



**EMERGE**  
*As a Leader*



# Emerging Water Leaders: Leadership Circle in New Jersey

Case Study

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2023, New Jersey Future, in collaboration with Jersey Water Works (JWW), successfully facilitated the **Emerging Water Leaders of Color Leadership Circle** pilot program with funding from Spring Point Partners. Learning “circles”, like this initiative, are intimate gatherings that allow sharing of ideas, practices, and experiences within a particular field. This pilot program was thoughtfully designed to aid participants in expanding their knowledge, skills, and professional network within the water industry. By doing so, they reflected on their career path and explored new ways of looking at the future by centering themselves as the driver of their professional growth journey. The program invests in the next generation of water leaders and supports the goal of retaining diverse talent in the water sector. The initiative produced noteworthy outcomes, with a focus on engaging people of color, both at leadership level and participant levels.

**This case study examines one strategy to address the diversity and retention challenges in the water utility sector.** It can serve as a model for water sector employers and supporters who seek to prioritize the retention of a diverse workforce. It can also serve as a model for philanthropic organizations to invest in the future of the next generation of water sector leaders.

*Learning circles are small gatherings where people share their ideas, practices, and experiences. This pilot program helps participants expand their knowledge, skills, and professional network. By doing so, they can create innovative solutions and explore career opportunities in the water industry. We aim to cultivate talent and invest in the next generation of water leaders.*

## BACKGROUND

In the water sector, men lead 94% of American utilities<sup>1</sup>, and nearly 85% of water workers are male, two-thirds of which are white.<sup>2</sup> Supporting emerging water leaders of color is an essential step toward a more equitable future. Emerging leaders need a clear pathway to advance to leadership roles in the drinking water and wastewater systems. Ultimately, the goal of developing a thriving water workforce is to recruit, *and retain*, a diverse workforce. Cultivating exceptional talent takes intention, and investing in the next generation of water leaders is essential.

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<sup>1</sup> Teodoro, Manny P. “Women in Water’s Corner Offices.” *Manny Teodoro*, 28 May 2024, [mannyteodoro.com/?p=4694](http://mannyteodoro.com/?p=4694).

<sup>2</sup> Renewing the water workforce: Improving water infrastructure and creating a pipeline to opportunity. *Joseph W. Kane and Adie Tomer*, June, 2018

Leadership skills must encompass technical and non-technical soft skills to tackle complex challenges effectively. In New Jersey, utilities come in varying sizes, and not all have the resources to provide comprehensive professional development training due to their daily management responsibilities. Utility leaders prioritize technical training over non-technical soft skills, consistently opting for technical workshops when given the choice to attend conference workshops.

For emerging leaders, a strong network is crucial for individuals to access resources and information, navigate challenges, find innovative solutions, and provide the necessary peer support to persevere in the industry. The Leadership Circle opened up a space where emerging leaders connected, strengthened their leadership skills, and tapped into existing communities to advance in their careers.

Supporting emerging leaders of color is a crucial step in establishing a thriving water workforce, especially in terms of racial and economic justice and water equity. AGN Global, a consulting firm led by two experienced water professionals, reports, “in order for more water professionals from historically underrepresented demographics to ascend to leadership positions, it will require intentionality on multiple levels.” AGN Global says that “the industry needs to recognize that it is necessary to create processes and systems such as the emerging leaders circle, to create the support and access to skills that may not be afforded to those who are not currently well-represented in the water industry as leaders.”

In New Jersey, New Jersey Future, in collaboration with JWW, was well-positioned to create space for this initiative. JWW is the sole statewide collaborative that brings together stakeholders to transform water infrastructure. JWW brings people together to find equitable solutions focused on clean water and waterways, healthier, safer communities, local jobs, flood and climate resilience, and economic growth.

