



WATER WORKFORCE WEBINAR SERIES

Office of Wastewater Management  
Office of Water | U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

We will start  
in a couple  
minutes.  
Thank you.

# WaterNowAlliance: Project Accelerator, Emerging leader Awards and Community Partnerships

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May 26, 2026 | 12:00-1:30 p.m. ET



WATER WORKFORCE WEBINAR SERIES

Office of Wastewater Management  
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# WaterNowAlliance: Project Accelerator, Emerging leader Awards and Community Partnerships

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May 26, 2026 | 12:00:30 p.m. ET

# Webinar Logistics

- This webinar is being recorded
- Participants will be in listen-only mode
- To submit a question, use the Q&A function



- Webinar slides information will be sent out to all participants following the webinar

# Water Sector Workforce at EPA

- Check out our website for resources and updates:  
<https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-water-infrastructure/water-sector-workforce>
  - Workforce Initiative
  - Past Workforce Webinars
  - Workforce Case Studies
- Stay tuned for information on our next webinar. If you are registered for this webinar you are automatically on the email list for future webinars!

# Having Audio Difficulties?

- Call in to any of these phone numbers:
  - +1 669 254 5252
  - +1 669 216 1590
  - +1 646 828 7666
  - +1 551 285 1373
- Webinar ID: 161 645 9835

# Opening Poll: Please indicate the sector in which you work

- Utility
- State or Local Government
- Federal Government
- Consultant
- Academia/Educator
- Military/Veterans
- Other



# WaterNowAlliance: Project Accelerator, Emerging leader Awards, and Community Partnerships

Jim Horne, Sustainable Utilities Program Manager,  
U.S. EPA Office of Wastewater Management

May 26, 2026 | 12:00-1:30 p.m ET



# Creating the Water Workforce of the Future

WEBINAR SERIES

## WaterNow Alliance: Project Accelerator, Emerging Leader Awards, and Community Partnerships

Water and wastewater utilities across the country are working to recruit, develop, and retain the staff they need to deliver safe, reliable service. WaterNow Alliance works directly with utilities in these efforts, providing technical assistance, professional development for rising leaders, and tools for strengthening community relationships. This work is funded through EPA's Innovative Water Workforce grant program.



In this webinar, WaterNow will walk through:

- The Project Accelerator — up to 250 hours of pro-bono technical assistance to help utilities design and launch specific workforce, community engagement, or water management projects.
- The Emerging Leader Awards — recognition, a \$1,500 professional development stipend, and a peer cohort for mid-career utility staff (roughly 3–10 years in) who are moving toward leadership roles.
- Community partnership resources — tools and examples from WaterNow's work helping utilities build durable relationships with the communities they serve, including through the Building Blocks of Trust initiative with River Network.

Presenters will share examples of how utilities have used these programs, what makes for a good fit, and how to get involved. There will also be time for questions.

This webinar is part of an ongoing webinar series hosted by EPA, in partnership with leading water sector organizations around the country.

Attendance is free. Register now at:

[https://www.zoomgov.com/webinar/register/WN\\_tbolvZM10eSZaZX3Vrry-0#/registration](https://www.zoomgov.com/webinar/register/WN_tbolvZM10eSZaZX3Vrry-0#/registration)

May 26, 2026

12:00-1:30 PM ET

### MODERATOR

Jim Horne, U.S. EPA

### SPEAKERS

Caroline Koch, WaterNow Alliance Water Policy Director

Amy Weinfurter, WaterNow Alliance Director of Strategic Projects

*This webinar series is supported by:*



# Speakers



**Amy Weinfurter**

WaterNowAlliance Director of Strategic Projects



**Caroline Koch**

WaterNowAlliance Water Policy Director



**Peter Martin**

Deputy Director Water Resources for Santa Rosa Water



**Aaron Kirkland**

Superintendent, Green Stormwater Operations  
Philadelphia Water Department, PA

*Webinar  
slides will  
be sent to  
registrants  
within a  
week after  
the webinar*



WaterNow works to advance transformation in the urban water sector to accelerate the widespread adoption of resilient and environmentally sustainable strategies.

We do this as a national network for local water leaders and decision makers, empowering them with the technical assistance, resources, and tools they need to implement innovative One Water drinking water, stormwater, and wastewater solutions in their communities.



