility was able to share some of the barriers and constraints that often limit their abilities. This kind of open dialogue helped community groups to better understand where they could step in and the roles they could play. As a result, many partners were able to take on responsibilities that a utility or government agency could not. For example, the Conservation Fund helped DWM acquire land for two large EIB projects and negotiate agreements with a variety of landowners. Community organizations like ECO-Action and WAWA cultivated a forum and environment for interaction that shifted the power between the utilities and residents. And the utility showed up with respect for the critical lens and expertise communities brought.

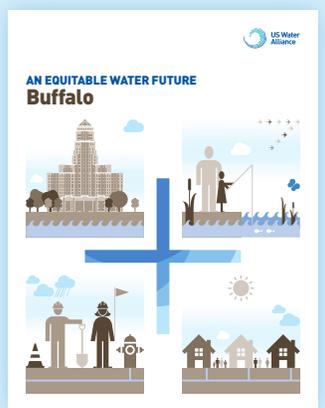
Building trust requires gradually shifting perspectives and addressing barriers. Changing designs in response to public feedback also requires longer project timelines. The Taskforce team accepted that community engagement takes time. It is worth the tradeoff, but it requires that both internal and external stakeholders come prepared for longer project timelines. By being willing to listen to communities, alter meetings, and change designs to meet resident needs, DWM was able to cultivate trust and excitement for the transformation and the community benefits promised.

Representatives from several learning teams on a site visit in Atlanta. The visit was led by the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, one of the community partners of the Atlanta team.



## Taking a Holistic Design Approach to Address Affordability in Buffalo

To read our report *An Equitable Water Future: Buffalo*, please click [here](#) or visit the [Resources](#) section of our website at [www.uswateralliance.org/resources](http://www.uswateralliance.org/resources).



As an older industrial city that has weathered both economic shifts and population decline, Buffalo, New York, has many vulnerable communities disproportionately affected by infrastructural, economic, and environmental issues. Population decline has transformed the built environment of the city, leaving neighborhoods with swaths of vacant lots. It also has caused changes to water infrastructure capacity to serve smaller populations. The region has a strong ecosystem of local organizations working towards socioeconomic equity and environmental quality. At the same time, many lower-income people and communities of color live with segregation and poverty. Reversing the historic conditions that have led to population decline, industrial pollution, and concentrated poverty will be a long-term task, but equitable water management can contribute greatly to an inclusive future for Buffalo.

When Buffalo joined the Water Equity Taskforce in 2018, water and sewer rates were affordable for many, but both drinking water and sewer rates were unaffordable to some segments of the population, especially those on fixed incomes, like the elderly. There were approximately 1,330 Buffalo Water accounts on payment plans, and the average outstanding balance was \$1,131. Additionally, many Buffalo residents faced housing cost burdens, meaning that 30 percent or more of their income goes towards housing. Close to 32 percent of people of color were housing cost-burdened in 2015, while only 16.9 percent of white homeowners spent more than 30 percent of their household income on housing costs.

While Buffalo Sewer had not raised rates since 2005, Buffalo Water was at the beginning of a rate study in 2018 to assess potential increases needed to support investment in infrastructure maintenance. Both utilities faced the dual challenge of needing to secure a rate increase to make necessary infrastructure improvements and address affordability in their rate design. The Buffalo utilities recognized the burden that rates pose for historically marginalized communities and the need to keep services affordable as they made critical investments in infrastructure.

Building trust between the utilities and the community-based partners was the first step. Team members had to talk through and build a shared understanding of the legal and policy barriers that constrained the utilities before identifying opportunities for solutions. They also needed to understand water costs in the context of other cost burdens Buffalo residents faced. This had to happen incredibly fast to meet the deadline for the rate proposal. As participants in the Water Equity Taskforce, Buffalo utilities, housing networks, and community-based organizations rallied around the challenge and worked collaboratively to ensure that the increase would not exacerbate economic disparities.

Buffalo Water performed a comprehensive review of rates, reducing and eliminating inequitable fees and charges while erasing an entire rate segment and striving to 'right-size' rate blocks between low and high users. In addition, the utility introduced its Residential Affordable Water Program to allow existing low-income customer's bills to remain the same while simultaneously reducing the bills of very low-income customers. This rate adjustment provided an opportunity to expand existing affordability measures and inform customers about these resources. The Residential Affordable Water Program formed the championed Pathways to Affordable Water (PAW) program, along with existing assistance programs for the elderly, leak abatement programs, and extended payment plans.