## **COLLABORATORS**

New Jersey Future received funding for this project from Spring Point Partners. To establish partnerships for the New Jersey Emerging Water Leaders of Color Leadership Circle, New Jersey Future hired AGN Global LLC consulting firm led by Aisha Niang and Nicole E. Brown, experienced engineers in the water sector. The project team includes Jersey Water Works backbone staff Jyoti Venketraman, Paula Figueroa-Vega, and Andrea Jovie Sapal. Assisting in developing this program is an advisory board including utility directors, consulting firm executives, academics, and retired industry professionals who gave invaluable advice to participants to strategically navigate the water sector for success, longevity, and advancement.

*“We are simply passing it forward” -*

*Nicole E. Brown and Aisha Niang, experienced engineers in the water sector and facilitators of the **Emerging Leaders of Color Leadership Circle in New Jersey.***

## APPROACH

### Partnership Building for New Jersey Emerging Water Leaders Circle

AGN Global and the project team recruited an advisory board to support the pilot initiative and provide guidance.

- Eight experienced advisory board members were recruited and interviewed. They consisted of utility directors, consulting firm executives, academics, and retired industry professionals. The consultants interviewed the board members to determine workforce and leadership needs, refine scope, and establish a common agenda. One key aspect of the recruitment was that the consultants had already built rapport within the water industry throughout their careers.
- The project team and AGN Global Consulting organized two focus groups that engaged six stakeholders, including the American Water Works Association (AWWA) NJ, NJ Water Association, and critical utility leaders, to codify common goals and achieve collective buy-in for the initiative's launch.
- The project team and consultants connected with utility leaders in conferences and meetings, broadening their understanding of their needs. The project team attended conferences by the US Water Alliance and NJ Association of Environmental Engineers, and participated in various water workforce webinars, including one from the US Environmental Protection Agency.

### Programming Outline for Leadership Program

The project team analyzed the feedback from individual interviews and focus group meetings to identify key themes. These themes formed a roadmap for leadership development and a detailed work plan for the program.

## FACILITATORS

**AGN Global LLC** is a consulting firm led by Aisha Niang and Nicole E. Brown, experienced engineers in the water sector.

**Nicole E. Brown:** With over 24 years of experience with all phases of water and wastewater projects, Nicole E. Brown has worked with clients to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of their systems. She is currently the Client Development Manager for Suburban Consulting Engineers, focusing on water & wastewater projects in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Nicole utilizes her communication skills through public speaking and community outreach for clients. She is passionate about increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the water industry and focuses on encouraging and educating the next generation of water professionals.

*“Although it is daunting, I decided to share my story whenever I was given a platform to highlight the systemic issues with marginalizing underrepresented individuals in the water industry. When you are in the gap, it is easy to feel stuck, unseen, unheard—even lost. As a community, water professionals need to identify and connect with anyone who might be in the gap so they stay in the industry. We need a shared language to identify and address the gaps that affect our industry’s sustainability and effectiveness.”*  
—Nicole E. Brown, [AWWA Journal](#), June 2024.



**Aisha Niang** is a recently retired wastewater professional with over 24 years in the industry. She started her career as a process engineering intern for DC Water, worked as an operations consultant for a consulting firm in New York, and worked her way up from an entry-level engineering position for Houston Public Works to ending her career as Assistant Director of Wastewater Operations where she was responsible for the day-to-day operations of 39 water reclamation facilities, 480 pump stations, and a team of over 400 employees.



Aisha obtained her professional engineering license and holds dual licensure as a water and wastewater operator in Texas. She is internationally recognized for her volunteer efforts with Operators Without Borders. She has won several industry awards, authored numerous articles, and held various positions in WEF and the Water Environment Federation of Texas, where she helped usher in DEI initiatives.



## ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS

**Partnership Building for New Jersey Emerging Water Leaders Circle:** The eight experienced advisory board members included utility directors, consulting firm executives, an academic, and retired industry professionals. The consultants interviewed the board members to determine workforce and leadership needs, refine the scope, and establish a common agenda.

