

## The LA County Public Works Women's Leadership Conference: Stronger Together



*Mark Pestrella, LA County Dept. of Public Works Director and WTS-LA Director at Large, at the LA County Public Works' Women's Leadership Conference, 2018*

With more than 4,000 employees and a budget close to \$3 billion, LA County Public Works delivers regional infrastructure and varied services to improve the quality of life for more than 10 million people in the county. Its mandate is vast, covering design, construction, operation, and maintenance of roads, traffic signals, bridges, airports, sewers, flood protection, water supply, water quality, and stormwater management facilities. That's the short list. But while LA County Public Works tends to the county's vast public infrastructure, Director Mark Pestrella also believes it has a mission, along with its 37 sister agencies, to measurably improve the quality of life for the people and communities of Los Angeles County. And one of the best illustrations of this is LA County Public Works' Women's Leadership Council (WLC) and its Women's Leadership Conference.

"The vision of the council, when it was founded, was to encourage, inspire, and empower Public Works employees," Director Pestrella said. "Over the years, it's evolved and changed to address the pressing issues of the time. But the overall vision has remained the same. "Its purpose is to help mold the culture of the Department and influence how women are treated in the workplace," he explained, "but its impact has gone beyond the walls of our department. The council has greatly affected the county in recognizing and addressing these issues, as well." Open to all Public Works employees, the WLC was founded in 2004 by then-director Jim Noyes, who wanted to create an entity that could provide input and analysis on gender-based issues, women-in-the-workplace issues, and workplace diversity. But he also wanted a mechanism to transfer soft-skills knowledge for women. And the WLC serves that role perfectly. At present, 216 LA County Public Works employees sit on the council; 70% are women and 30% are men. Again, Director Pestrella.



"Since the beginning, one of the major accomplishments of the council has been its mentorship and support of employees. It creates a safe zone for women to speak up about what they see as inequities within the Department and how the Department can address them. But it also looks outside the agency,



as well. “Over the years, the WLC has had a number of major initiatives, including everything from promoting Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) careers in local schools to providing hygiene packs to the county’s unsheltered female population. But one of its most public and far-reaching efforts has been the Women’s Leadership Conference. Beginning in 2010—when 300 people convened for the first conference—there are now more than 900 people from county departments and the general public gathering each year to discuss, learn, and inspire women and men on the challenges of leadership, gender, and many other important workplace topics.”

The conference was recommended as an initiative of the WLC, whose members were inspired by then-First Lady of California Maria Shriver’s Women’s Conference. When that ended, the void compelled them to launch a conference of their own. Years later, it’s become evident that the Women’s Leadership Conference has influenced change not only within LA County Public Works, but in the county as a whole. It has sold out every year since its founding. Covering a vast array of vital, pressing topics in lectures, forums, and roundtables, the conference routinely changes people’s lives. “The council engages our membership and arranges the entire conference and its agenda. And we’ve had so many different and wonderful folks speak. It’s been fascinating. It’s a space where women hear speakers share from their own experiences of overcoming adversity, how to achieve goals, and what it takes to be a leader,” Director Pestrella explained. “Studies show that gender diversity in the top ranks translates to higher productivity and greater innovation,” he said. “Our department is already seeing that.



“My executive team has achieved gender parity, with an equal number of men and women, and I believe strongly in having both a diverse workforce and management team. As a result, job satisfaction is at an all-time high, employee retention is at an all-time high. “We’re seeing better outcomes and focus. We’re seeing better solutions that are really unique to the organization, and I attribute that directly to the diversity of our leadership and workforce, and the increase in women in our workplace. And that’s exactly what the conference and the council promote both internally and externally.” For Mr. Pestrella, those beliefs are critical. He points out that in 2017, women only made up 13% of all

engineers working within the profession. But in LA County Public Works, things are different. Experiencing a “huge uptick” in the number of women in engineering roles, he reports a 50:50 hiring ratio for women and men.

“The conference opens up new avenues, ideas, and concepts for people and what they might do in the workplace, jobs they might have. It’s also informed us about new job classifications, making it easier to transfer from one job classification to another. That makes it easier to climb the career path in the organization. But that happened because, as an organization, we’ve made ourselves more aware of issues pertaining to women, whether it’s raising children while working, pay equity, flexible scheduling for women and men, etc. “What we’re learning from these conferences,” he continued, “is that there are real blind spots in our society and business when it comes to women and leadership. And as we learn more about them, we apply those changes to our organization. The same is true for our vendors and other

attendees at the conference. You've got to invest in all of the people that work for you and the conference helps us realize and then fix those disparities."

Already sold out at 900 seats, this year's conference theme is *Stronger Together*. Speaking to the need for greater collaboration among women, the conference seeks to facilitate and empower the concept within the workplace. But Mr. Pestrella also believes the theme relates directly to another important element connected to LA County Public Works. "The *Stronger Together* theme reflects meaningfully the progressive approach and regional thinking of the County Board of Supervisors," he said. It's no coincidence that with four of the five board seats held by women that we're thinking about the real issues of the day, whether it's infrastructure, mobility, healthcare, homelessness, etc. All of those things are carefully examined and fully discussed so that we can better serve the public. But only through collaboration can we solve the tough problems of the day and serve the public optimally. And what we preach, we practice in our department.



"At the operational level, you hear stories about people hoarding knowledge. You also hear stories about women that don't reach out and help other women. I think our theme presents a great message for women to hear, that you're more powerful when you reach out and not go it alone. But that's not just true for women. Men and women do that. But traditionally women lacked mechanisms for joining together in the workplace, for the transfer of knowledge and awareness. That's part of what makes this conference and its theme so powerful."

Though hosted by the WLC, 20 of LA County's 30+ departments participate and help design and execute the conference. That also includes LA County CEO Sachi Hamai, a featured speaker at the conference. In addition, outside organizations in both the public and private sectors provide sponsorship and speakers. Mr. Pestrella believes that all participants gain great value from every kind of participation. "What we've found is that all of the organizations that participate have a strong drive and incentive to improve diversity in the workplace. They're just as aware of gender issues and the value of equality. Whether they're in-kind or financial sponsors, organizations also send their own folks, as everyone wants to be there. And that's wonderful to see. It's also fantastic exposure and great networking.



To help ensure that success, Mr. Pestrella points out, even when the conference closes, the work doesn't stop. Each year, the conference committee does a very active debriefing to diligently assess and address any concerns and to make the conference better each year. Los Angeles County's 37 departments provide a safety net of support for 10 million residents. Without their massive services and good works, the region simply could not function. But for Mark Pestrella, the women and men of LA County Public Works, and the Women's Leadership Council, that is not enough. They also want to advance the cause of workplace diversity within LA



County, through their words and actions, and the hosting of such critically important events as the Women's Leadership Conference.