# “Skill Building, Recognition and Networks: Retaining Emerging Leaders in the Water Sector”

A cross-pollinating WaterNow initiative providing water workers with the capacity and support they need to **take on management-level** roles, and confidence to **incorporate new strategies** along with the tried-and-true approaches to address the water challenges ahead

# Upskilling the Water Workforce with Professional and Leadership Development



Practical opportunities for leadership development



Occupational training on building trust



Recognizing excellence with Emerging Leader Awards



Networking and mentoring for mid-career staff



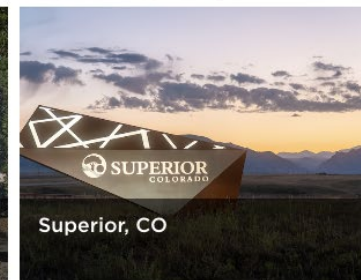
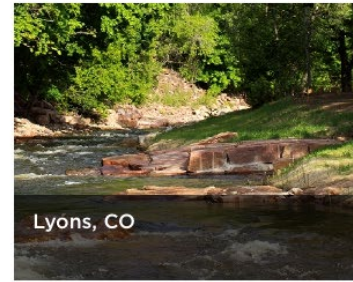
# Project Accelerator



# Project Accelerator

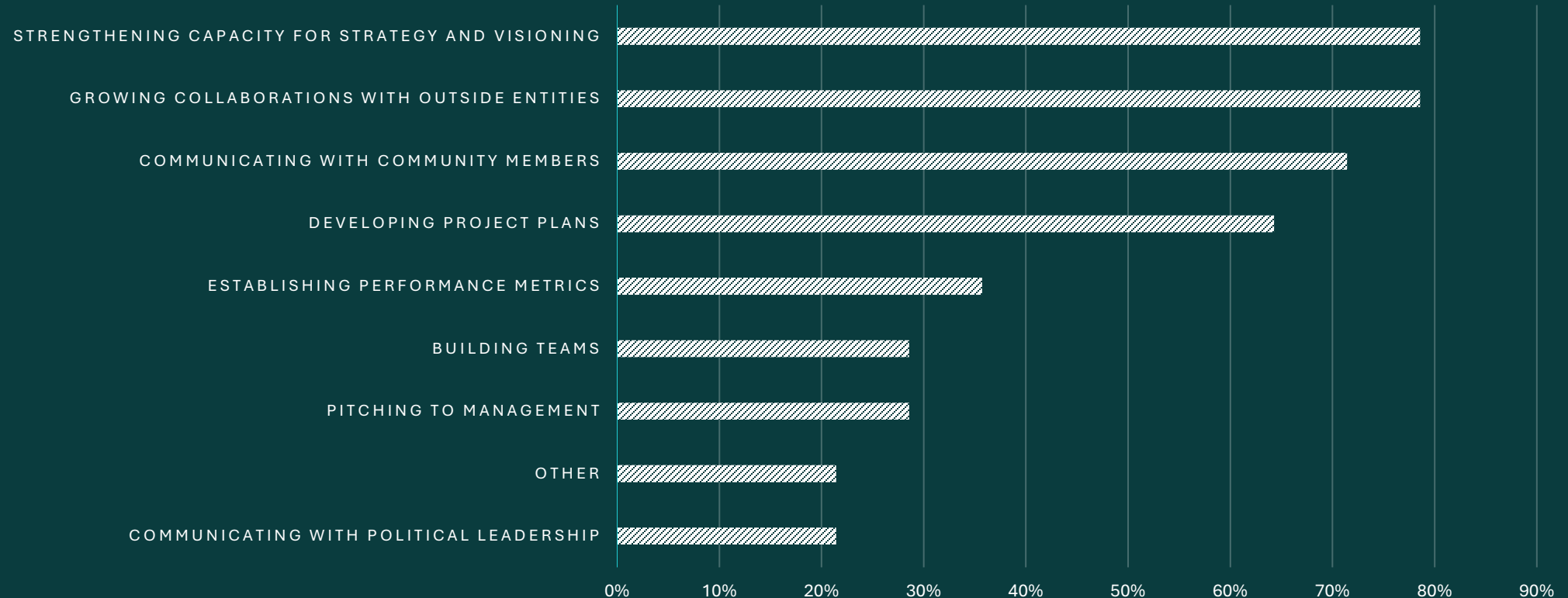
- 250 hours of **pro bono technical assistance**
- Over a **6-12 month** period
- City/Agency identified project, driven by **local priorities**
- **Jump start** innovative water management initiatives

## FEATURED PROJECTS



# Practical Leadership and Professional Development Opportunities

WHAT TYPES OF SKILLS DID THE PROJECT LEAD(S) AND/OR ANY EMERGING LEADERS ON YOUR TEAM BUILD AS PART OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT?