1. **Kareem Adeem**, Department of Water and Sewer Utilities, City of Newark
2. **Lawrence Carson**, President Aqua New Jersey, New Jersey American Water
3. **Donnell Duncan**, Associate Vice President, Arcadis
4. **Patricia Lindsay-Harvey**, Commissioner, Willingboro Municipal Utilities Authority
5. **Yvonne Forrest**, Department of Public Works, City of Houston
6. **Oluwale McFoy**, General Manager, Buffalo Sewer Authority
7. **Lillian Milanes**, Professor, Community and Social Justice Studies, William Paterson University
8. **Lisa Stone**, Chief People and Inclusion Officer & Executive Vice President, DC Water

## PROGRAM ROADMAP

The AGN Global consultants designed a program roadmap that addressed vital support for emerging leaders. Each session was crafted to ensure the delivery of critical information to assist participants in navigating the complexities of the water industry. The sessions were designed to have a healthy balance between personal and professional growth, which was achieved by incorporating personal leadership journey stories, knowledge building on soft skills, and guest speakers complementing session content by sharing lessons learned in their leadership and/or career journeys. During the planning phase, the consultants gathered information from various advisory board members during the planning phase. The information from the advisory members interviews provided insights shared through the leadership circles.

The advisory board provided invaluable advice to help participants strategically navigate the water sector for success, longevity, and advancement.

## RECRUITMENT AND OUTREACH

## RECRUITMENT

The project team developed a comprehensive application process and communication strategy to promote the program and recruit participants. The initiative was publicized through various channels, including newsletters, emails, website blogs, and social media platforms. Additionally, direct outreach efforts were made to members of the Jersey Water Works (JWW) collaborative to increase awareness and engagement. Through this approach, the project team aimed to foster a broad and diverse group of participants to contribute to the initiative's success. The team was committed to ensuring the program was accessible and appealing to individuals from different backgrounds by offering evening virtual sessions and leveraging multiple communication channels to specific groups and form a diverse inaugural cohort.

Uniformly, applicants were grateful for this opportunity to apply and excited to be part of a learning journey.

*Thank you, wholeheartedly, for this opportunity to grow my professional career through this cohort. I am excited to meet new peers and for the future!*

*Thank you for having the vision and foresight to implement such a necessary program. I am excited for an invitation to participate and look forward to hearing from you soon.*

## PARTICIPANTS

Eleven participants signed up for the program; all identified themselves as people of color who worked in the water sector. The participants held different roles and were employed at four different utilities, reflecting a mix of large to medium-sized population served and represented both public and private governance structures. The applicants identified a clear need for a unique program that centers emerging leaders of color within the water sector by integrating leadership with a safe peer learning space.

They held the following roles:

- Manager, Health and Safety Programs
- Supervisor, Distribution Planning and Scheduling
- Operations Project Manager
- Senior Environmental Engineer, Engineer, Civil Engineer, Mechanical Engineer
- Management Specialist
- Sr. Customer Service Representative, Customer Service Sup/Billing and Meter Reading
- Operations Specialist

## LEADERSHIP CIRCLE



Five 75-minute-long virtual sessions were held between September and December 2023, and one dinner gathering in February 2024. The sessions were held from 5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. and facilitated by AGN Global, offering an informal but structured space. Each session had unique slides, and information was shared with participants after each session. Eight of the 11 participants completed the program, with three participants only attending some sessions. The sessions were not recorded, and high-level notes were taken to honor privacy and confidentiality. Participants were asked to do “homework” to advance their goals, and each session provided action steps for participants to follow to reach their personal and professional goals. We met in February to share a meal and collect feedback. We aim to share stories related to the pilot with our stakeholders, update the curriculum utilizing the lessons learned, and begin promoting for a second cohort.