Buffalo Water launched Pathways to Affordable Water, a program that helps to qualify residents for lower bills. Lower-income households can receive a discount on their water bill between \$60 and \$90 a year. Buffalo Water was able to leverage the relationships established with external organizations through the Water Equity Taskforce to enhance the equitable reach of this program. The Water Board partnered with Catholic Charities to administer the program and assist with enrollment. Buffalo Water developed a mobile-first web application for low-income and senior residents to enroll in Buffalo Water's affordable water assistance programs. The web interface allows applicants to upload photos and scans of any required documentation, allowing Water Equity partners and Buffalo Water employees to manage submitted applications and provide status updates. The Water Board also created an awareness campaign targeted to seniors, refugees, and low-income people using social media, bus ads, and other materials in multiple languages.

Water assistance programs are one of many strategies that can make housing conditions safer, healthier, and more affordable, including energy cost assistance, efficient fixtures, weatherization programs, and lead service line removal. Community groups, therefore, became well-suited to conduct outreach around service programs and assist with applications and enrollment. The team tapped into other local organizations such as block clubs and refugee resettlement groups with a trusted presence in target neighborhoods. By leaning into the expertise of the community, the team could take on a more comprehensive and effective outreach approach. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it conducted outreach through food banks, schools, and other community centers.

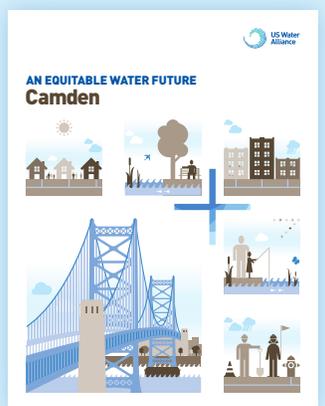
Thanks to this collaborative design process, utilities were able to offer improved affordability and assistance options to ensure that their rate increase did not disproportionately affect the most vulnerable households. It is estimated that up to 50 percent of Buffalo Water ratepayers are eligible for the affordability program. Since the launch, over 700 households have enrolled in the program and that number is expected to grow rapidly as the team explores options of automatic enrollment via SNAP and LIHEAP programs. As an unexpected result of the program, the utilities' bond ratings increased, making overall financing for infrastructure projects more cost-effective for the entire city. Buffalo Water's affordability program demonstrates collaboration between utilities and communities, and leading with equity brings about better outcomes for all.

Taskforce members from all seven cities present for the Buffalo Learning Exchange.



## Aligning Equity Efforts to Scale Progress over Time in Camden

To read our report *An Equitable Water Future: Camden*, please click [here](#) or visit the [Resources](#) section of our website at [www.uswateralliance.org/resources](http://www.uswateralliance.org/resources).



Situated on the Delaware River waterfront, Camden, New Jersey, has water surrounding all three sides. While water has been central to the city's environmental, social, and cultural fabric, it also has been a source of stress for an already vulnerable city, made up of communities of color, lower-income people, and other under-represented groups.

When manufacturing and shipbuilding steadily left the city over the last 30 years, they left behind hundreds of contaminated areas, including two Superfund sites and nearly 200 other contaminated sites. Runoff from these industrial sites contaminates water resources. A declining population and shrinking tax base also contributed to government deficits that left aging infrastructure systems under-invested and in need of improvement.

Flooding caused by combined sewer overflows is a dramatic and frequent occurrence in Camden, and lead is present in some residential plumbing fixtures in the older housing stock. Camden is also in one of the most vulnerable parts of the country in terms of climate change. As sea levels rise and storm severity increases, they will hit communities in Camden hard. The variety of water stresses in Camden has cumulative impacts on the already vulnerable neighborhoods of Camden.

While Camden has faced a long history of water challenges, the city has also aimed to write a new history of collaboration, with diverse groups coming together around promising solutions to these challenges. The Camden Collaborative Initiative, Camden SMART, and PowerCorps Camden are three anchor initiatives to address storm-water management, climate change adaptation, and workforce development.

Prior to joining the Water Equity Taskforce, Camden's efforts already made significant progress in addressing water issues. The community and utility leaders in Camden, however, knew there was more work to do to deliberately address water equity. With a solid foundation of cross-sector collaboration in place, the Camden learning team brought together representatives from local, county, and state government; a private utility; community, economic, and environmental nonprofits; and residents. This unique team came together to understand how various initiatives could unite under a shared vision for a more equitable Camden.

Occasionally during long-term systems change work, leaders must take a step back from the day-to-day implementation to realign the strategy. The Taskforce process enabled the Camden learning team to do just this. With a broad range of pressing water challenges afflicting the Camden community, team members naturally had different perspectives on what should take precedent. Instead of spiraling into an endless debate, the team decided to channel energy in to creating a roadmap.