# Strengthening Strategy and Visioning

WHAT TYPES OF SKILLS DID THE PROJECT LEAD(S) AND/OR ANY EMERGING LEADERS ON YOUR TEAM BUILD AS PART OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT?

STRENGTHENING CAPACITY FOR STRATEGY AND VISIONING

GROWING COLLABORATIONS WITH OUTSIDE ENTITIES

“It helped me look for **opportunities for alignment** across political and industry boundaries. To find solutions that will not only better our local environment but **also benefit the state as a whole.**”

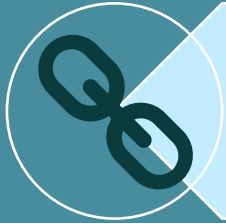
– Project Accelerator Participant

20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90%

# Strengthening Strategy and Visioning



Develop a comprehensive stormwater management plan



Integrate stormwater, watershed, transportation & capital improvement planning



Gather community input

 Sharpsburg, PA

**RESEARCH-DRIVEN RFP OPENS  
DOOR TO COMPREHENSIVE  
STORMWATER SOLUTIONS**

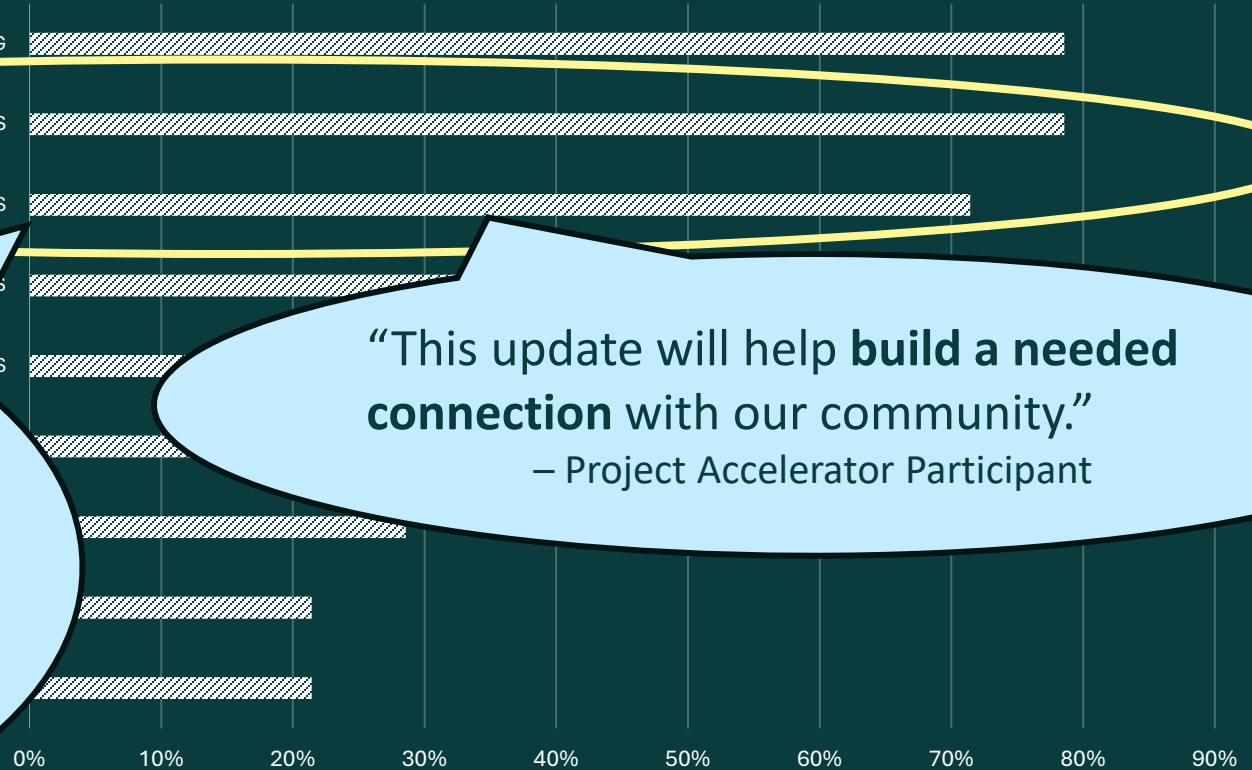
# Communication and Collaboration

WHAT TYPES OF SKILLS DID THE PROJECT LEAD(S) AND/OR ANY EMERGING LEADERS ON YOUR TEAM BUILD AS PART OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT?

