

● COVER STORY



Kareem Adeem



Kishia Powell



Cheryl Porter



Gary Brown



Calvin Farr





Cathy Bailey



Angela Charles

# Waves of Change: African American Leaders Transforming the Water Sector

Carita Parks

## Key Takeaways

AWWA members and water utility leaders are paving the way for expanded diversity—and a focus on welcoming and belonging—in the water industry as envisioned in AWWA's 2030 Strategic Plan and Water 2050 initiative.

With a growing number of African American water professionals setting the tone for the utilities they lead, their communities benefit from a heightened level of understanding.

Being an African American leader in the water industry has unique challenges, but setting an example for underrepresented professionals and future generations is an integral driver of their work.

The seven people interviewed for this article stressed common leadership principles: building relationships, aligning with customers' needs; advocating for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging; removing barriers to professional growth; and inspiring newcomers to the world of water.

**C**heryl Porter's journey from junior chemist to chief operating officer of the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA) to the first woman of color and African American president of AWWA is a testament to her determination and commitment to reshaping water in her community. Porter's story reflects a powerful wave of change in a sector that in the United States has historically been dominated by White men. African American leadership and the presence of Black professionals in the water sector have grown incrementally throughout the years. While this is a positive trend, AWWA's 2030 Strategic Plan recognizes there is still work to do and defines the collective concept of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) as a core principle.

This shift in the water industry is embodied in Porter's high-profile leadership roles at GLWA and AWWA. In recognition of Black History Month, Porter aims to broaden the narrative around who serves in critical leadership roles at water utilities. Having African American leadership in utilities and other water-related organizations is not just about representation but also ensuring overlooked communities are protected by those who understand their struggles firsthand. "I want to tell the other side of the story," she explained. "We do have African American leaders who are doing the right things for their communities."

The following sections highlight seven African American leaders, including Porter, who are transforming the water industry. They each reflect on their journeys—how they entered the water industry, what successes they achieved and how they dealt with challenges, and how they each want to define their legacy. They are only a small sampling of African American water leaders, but they represent thousands of individuals who contribute to safe water in the United States every day.

### Cheryl Porter: From Humble Beginnings to a Groundbreaking Presidency



Porter's path to becoming a changemaker in the water industry is deeply rooted in her family and upbringing. Raised in Detroit, she was influenced by the strong values instilled in her by her parents. Her father, a career Air Force serviceman, and her mother, a homemaker, taught her the importance of discipline, hard

work, and respect for others—principles that have guided Porter throughout her life.

While Porter's parents were hard-working, she didn't come from privilege. Nonetheless, she had a strong support system that helped her see future possibilities. "I didn't know how to apply for college, and I had already concluded I didn't have enough money to go," she said. A high school counselor saw something special in Porter; the counselor went out of her way to ensure that this young student would have the opportunity to pursue higher education by paying for Porter's college applications. "When you see people doing things like that for you, you have to step up to the plate," Porter said.

### A Nontraditional Path Into Water

"I always say that water found me," Porter said about her introduction to the water industry. She began her career as a chemist at a solvent company, where she realized the opportunity for advancement was limited. At the suggestion of a friend, she applied for a junior chemist position with the City of Detroit.

Initially, Porter struggled with the demands of balancing her shift work and personal life. A key moment came when she saw the link between her work and her community. "When I started making decisions around treatment, I made the connection: This is water that's going to my home; this is going to my family and friends," she said. "When I made that connection, water went from just being a job to something that became a career."

As opportunities arose, Porter's leadership abilities were recognized and rewarded as she progressed from junior chemist to assistant chemist, then into various supervisory positions. Throughout this rise, Porter realized that while she had honed her technical skills, leadership required other abilities. "Dealing with water quality is totally different from dealing with people, and I had to educate myself on how to adjust my leadership to meet the human-resource-capital need." Her love for learning and continuous self-improvement eventually led to her current role as chief operating officer at GLWA.

### Navigating Challenges as a Black Woman in Leadership

Across industries, being a woman in leadership still comes with its own set of difficulties, and African American women who are leaders often face even steeper challenges. "We can be characterized as hostile, aggressive, or strong," Porter acknowledged. With this in mind, she focused on understanding other people's perspectives and finding ways to challenge these stereotypes constructively. Furthermore, she recognized that some cultures are still getting used to women leaders, and that learning can take some time. "People don't appreciate what they don't





Cheryl Porter (right) and Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA) CEO Suzanne Coffey (left) participate in GLWA's Annual Team Member & Family Open House, which brings team members together with their families for fun and education through games about GLWA and tours of the water treatment plant. *Photo credit: Great Lakes Water Authority*

understand until they have an interaction," she explained. "Until they have some sort of knowledge base, they can't change those perspectives they have."