The team prioritized an early connection with residents and Camden stakeholders to ensure that they elevated the needs of the community from the beginning. By developing the roadmap, the team gained a deeper understanding of the intersectional nature of the many local water and economic challenges. This helped the team arrive at six core priorities for advancing water equity in Camden: build on local achievements and partnerships, ensure long-term water quality and awareness, keep water rates affordable for all residents, ensure that equity concerns are central to climate planning and investments, build an inclusive water workforce, and strengthen policies to evaluate cumulative environmental and equity impacts.

With a shared language and a high-level vision for the future, the Camden team focused on actions for institutionalizing efforts and maximizing limited resources to bring them to scale. Putting trust in each other, the team created subgroups to make progress on water quality awareness, climate resilience, and workforce opportunities. The climate subgroup worked with The Trust for Public Land on a tool for assessing climate and health and equity in Camden, and the water quality subgroup conducted a survey with American Water on Camden residents' trust in water quality. Even though Camden's drinking water meets all regulatory standards for quality, the survey results revealed low trust in tap water and helped determine the need for water quality and community outreach for lead education as top priorities. To expand workforce development programs, the workforce development subgroup explored new potential partners.

While the Taskforce equipped teams with a framework and the capacity to set their strategy, the Camden team recognized that traction on its subgroup efforts would require more time than allotted in the two-year Taskforce scope. A major win for ensuring that progress did not stop with the Camden Water Equity Learning Team was institutionalizing and uniting efforts under the Camden Collaborative Initiative. The existing structure of CCI will allow subgroups the ability to continue working on their efforts and will provide the accountability needed to ensure efforts. Additionally, CCI is an innovative structure that is well-positioned to align Camden's water equity initiatives with statewide efforts and scaling the progress in Camden across the state of New Jersey.

[A presentation from youth participating in PowerCorps Camden, a soft-skills and job training program for at-risk young adults in Camden, NJ.](#)



## Widening the Lanes of Communication through Cleveland Water Champions Program

To read our report *An Equitable Water Future: Cleveland*, please click [here](#) or visit the [Resources](#) section of our website at [www.uswateralliance.org/resources](http://www.uswateralliance.org/resources).



The city of Cleveland, Ohio, sits at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River and on the shore of Lake Erie. While Cleveland is home to a legacy of regional leaders working to protect and preserve the region's water resources, it has also been home to water crises that communities must overcome to move toward a more equitable water future.

In the 1960s, the waterways surrounding Cleveland were heavily polluted—so much so that the Cuyahoga River famously caught fire in 1969. While this had lasting implications on residents, it disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, including the city's majority Black population. According to one of the Taskforce members, many Black people migrated to the area from southern states during the Great Migration. Many newcomers settled along the Cuyahoga River and relied on the river for subsistence fishing. While water was critical to daily life in many ways, water contamination led to generations of health effects and perpetuated a legacy of distrust.

Upon joining the Taskforce, both utilities, Cleveland Water, and the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (NEORS) understood that improved public engagement needed to be a cornerstone of their water equity agenda. Originally, the utilities considered hiring internal staff members who could communicate with vulnerable communities on behalf of the utility.

The team recognized that building community capacity to engage with water management was critical to an equitable water future in Cleveland. Public engagement done right leads to better, more sustainable processes and outcomes. Together, the Cleveland team charted a roadmap focused on expanding authentic engagement with vulnerable communities, deepening utility understanding of community concerns, and deepening community understanding of who the utility represents and to whom it is responsible.

The Cleveland Water Equity Learning Team wanted to build on the success of the Cleveland Climate Ambassadors program to connect with residents on water investments and programs. The Climate Ambassadors program employs community members with deep connections in the community to conduct outreach and education on how neighborhoods can become more resilient. Ambassadors act as liaisons among the City, community organizations, and the public, providing information on climate impacts and addressing questions or concerns from people affected by construction. They connect the public with information and resources to help reduce the risk of flooding, improve neighborhood green spaces, reduce utility bills, and prepare for heat waves.

Building off of the success of the Cleveland Climate Ambassadors, the team designed and implemented the Water Champions Program in which community representatives connect with residents in vulnerable communities, share information on water investments and programs, and listen to community perspectives on water management decisions. Water champions receive training in water systems and utility programs so they can help the community understand water quality issues and answer residents' questions about utility bills, water quality, cost-savings programs, and more. Perhaps more importantly, the champions undergo equal training in advocacy and consensus-building so they can voice community concerns back to the utility. This enables them to enhance the utilities' understanding of community needs and increase enrollment in cost-savings programs.