STRENGTHENING CAPACITY FOR STRATEGY AND VISIONING

GROWING COLLABORATIONS WITH OUTSIDE ENTITIES

COMMUNICATING WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS



“We feel more empowered to **get our message out** to elected officials and residents in a way that would have felt more intimidating prior to the project start.”

— Project Accelerator Participant

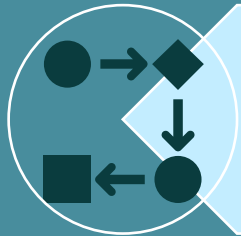
“This update will help **build a needed connection** with our community.”

— Project Accelerator Participant

# Communication and Collaboration



Support well and septic system repair



Customer experience mapping



Comprehensive outreach strategy

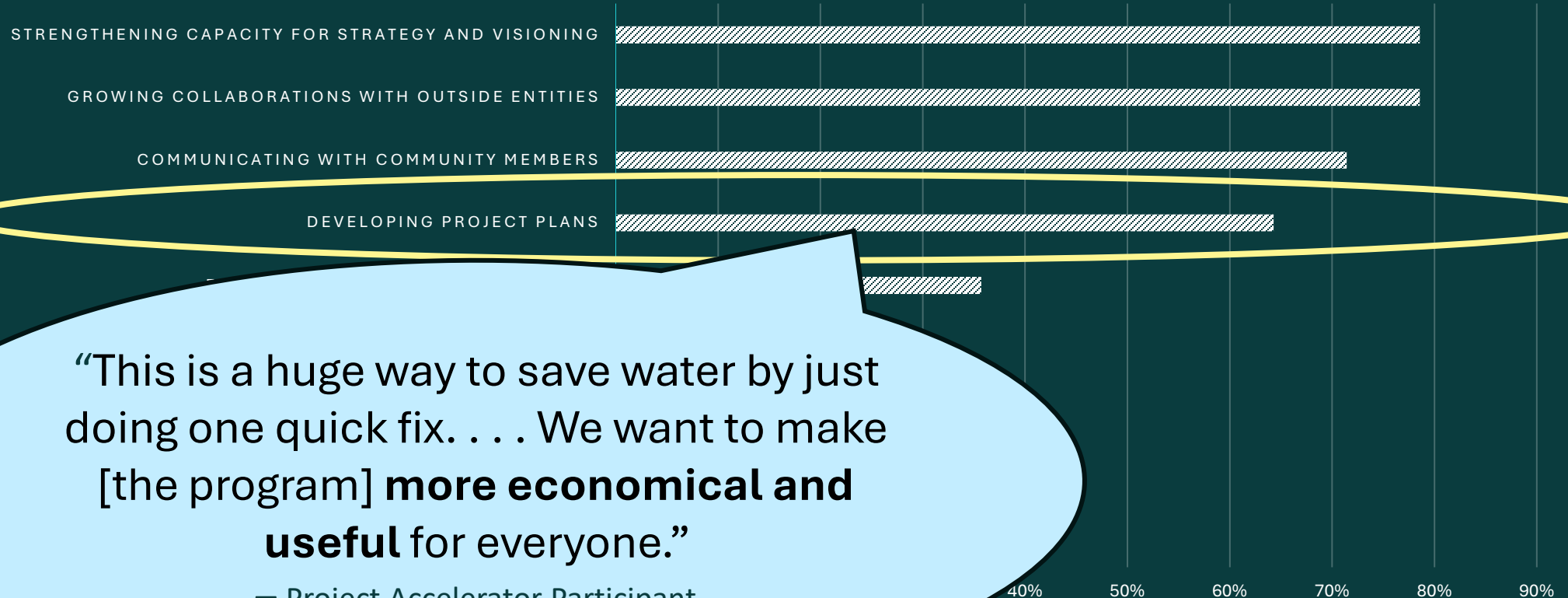
 Wake County, NC

**IMPROVED OUTREACH STRATEGY  
TO HELP MORE HOMEOWNERS  
REPAIR THEIR WELL & SEPTIC  
SYSTEMS**



# Developing Project Plans

WHAT TYPES OF SKILLS DID THE PROJECT LEAD(S) AND/OR ANY EMERGING LEADERS ON YOUR TEAM BUILD AS PART OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT?



“This is a huge way to save water by just doing one quick fix. . . . We want to make [the program] **more economical and useful** for everyone.”