## LEADERSHIP CIRCLE SESSION TOPICS/THEMES

1. **Defining Your Path to Leadership:** Understanding how to use your voice to effectively communicate past experiences, background, and future aspirations (September 2023).
2. **Intentionality & Goal Setting:** Exploring the path forward by identifying the skills needed for improvement to prepare to be open to opportunities not previously considered (September 2023).  
*Evaluation after two sessions: Participants provided feedback after two sessions. The feedback helped the facilitators understand what worked and what needed to be improved. The approach to the consequence sessions shifted to address some of the input.*
3. **Effective Networking:** Growing an individual network and inviting others to follow (October 2023).
4. **Cultivating Your Entrepreneurial Self:** Developing entrepreneurial skills by maximizing situations, exploring opportunities, and acquiring the necessary resources and skills to succeed with or without mentors or champions in the field and identifying opportunities to connect in person, i.e. conferences, meetups, etc. (November 2023).

5. **Perseverance & Commitment:** Explored what it takes to push through barriers. Participants discussed qualities of perseverance and commitment needed to overcome obstacles (December 2023).
6. **In-Person Session:** On February 9, five participants, one facilitator, and two New Jersey Future staff shared a meal. The dinner gave the group time to connect outside of work-related activities and reinforced a sense of belonging. The conversations were lighthearted, and they involved talking about family, tests that engineers take to get their professional engineering license, and how appreciative the group was of connecting.

During the 4th session, **Donnell Duncan**, an esteemed advisory board member and guest speaker, shared insights on the topic of Personal Branding. When questioned about his choice of topic, he emphasized that one's personal brand is not just a reflection of who they are, but rather the perception others hold of them. In the professional arena, individuals are often recognized not for their true selves, but for their personal brand. Duncan highlighted that aspiring leaders from diverse backgrounds may face challenges in securing mentorship and sponsorship for career progression. However, by mastering the art of building and leveraging their personal brands, they can overcome barriers and limitations. Duncan emphasized this in his book, "[A New Mindskin](#)," stating, "Similar to how consumers attribute value to a product or service based on its brand, organizations assess and reward individuals, as well as provide growth opportunities, according to their perceived personal brand."

As participants progressed through each session, the program team and facilitators observed that participants became more comfortable bringing up personal stories that reflected the unique barriers they were navigating or learnings they wanted to explore together. A few examples include navigating performance evaluation feedback within the workplace setting, perseverance strategies toward required tests that subsequently support career advancement, and dealing with offensive comments in the workplace.

## PROMOTED MUTUAL SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT

The project was designed to offer a space to promote mutual support and encouragement, as such the facilitators created a welcoming and inviting space. After the first session, the project team observed that more time was required for effective participation, and for participants to ask individual questions. The team invited the participants to stay for additional time to address this. Small group discussions were set up during each virtual session to create a conducive atmosphere. Two advisory board members joined in separate sessions to share their stories and lessons learned as facilitators and mentors. Assignments asked participants to meet or talk outside of the group. Several cohort members found themselves at different in-person events and connected, taking photos and sharing them with the group.

## OUTCOMES

The assessment submitted by the participants showed that the topics presented allowed them to consider their capabilities, develop goals to chart their career paths and explore new ways of looking at their future. They created personalized plans, identified key skill sets for improving their work and interpersonal relationships, and expanded their professional network by

interacting with industry leaders. The program provided a safe place for participants to share their stories. Several participants also shared that they would recommend the programs to others.

The Emerging Water Leaders of Color Leadership Circle provided social support to the participants by helping them develop a professional network among themselves and the other industry leaders of color who were introduced to the cohort. It cultivated successful collaboration and encouraged active involvement in professional organizations to assist with exposure and growth. It also stressed that they should consider opportunities to present and publish topics in the field. The participants also had the chance to connect with two seasoned professionals, Nicole and Aisha, who served as mentors throughout the program.