The program is designed so that water champions co-create additional programming to deepen community engagement. As the learning team explored additional public engagement strategies, it was important that these efforts worked in tandem. For example, the utilities sponsored water equity listening sessions hosted and led by trusted community-based organizations. Sessions revealed important feedback and modifications to utility practices that would improve the community experience and translate into the structure of the Water Champions Program.

In implementing the Water Champions program, the Cleveland learning team embraced the diverse strengths of the Taskforce members. The utilities valued the strong relationships and trust the Cleveland Housing Network had within the target communities. Given the intersections between water and housing affordability, the utilities worked with housing networks to administer assistance and plumbing conservation programs as part of their wraparound services to the community. Naturally, there was alignment in having the Cleveland Housing Network operate the Water Champions Program. Cleveland Water, NEORS, and local foundations financially supported the program and provided resources so it could hire, train, and pay champions to serve as liaisons between utilities, communities, and frontline organizations. Meanwhile, utilities developed the water curriculum, and other community-based organizations weighed in on the advocacy curriculum.

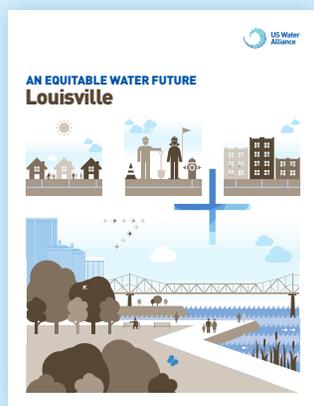
The utilities currently employ one water champion and are working to recruit an additional champion with the current funding they have available. While the program is still in its infancy, it has already proven to be a success. It has increased awareness and enrollment in affordability programs and helped the utilities better understand community needs and priorities. A key success factor has been ensuring that the champions have strong connections both with the community and the utility to effectively serve as vehicles for change.

A community partners panel with representatives from most of the Taskforce city teams.



## Institutionalizing Equity-Oriented Policies to Maximize Community Benefits in Louisville

To read our report *An Equitable Water Future: Louisville*, please click [here](#) or visit the [Resources](#) section of our website at [www.uswateralliance.org/resources](http://www.uswateralliance.org/resources).



Louisville, Kentucky, is experiencing a strong wave of development and rapid growth, including an anticipated expenditure of approximately five billion dollars in public and private capital infrastructure investments over the next five years. While many residents in the Louisville region enjoy a relatively high quality of life, enormous gaps persist between the day-to-day experiences of Louisville's affluent residents and those in its vulnerable communities in terms of wealth, employment, safety, and wellbeing. The Louisville metropolitan area, known as Kentuckiana or Louisville-Jefferson County, is home to a racially and ethnically diverse population and large veteran workforce due to nearby Fort Knox. But a long history of redlining has contributed to the segregation of the region's vulnerable populations, and despite a competitive job market, barriers to employment remain for people of color and veterans.

As utilities are positioned to make considerable investments in water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure improvements, there is a significant opportunity to accelerate job opportunities in the water sector, especially for vulnerable populations. Louisville and Jefferson County Metropolitan Sewer District (MSD) is positioned to invest over four billion dollars over the next 20 years in a Critical Repair and Reinvestment Plan to address wastewater infrastructure and flooding challenges. MSD Executive Director Tony Parrott has long advocated that capital programs are opportunities to strengthen the local workforce and ensure all community members benefit from infrastructure investments.

Representatives from Team Louisville give their city presentation to the rest of the Taskforce teams during the Atlanta Learning Exchange.



MSD began participating in cross-sector exchanges around workforce development. Louisville leaders, including representatives from local government, water and transportation agencies, workforce development agencies, and non-government organizations, took part in a Brookings Institute report, *Renewing the Water Workforce*, to explore current water workforce challenges and develop general recommendations for addressing them. These relationships laid a strong foundation for the Louisville Water Equity Learning Team.

In 2018, MSD completed a comprehensive disparity study, which examined MSD's contracting practices over five years (2010-2015). The study found that MSD underutilized businesses owned by minorities and women in awarding construction contracts. Out of the \$661 million in purchase order payments MSD made during the study period, 97 percent went to white, male-owned businesses. This data gave irrefutable evidence of a disparity in opportunity and was a mobilizing force behind the utility's efforts to institute more equitable policies.