— Project Accelerator Participant

# Developing Project Plans

4 projects launched

Roadmap to 170-290 AFY water savings

📍 Longmont, CO

**SETTING A DATA-DRIVEN PATH FOR  
NON-FUNCTIONAL TURF  
CONVERSION**



+70M gallons water savings

34% increase in applications

📍 Charlottesville, VA

**IMPROVED TOILET REBATE  
PROGRAM GENERATES UTILITY AND  
CUSTOMER SAVINGS**



Establish goals

Research &  
analysis

Implementation  
plan

Pilot & refine  
program

# Learn more and apply!



## Project Accelerator

A WaterNow Initiative

Hands-on support to accelerate  
innovative water projects and programs

Learn more and apply:  
<http://bit.ly/Project-Accelerator>

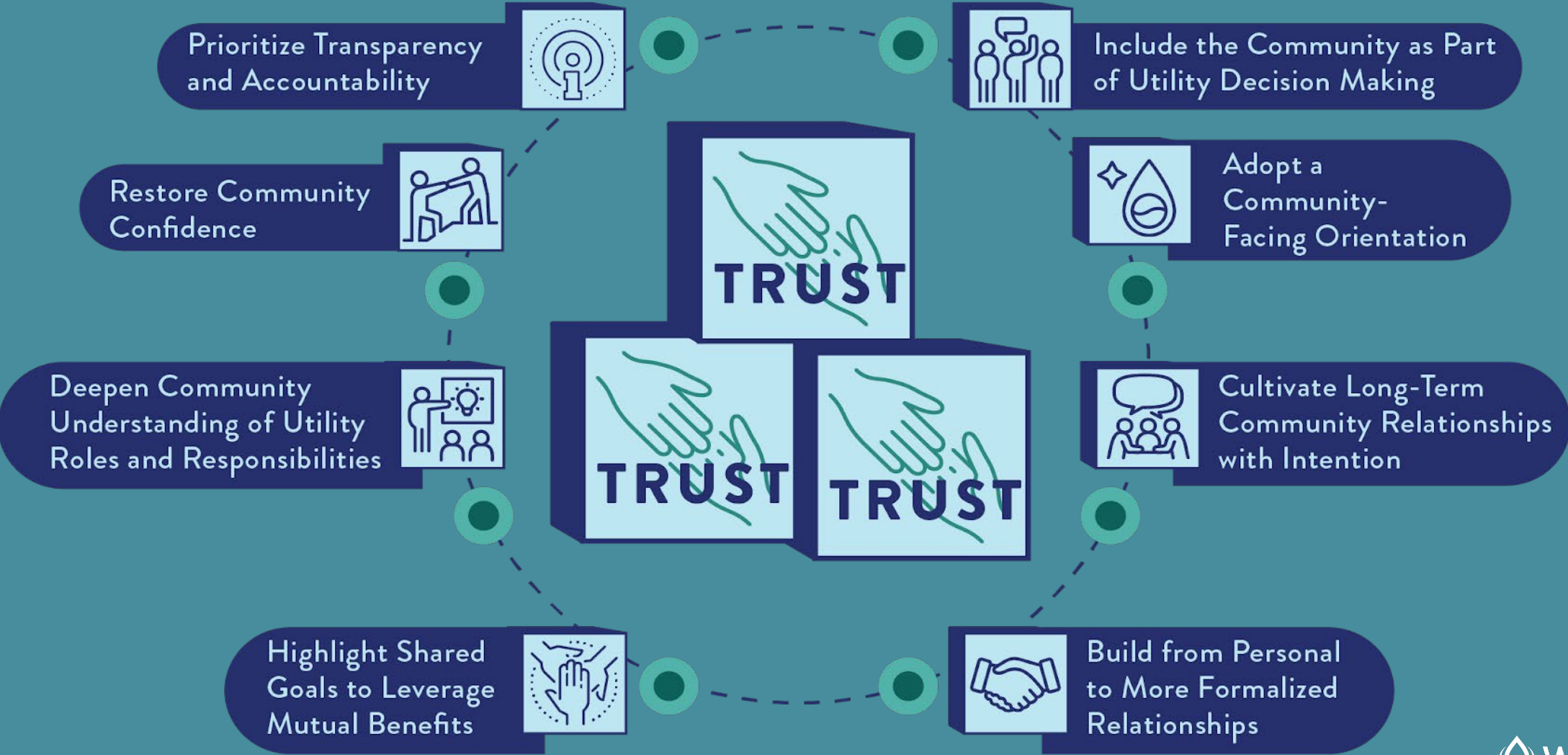
Applications are  
open through Friday,  
May 29!