*In December 2023, participants and facilitators attended the Jersey Water Works Annual Conference held at The College of New Jersey, in Ewing, NJ.*

### REFLECTION FROM FACILITATORS

**Aisha:** *I believe what is most valuable is that they are not alone in their struggles. That some doors may appear to be closed to them but having the right key can open the door that is meant for them. They are responsible for their career and just need to be creative and intentional to navigate them. One thing that I learned from the process was that they needed a sounding board for career advice. We had to pivot during the program to add additional time after each session for advice.*

**Nicole:** *As in many areas of life, a lot can be gained from institutional knowledge. It was my hope to impart some of the experiences of people of color in the water industry that had learned from the unique challenges and successes from that perspective. Of course it is impossible to capture a career's worth of that experience, but I think expressing the common issues and recommended approaches to solutions is the most*



*helpful way to pass that lived experience on. Personally, I found it cathartic to express these stories and validating to hear the cohort recall similar experiences. Although, knowing that the next generation of water professionals is experiencing some of the same frustrations also demonstrates that we as a sector have more work to do in the way of inclusion and belonging. I hope we offered enough space and encouragement for telling each person's journey.*

The ripple effects of the program were evident in a few insightful ways. Several members met in person at different conferences; including five participants attending and connecting at the annual Jersey Water Works Conference. Nicole E. Brown and Jennifer Harris presented at the conference and discussed the Emerging Leaders program, while Jennifer Harris connected with a county community college representative. The community college representative invited her to present at an event that highlighted women in STEM. Paula Figueroa-Vega introduced a participant to a vice president in Veolia for more career exploration. Finally, two participants expressed interest in joining the Water Workforce Task Force.



For the eight participants who remained involved, a stipend of \$300 was offered for professional development purposes, with receipts submitted for reimbursement. The small stipend was a welcomed surprise to the participants. We learned that two participants are studying for their professional engineering certification, which costs thousands of dollars and are only reimbursed once they pass the test, which often requires multiple attempts regardless of preparation. Other participants are using the funding to pay for conferences or class-related books.



*In February 2023, participants and facilitators met in New Brunswick, NJ to connect over dinner.*

In the last program evaluation, participants shared that the program allowed them to “**network with like-minded individuals.**” It also allowed them to “**open up about their career goals and get motivation from others.**” At the same time, others commented that the program helped them assert themselves more confidently. They asked when another cohort was happening so they could participate by sharing their experiences with others.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### SUPPORT TALENT

The leadership circle is one strategy where participants felt supported and were able to explore different issues with like-minded people.

Water sector utilities and business firms must create or enhance utility career pathways and consider pay, benefits, training, employee appreciation, and job satisfaction to build a culture where employees can thrive and grow. Water sector utilities and business firms can construct a

supportive framework that outlines career development programs to bolster retention and expand opportunities for professional growth. They can explore supporting emerging leaders (internally or externally) and provide mentoring, coaching, and peer support. It is imperative to prioritize aiding staff in enhancing their capacity to perform their duties effectively, leveraging the latest innovations. Participation in industry-related events can assist staff in developing technical and other skills.

## Further Reading

**Support and deepen equitable human resources (HR) management.** A new national water HR network or community of practice is needed to surface and spread best practices, guidance, and tools to solve talent gaps and enhance water workforce diversity, recruitment, training, retention, and growth. [\*Toward a Strong and Equitable Water Workforce\*](#) (US Water Alliance).

**Investing in America's Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems for Equity and Sustainability:** The Environmental Policy Innovation Center (EPIC) published its latest report, [\*Investing in America's Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems for Equity and Sustainability\*](#). The report looks deeper into some of the issues facing failing onsite systems and potential funding solutions, in addition to local and state-level examples and case studies.

## CONNECT WITH EXISTING TALENT AND GROUPS

The leadership circle emphasized the importance of meeting with people in the same industry but outside of the immediate place of work, such as organizations and associations. Several organizations, associations, and groups support people of color. For example, learn more about the ***Black Water Professionals Alliance (BWPA)***.

