

Big Ideas and a Culture Shift on How We View and Use Water

Access to safe, reliable water for health, sanitation and hygiene is essential to human health — and also to public health. As a young man of African American descent embarking on a career in engineering, in my lifetime I have witnessed the consequences of inequitable water provision play out in two serious public health crises: the poisoning of the water supply in Flint, Michigan and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In both of these cases, access to water or lack thereof could mean life or death. And in both cases, marginalized people got the short end of the stick.

In the Flint water crisis, at least 12 people died and countless others became ill after being poisoned by lead after the city's water supply was switched from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to the Flint River as a cost-savings measure.

Amid COVID-19, many families in WSSC Water's service area of Washington DC lost income. Marginalized individuals who are low-income and who were working on the frontline in the service and hospitality industry were especially impacted. For example, in the hard-hit Prince George's County (a major WSSC Water service area) this translated into barriers to water provision, including unaffordable water bills and higher shutoff rates. Additionally, water access for proper handwashing and hygiene was integral to pandemic health and safety.

As among the largest water and wastewater utilities in the nation, WSSC Water faces an urgent and complex task as many of the nearly 2 million Prince George's and Montgomery county residents served are those who are more likely to struggle with secure water access: black and brown people, immigrants, renters and low-income earners.

To address limited natural resources while both ensuring equitable access to water service and the ability of WSSC to remain profitable, I believe the future of our water systems and service provision will require big ideas and a collective culture shift in how we view and use water. One of these ideas is a collective commitment to sustainability — not just as a buzzword but as an action word. Individuals, communities and businesses must be relentless in incorporating a mindset of conservation into operations and daily life.

First, WSSC can pursue strategic partnerships with local businesses to encourage corporate responsibility around sustainability. Sustainability can no longer be viewed as a 'nice to-do' or page of an annual report. It must be incorporated into operations as a key business strategy alongside other strategies. With limited natural resources, corporate institutions must take ownership and action toward efficient water practices.

WSSC can also develop thoughtful community partnerships with local governments, community agencies and nonprofits to work toward the equitable provision of water and affordable access to meet the needs of those who need it most.

As a future engineer, I recognize my role as a changemaker. Across specialties, engineers share a common mission: the power to solve the world's most complex problems. The future of water provision will absolutely be one of my generation's 'big challenges;' I look forward to being a part of the solution.