# Building Water Sector Skills for Developing Community Partnerships



# Building Blocks of Trust: Developing Practical Skills for Forming Utility & Community Partnerships



# Three Avenues to Upskilling the Water Workforce on Building Trust

- On-Demand Trainings
- Live (In-Person or Virtual) Trainings
- Community Water Academies



# On-Demand Training

## Building Blocks of Trust Training Series

Based on the Building Blocks of Trust report, this online, self-paced training series covers the 8 "Foundations of Trust." Created to support community groups and water utilities in building strong relationships for clean and safe water, this training aims to uplift long-term partnerships with mutual benefits.

Sign Up Now



[bit.ly/BBoTTraining](https://bit.ly/BBoTTraining)

### Building Capacity through Partnerships

Water utilities across the country are increasingly, and successfully, turning to partnerships with community groups, NGOs, and other cities and utilities to build capacity and advance greater water resiliency in their communities.

Click through the sub-sections below to learn how to **identify main capacity challenges** facing utilities serving frontline communities, how to **identify local partners** who can help overcome those challenges, and what **best practices** to follow when building capacity through partnerships. Partnerships can also include "public-private partnerships," and the precise meaning of "public-private partnership" is often a source of confusion. This term is used to describe a variety of arrangements between governments and private sector organizations from full privatization of formerly public municipal water providers, to outsourcing, grants, leases, asset sales, and others. Check out the Partnership vs. Privatization sections of the Toolkit to explore the **most common types of public-private partnerships** formed in the water sector and several **key considerations** for determining whether to enter into any of these arrangements.

Identifying Internal Utility Capacity Challenges >

Identifying Partners Who Can Add Value >

Best Practices for Building Trusting Partnerships >

Hosting a Community Water Academy >



[tapin.waternow.org/toolkit](https://tapin.waternow.org/toolkit)



# On-Demand Training Participants

**245** trainees from water utilities, local governments, and community groups using the online modules

**900** total Building Blocks of Trust on-demand trainees

“The self-paced online Trust Building training **significantly increased** my knowledge about how to build trust with my community, and I feel **extremely well-equipped** to apply the Building Blocks of Trust to my work after completing the training.” –  
Water Utility Staff

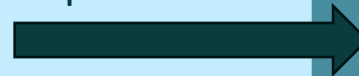
# Live (In-Person or Virtual) Trainings

Customized to the specific audience and priorities and based on four core elements:

- Overview of the Building Blocks of Trust
- Deep dive on 2-3 selected building blocks Actionable strategies for building trust
- Case studies
- Immersive trust building exercises

Example trainings held with EPA support:

- Transformative Water Leadership Academy
- Regional Network Collaborative for Water Leadership
- Oklahoma Water Resources Control Board



 OKLAHOMA  
Water Resources Board

UPCOMING **FLOW** WORKSHOP

## INFRASTRUCTURE PROBLEM-SOLVING

**Forming successful partnerships  
within the community**

 **Tuesday, Feb. 24, 2026**  **9:30 AM-2:30 PM**

 **307 NE 122nd Street  
Oklahoma City, OK 73131**  **\$30 per person  
(includes lunch)**

**ATTENDANCE IS ELIGIBLE FOR FIVE DEQ CREDIT HOURS**

**ABOUT THE WORKSHOP:**

Join the OWRB and our partners for an in-person workshop designed to strengthen community planning, management and collaboration around water infrastructure!

Experts from the **WaterNow Alliance**, the **River Network** and the **University of New Mexico Southwest Environmental Finance Center** will guide participants in interactive group work examining the challenges utilities and local governments face in maintaining reliable systems.

By the end of the workshop, participants will have practical skills and partnership strategies they can implement to support long-term, community-centered infrastructure solutions.