Louisville joined the Water Equity Taskforce to channel the findings from the 2018 Brookings report and put the disparity study findings into action. While MSD seeded several promising policies and practices, the team focused on how to institutionalize efforts, spread them beyond the utility, and scale their influence across the Louisville region. This required implementing policies and practices that lift up and protect the most vulnerable residents of Louisville. It also required identifying and addressing the barriers and obstacles to workforce opportunities in the community, especially for those who have been historically and economically disadvantaged. MSD leadership leaned on the diverse perspectives of their learning team to identify these barriers and build solutions to address them.

With a significant investment in new construction and high demand for jobs, MSD leaders recognized and embraced their responsibility in creating local prosperity. Throughout the lifespan of the learning team, the utilities launched three policies driving change not only at the utility level but citywide.

MSD leadership championed the approval of a formal Community Benefits Policy for construction, construction-related services, and engineering and professional service contracts. The utility worked with diverse stakeholders to craft the policy, which enables vendors to make voluntary commitments for community benefits, such as financial contributions, volunteer hours, and other in-kind services to community organizations and schools within the MSD service area. The utility also created full-time positions, including chief equity and compliance officer and a director of community benefits and partnerships to direct these and other efforts.

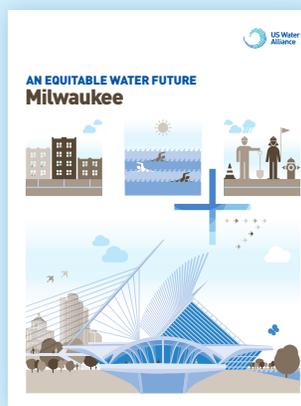
Focused on correcting the findings from the disparity study, the MSD board also approved an enhanced Supplier Diversity program to create more opportunities for underserved groups to work with MSD and share the benefits of billion-dollar capital programs equitably. The program increases the goals for minority- and women-owned businesses focused on specific underrepresented groups, including African Americans, Asian Indians, and Caucasian women. It also provides bidding discounts to encourage these groups to compete for prime contracts.

In 2010, MSD adopted a Local Labor Preference Policy for construction contracts valued at \$10 million or higher and reduced that threshold to five million dollars in 2017. MSD worked with the Taskforce to consider ways to increase the policy's influence. To increase the effectiveness of the Local Labor Preference Policy, the agency launched *MSDJobLink*, a free, web-based matchmaking platform that connects local workers to contractors seeking local labor. It provides a consolidated, easy-to-access platform where contractors can post new skilled and non-skilled trade jobs and individual applicants upload their resumes. MSD also worked with workforce development agencies and local community colleges to expand the pool of eligible laborers through accessible training and education programs.

Leaders in Louisville recognize that policies and practices must be intentional and focus on the needs of the most vulnerable communities, so the entire city and metropolitan area can realize their full potential and create an equitable future for all. The Louisville learning team not only helped shape the policies and programs adopted by MSD but joined forces with Mayor Greg Fischer and the Louisville metropolitan government agencies to expand their reach across the entire city government. MSD Executive Director Tony Parrott is co-chairing Mayor Fischer's Equity in Contracting and Procurement Task Force to create supplier diversity and local hiring opportunities in capital projects across all city governments. With a regional approach and utilities serving as anchor institutions in partnership with local community organizations, leaders in the Louisville area are leveraging investments to serve as a platform for modifications to existing policies so they can develop new programs and jobs to support the local workforce.

## Building the Case for Long-Term Change in Milwaukee

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Milwaukee, Wisconsin, sits at the confluence of three rivers and the shores of Lake Michigan. Yet, in an area so rich in water resources, the benefits of water infrastructure investments, including job creation and contracting opportunities, are not being shared equitably. Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the country, a condition reflected in its socioeconomic disparities.

Several workforce equity efforts were already underway in Milwaukee. The Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD), in collaboration with Cream City Conservation, and Employ Milwaukee, launched the Fresh Coast Ambassador program in 2019 to prepare young adults to enter the water workforce. MMSD also implemented “ban the box” on job applications and began developing a re-entry workforce program, Fresh Coast Fresh Start. Milwaukee Water Works is partnering with schools from grade school through college and university to build a stronger pipeline for potential future workers. Through this partnership, Milwaukee Area Technical College has launched an associate degree program and internship program for Environmental Health and Water Quality Technology.

While the efforts underway represent significant traction in building a resilient water workforce that is reflective of the communities MMSD serves, they run the risk of being disjointed if leaders are not communicating and working together. Milwaukee water leaders from utilities, non-profits, neighborhood associations, workforce development organizations, and educational institutions, joined the Water Equity Taskforce to identify more equitable pathways to employment opportunities for city residents. The team leveraged their resources to explore workplace culture, policies, and practices that can work together to reinforce the equitable economic opportunities resulting from community investments.