## PLATFORM SHARING

Following the leadership circle, Jersey Water Works hosted a conference where one of the participants presented. Engaging emerging leaders as presenters and guest speakers will help build confidence and bring visibility to the water sector and the industry as a whole. Public speaking promotes leadership skills.

Taking a proactive approach to retain talent in the water sector can go a long way, especially with regard to the talent of underrepresented

Founded in 2023, Black Water Professionals Alliance (BWPA) aims to elevate and advocate for Black professionals within the water industry, driven by our mission "To create a thriving community of Black water industry professionals committed to outreach, collaboration, and advocacy." We envision a future where Black professionals lead and innovate in a diverse and equitable water industry. Our goals focus on professional development, networking, advocacy, and sustainability to support this vision. BWPA is dedicated to unlocking livable wage jobs, developing skilled professionals for impacted communities, fostering trust and connectivity, and providing essential resources and opportunities for Black individuals in the water sector.



individuals. The **Emerging Water Leaders of Color Leadership Circle** and programs designed to support emerging leaders can provide solutions to cultivate a thriving workforce for now and the future.

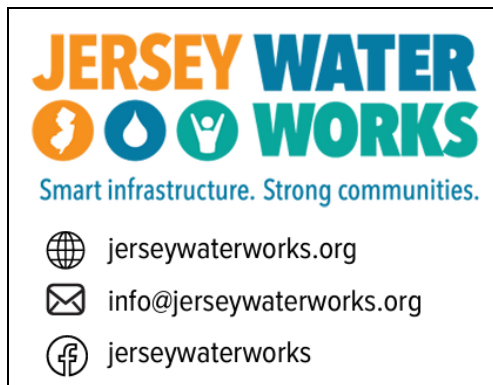


*Jersey Water Works Annual Conference breakout session, [Partnering to Advance Water Workforce Initiatives in New Jersey](#). The panelists highlighted that raising visibility and awareness of the industry is crucial to building its capacity and achieving success.*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

**New Jersey Future:** Founded in 1987, New Jersey Future is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that promotes sensible and equitable growth, redevelopment, and infrastructure investments to foster healthy, strong, resilient communities; protect natural lands and waterways; increase transportation choices beyond cars; provide access to safe, affordable, and aging-friendly neighborhoods; and fuel a strong economy for everyone. New Jersey Future does this through original research, innovative policy development, coalition-building, advocacy, and hands-on strategic assistance. Embracing differences and advancing fairness is central to New Jersey Future's mission and operations. New Jersey Future is firmly committed to pursuing greater justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion through its programs, internal operations, and external communications. Website: <https://www.nifuture.org/>



**Jersey Water Works (JWW):** Jersey Water Works is a collaborative effort of many diverse organizations and individuals who embrace the common purpose of transforming New Jersey's water infrastructure by investing in sustainable, cost-effective solutions that provide communities with clean water and waterways; healthier, safer neighborhoods; local jobs; flood and climate resilience; and economic growth. Through a collaborative approach, Jersey Water Works engages the unique perspective and expertise of its member organizations to solve complex problems. Jersey Water

Works consists of 145 committee members, 611 supporting members, and 3,513 network members. Jersey Water Works seeks equitable, just outcomes as it works collectively to transform water systems for everyone. For more information, visit [www.jerseywaterworks.org](http://www.jerseywaterworks.org).

**AGN Global LLC** consulting firm, led by Aisha Niang and Nicole E. Brown, experienced engineers.

**Spring Point Partners** is a social impact organization that champions community-driven change and promotes justice by investing in transformational leaders, networks, and solutions. Via the Delta group, Spring Point Partners aims to ensure the next generation of public water leaders reflect the communities they serve, by increasing diversity, supporting promising talent, and elevating community-centered practices. Website: <https://thespringpoint.com/>

**Spring Point DELTA Initiatives:** *DELTA aims to ensure the next generation of public water leaders reflect the communities they serve, by increasing diversity, supporting promising talent, and elevating community-centered practices.*