*Register here by Feb. 20!*

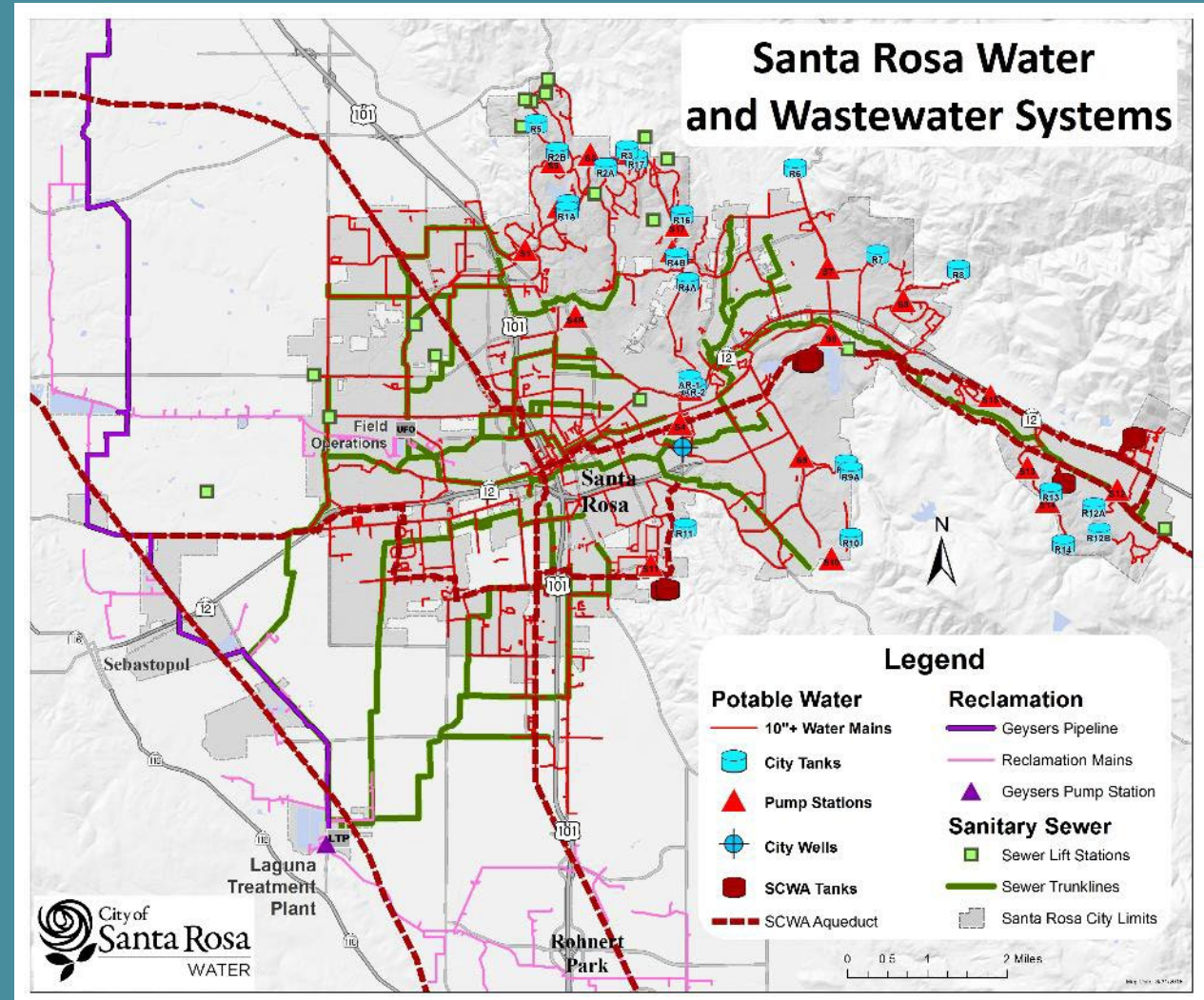


**QUESTIONS?**

Please email [fad@owrb.ok.gov](mailto:fad@owrb.ok.gov) or visit [oklahoma.gov/owrb](http://oklahoma.gov/owrb).

# Case Study: Santa Rosa Community Water Academy

- 175,000 residents
- 6.3 billion gallons of water per year
- 3 water sources
- 23 Tanks/Reservoirs
- 600 miles of drinking water pipe
- 600 miles of sanitary sewer pipe
- 7 billion gallons of recycled water (geothermal, agricultural, urban reuse)
- Sectors: Agribusiness, service, tourism, tech