Brenda Coley, the co-executive Director of Milwaukee Water Commons, one of the partners on the Milwaukee team, speaks during a meeting of the Taskforce teams.



Embarking on this journey, the Milwaukee learning team realized that before it could design inclusive workforce solutions, it first needed to understand the barriers to employment that disproportionately affected vulnerable communities. To garner this understanding and begin to better include the lived experiences of Milwaukee residents, the team needed to collect more data and incorporate more voices. To address these needs, one of the team participants, Milwaukee Water Commons, contracted with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Economic Development to undertake a comprehensive water sector needs assessment.

The needs assessment was a first-of-its-kind effort to deeply understand what was happening in the community. The study was a multi-pronged data gathering effort reinforced by national and local water sector research, in-depth stakeholder interviews, and multiple community focus group discussions on barriers to living-wage employment. The team listened to community members, workforce agencies, employers, unions, educators, and more to understand what people experienced in the job market. They also looked at existing and future water workforce needs, hiring and procurement processes, pathways to water related jobs, and barriers to entry for people from vulnerable communities.

For the focus groups to be successful, people needed to take part. The team leaned on respected community leaders, particularly Milwaukee Water Commons, to encourage communities of color to participate, and participants were paid for their time. Community members were not only asked to attend but asked to co-lead the conversations with the support of external facilitators. Utility leaders hoped to create a space in which they could learn from community members directly and establish a greater understanding of the barriers they face to co-create informed solutions with the help of their learning team. By taking a step back and assuming the role of listener, not inquisitor, the team was able to learn much more and break the assumptions they previously held.

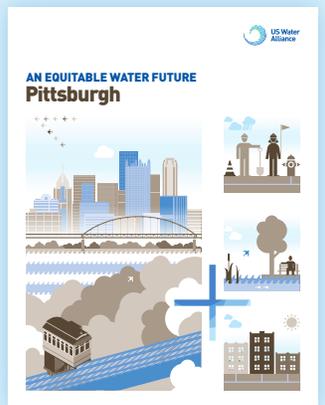
An important lesson for the team—and every city—was that the skills typically associated with the water workforce permeate across other industries, like construction, accounting, electrical work, and engineering. In fact, the utility is not the biggest employer in the water sector; the most significant opportunities lie with the private companies (contractors, equipment companies) that serve the utilities. Therefore, it is critically important to engage the private sector, as well as the public sector in advancing water workforce equity.

After the research study, core members of the team synthesized the feedback from the needs assessment and team meetings to develop a roadmap with detailed recommendations in three core areas for action: 1) increasing collaboration among the many organizations focused on workforce development in Milwaukee; 2) raising the visibility of water sector career paths; and 3) reforming the procurement process in water sector organizations across the public and private sectors. A major theme throughout each core area of action is using more equitable employment, hiring, and training practices to address the current barriers to employment and improve diversity and inclusion efforts. This roadmap sets the direction for the next phase of water equity work in Milwaukee.

The undertaking was not without tradeoffs. An assessment like this takes time, but the team recognized that to get their strategies right, they had to go slowly. Consistent outreach and investing in listening help to build a compelling case for long-term change. By intentionally bringing in the right partners and the right process, the team was able to increase collaboration across organizations working on workforce issues, broaden awareness of water sector careers, begin to reshape policies and practices for public and private sector employers, and create a water equity advisory group that will hopefully work in tandem with the learning team.

## Reinforcing Water Democracy While Pursuing Water Equity in Pittsburgh

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Residents in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, have varying access to opportunities and resources, but like most legacy cities in the United States, Pittsburgh is a city of stark disparities. Income and life expectancy vary across neighborhoods. Some neighborhoods enjoy investment, while others suffer from systemic disinvestment. Legacies of redlining and zoning have separated people of color from economic centers. Nodes of economic opportunity are not equitably accessible. These inequities are also present when it comes to water. Increasing water rates to fund much-needed infrastructure repairs and improvements creates a water affordability challenge, particularly for low-income residents and people of color. While the water sector provides good-paying jobs, they are not available to everyone equally.

Driven by a commitment to equity, a foundation of cross-sector relationships, and an urgent need to reinvest in reliable water management practices, Pittsburgh joined the Water Equity Taskforce in 2019. The learning team wanted to investigate how Pittsburgh, a city rich in water resources but deficient in neighborhood development and equity could address historic systemic disparities and ensure all residents can benefit from a sustainable, inclusive, and just water future. In Pittsburgh, water investment could be a force for uniting the various equity goals of the city.

The Pittsburgh learning team pursued many goals shared by other cities in the Taskforce, but they also had a unique focus on a concept they called water democracy. After a failed public-private partnership, leadership turnovers, and high-profile challenges with water quality and pollution, many residents and stakeholders in Pittsburgh were losing faith in the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority (PWSA). But several of those same stakeholders came together with PWSA staff to fight against any attempt to privatize PWSA in 2018. While they had their differences, the shared value of keeping water management firmly under public control overshadowed those differences. These same stakeholders, joining PWSA in the Pittsburgh learning team, saw the Water Equity Taskforce as a place to take further action on that commitment.

They built recommendations around the concept of water democracy based on the shared belief that a public ownership model facilitates democratic processes and governance and better enables equitable and accountable water management. Each of the team's recommendations and actions for water democracy ensures that the governing and operation of PWSA maximizes public decision-making, accountability, and transparency and that the public has the necessary knowledge, information, and resources to make meaningful contributions that shape the future of water resources and infrastructure.

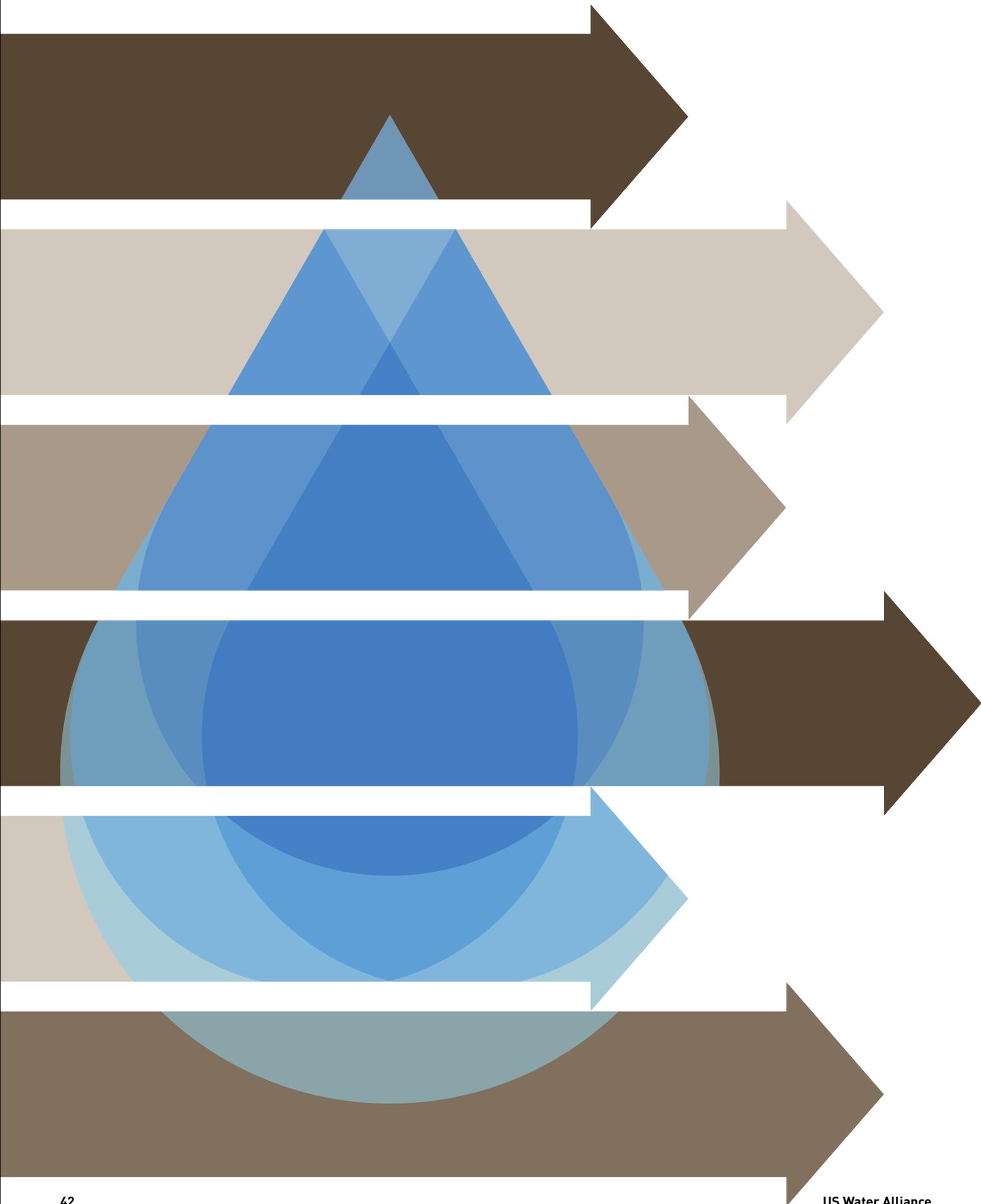
Underpinned by this fundamental value, the team also developed strategies around workforce development, affordability, stormwater management, and water quality. Before diving into policies and programs, the team dove into the data. They mapped demographic, employment, and income data and explored more segmented data sets to check their assumptions about where the most affected communities were and what they knew about them.