# Case Study: Santa Rosa Community Water Academy

## Ongoing Workforce Development Challenges

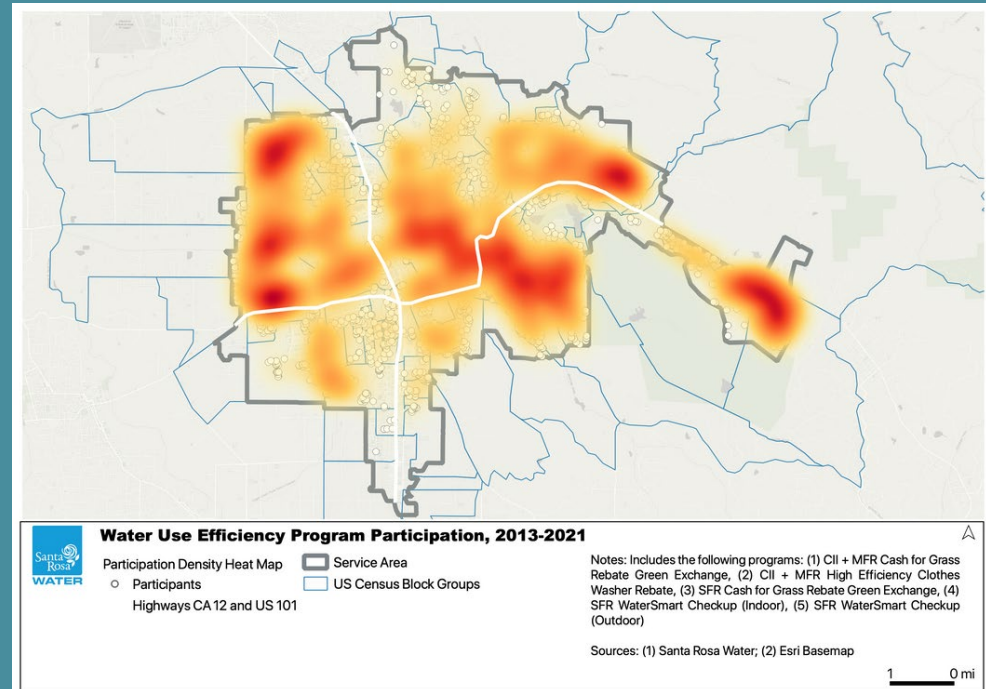
- Post-Pandemic return
- Retention, competition with other Bay Area agencies
- Continued retirements, lack of continuity in areas of 5-10 years experience
- Traditional job outreach is no longer working with the new generation of workforce
- Lack of understanding, interest in available jobs in our community



# Case Study: Santa Rosa Community Water Academy

## WaterNow Alliance Project Accelerator

- Technical Assistance with promoting Water Use Efficiency Programs in our predominantly Spanish language customer base
- Program outreach recommendations:
  - Meet people where they are
  - Partner with community organizations to help carry the message
  - Keep messages and strategies fresh
  - Make information accessible and pursue different formats, be clear and creative



# Case Study: Santa Rosa Community Water Academy

Partnership between **Santa Rosa Water** and **Latino Service Providers** stemming from prior Project Accelerator

**Six-week** training program to inspire community youth ages 18-25 as future water sector workers

Each week trains on substantive **local water topics** paired with **hands-on learning** through interactive exercises

Program launches **June 8!**

# Emerging Leader Awards and Network



# Emerging Leader Awards and Programming

- Recognizing exceptional mid-career public water utility professionals
- Professional development stipend and resources
- Networking and educational opportunities



# Emerging Leader Awards and Programming: Awardee Spotlight



**Lily Lopez**

Director of External Affairs,  
Walnut Valley Water District, CA



Emerging Leader

Awardee:

**Lily Lopez**

*Director of External Affairs*

Walnut Valley Water District, CA



2025 Emerging Leader Awardee:

**Aaron Kirkland**

Green Stormwater  
Operations Superintendent,  
Philadelphia Water  
Department, PA

# Emerging Leader Awards and Programming: Awardee Spotlight



**Aaron Kirkland**

*Superintendent,*

*Green Stormwater Operations*

Philadelphia Water Department, PA

# Emerging Leader Awards and Programming



**Do you know an exceptional mid-career water leader?**

**Nominations open early in winter 2027!**



[bit.ly/WNEmergingLeaders](https://bit.ly/WNEmergingLeaders)



# Join WaterNow



**LEARN MORE AND SIGN UP**

[www.waternow.org/join-the-leaders](http://www.waternow.org/join-the-leaders)

# Thank You!



**Caroline Koch**

[cak@waternow.org](mailto:cak@waternow.org)

**Amy Weinfurter**

[aw@waternow.org](mailto:aw@waternow.org)



<https://waternow.org/>

# Q&A Session

Audio Video Q&A Show captions More End

# Closing Poll

- On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the best score and 1 being the worst, how would you rate today's webinar?



# Thank you!

WATER  
WORKFORCE  
WEBINAR  
SERIES