As the team analyzed the data, it showed how employees and contractors working on PWSA's lead line replacement program workforce are primarily white, live in the suburbs, and do not represent the communities of the program. PWSA's senior leadership is also predominantly white, with people of color occupying lower-level positions. With this insight, utility workforce development rose as a priority, which the team was well-positioned to find traction. The team used this data to explore a portfolio of solutions that address recruitment and retention of diverse talent, expansion of talent pipelines, equitable contracting, and more inclusive hiring policies. The utility leaned on the learning team members to help conduct a contractor residency analysis, and members built the political support to remove criminal and salary history from PWSA job applications and negotiate with one of PWSA's collective bargaining units to commit to establishing job training programs.

With early wins in place, the Pittsburgh Water Equity Learning Team hopes to use the roadmap as a call to action for the connections and collaboration necessary to ensure all residents participate in and prosper from the investments and operations of their water utility. The team also aims to use the momentum from the efforts to catalyze regional change.

The Pittsburgh learning team at the Buffalo Learning Exchange.





# IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

While the Water Equity Taskforce made great strides in each of the seven participating cities, true progress lies beyond any one policy or program. It lies in the ability to build meaningful, trusting relationships and adopt new ways of thinking and working. Advancing water equity in cities across the United States requires building a movement. Movement building is a long, ongoing work. This is only the beginning.

As the Alliance continues its mission of ensuring sustainable and inclusive water systems for everyone, **it encourages all people to lead with equity.** By improving the conditions for the most vulnerable, it leads to greater benefits for all. This resonated with participants in the Water Equity Taskforce because they saw it happening firsthand as they progressed their water equity agendas. In Buffalo, the launch of the water affordability program improved the utility's credit rating, lowering the cost of capital for new infrastructure programs. In Milwaukee, a new workforce development plan is creating jobs for disenfranchised communities, while simultaneously attracting new talent into the city's workforce.

**By working together, teams make their movements stronger.** As teams put equity at the center of their efforts, they found they could make strides not only in water but across other essential public services. In Louisville, small business contracting and workforce development policies were modified and adopted by the transportation agency and other city departments, strengthening the equity movement across the city.

Like racial equity work, water equity must be embraced as a lifelong commitment to learning. The Taskforce acknowledges that water equity may never be perfectly "solved," but with each decision point, all have the opportunity to make institutions more equitable. Water leaders from utilities, community-based organizations, environmental groups, and philanthropy must **consciously choose to lead organizations in ways that put the principles of equity, community, and collaboration at the center of every plan, policy, program, and investment.**

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**No longer can utilities do this alone or think they know what is best. That old-school way of thinking is not going to get us where we need to be. Partnerships bring a diverse amount of perspectives, diverse ways of looking at things. We need to not only be part of this conversation; we need to be leaders in it.**

—Kyle Dreyfuss Wells, CEO, Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District, US Water Alliance Board Member

# ABOUT THE US WATER ALLIANCE

The US Water Alliance advances policies and programs to secure a sustainable water future for all. Our membership includes water providers, public officials, business leaders, agricultural interests, environmental organizations, community leaders, policy organizations, and more. A nationally recognized nonprofit organization, the US Water Alliance brings together diverse interests to identify and advance common-ground, achievable solutions to our nation's most pressing water challenges. We:

**Educate the nation about the true value of water and the need for investment in water systems.** Our innovative approaches to building public and political will, best-in-class communications tools, high-impact events, media coverage, and publications are educating and inspiring the nation about how water is essential and in need of investment.

**Accelerate the adoption of One Water policies and programs that effectively manage water resources and advance a better quality of life for all.** As an honest broker and action catalyst, we convene diverse interests to identify and advance practical, achievable solutions to our nation's most pressing water challenges. We do this through our strategic initiatives and One Water Hub, which offer high-quality opportunities for knowledge building and peer exchange. We develop forward-looking and inclusive water policies and programs, and we build coalitions that will change the face of water management for decades to come.

**Celebrate what works in innovative water management.** We shine a light on groundbreaking work through storytelling, analysis of successful approaches, and special recognition programs that demonstrate how water leaders are building stronger communities and a stronger America.





One Water, One Future.

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