Another hurdle she faced was resistance from colleagues who doubted her leadership abilities and knowledge because she wasn't an engineer. Rather than being discouraged, Porter sought advice from other engineering colleagues,

**"In order for me to be the first African American and woman-of-color president, folks who don't look like me had to vote for me. That makes a huge statement."**

—Cheryl Porter

many of whom shared her views on key issues. This validation reminded her that she was appointed to leadership roles because people believed she could do the job. These experiences shaped her confident, collaborative leadership style and taught her to trust her instincts as a leader.

### **A Historic Achievement and Championing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

Porter's personal and professional experiences led to her historic selection as AWWA's first president to be African American and a woman of color. It marked a pivotal time both for her and the association when the gavel was passed to Porter in June 2024 at AWWA's Annual Conference and Exposition.

"Wow, what an exciting moment," she recalled. "In order for me to be the first African American and woman-of-color president, folks who don't look like me had to vote for me. That makes a huge statement."

Porter also takes pride in being the first because there is now more interest in water, which means more opportunities to leverage her platform to champion improvements she is passionate about. “Disadvantaged communities haven’t received the same type of service, so that poses a question for me,” she said. “The events in Flint, Michigan, and Jackson, Mississippi, opened eyes to the water profession as a whole. Missteps have become opportunities for us to have positive change.”

Leading an organization that’s more than 140 years old, with thousands of members, is no small feat. Porter recognizes that her presidency is more than just a personal achievement—it is a signal that the water industry is ready to embrace broader representation. She recalls that when she first became involved with AWWA’s board of directors, there were only two African American people in the room. She believes that since then, there is a greater appreciation for the perspectives and insights that underrepresented groups can bring to the conversation. “That was 2018. Here it is, 2024, and there are more Black section directors than I’ve ever seen,” Porter noted.

She is also excited about some of the steps AWWA is taking to strengthen diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Specifically, the AWWA Transformative Leadership Academy has a deliberate focus on bringing more underrepresented groups into the sector. “I was looking at my folks being harmed, and that didn’t sit well with me,” Porter said. “That was part of the motivation of saying we can get in here and have these jobs, because we’re going to have the motivation to protect our own communities. That’s what happened for me when I realized that my home was being serviced by this water. Building those relationships and getting people engaged, even those who are outside the profession, is key. We all have an investment in this.”

Porter also appreciates the shift from DEI to DEIB in AWWA’s 2030 Strategic Plan to empower members in serving their unique communities. “I love the fact that we added ‘belonging,’” she said. “One of the messages I’ve tried to communicate while at the table with the AWWA board is to be careful about those first encounters. If you see someone who’s a first-timer, what’s wrong with introducing yourself and making that person feel more welcome? That’s where people get their sense of belonging from.”

It doesn’t stop there. Porter also acknowledges the importance of allyship in advancing DEIB. She stresses that White men, who still make up a majority of leadership in many sectors, must be part of the conversation. The water industry will be stronger when the challenges faced by underrepresented groups are better understood

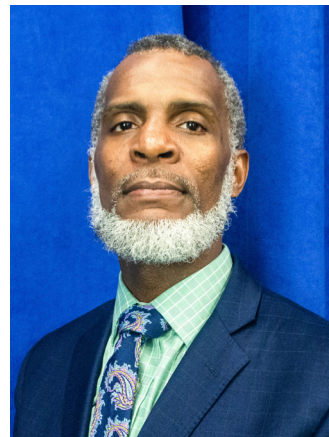
and appreciated, and Porter believes that open, honest discussions can lead to meaningful change.

### Leaving a Legacy

The early support from Porter’s community shaped her professional philosophy. She is passionate about paying it forward by offering guidance and opportunities to others in the same way that mentors helped her along the way.

Porter wants people to know that success is possible, no matter where you come from. “I think my legacy is that it can be done,” Porter stated. “Yes, you’re going to need some help along the way, and yes, you might need encouragement, but it is possible. We have a story that needs to be told, and you can be a part of that conversation.” As Porter continues on her path as a water industry leader, her story inspires others to break barriers, challenge stereotypes, and better serve our communities, which is a message that resonates with the global water profession.

### Kareem Adeem: From the Trenches to Visionary Leadership



In the heart of Newark, N.J., Kareem Adeem stands as a beacon of pioneering leadership in the water industry. Adeem’s journey to becoming director of Newark’s Department of Water & Sewer Utilities started far from the boardroom. His career began on the front lines at the city’s

Department of Public Works. “As a young laborer, I was on the ground floor, digging trenches for new water or wastewater lines,” Adeem recalled.

Those early encounters shaped his understanding of the intricacies that make up Newark’s diverse residents and neighborhoods. He explained, “Knowing the city and its people—understanding the demographics and challenges—helps me serve them better today.”

### Lessons From the Front Lines

Adeem’s hands-on experience is now a cornerstone of his leadership approach. He doesn’t just manage from behind a desk—he’s in the field, meeting with residents, understanding their concerns, and ensuring their voices are heard. His philosophy is clear: “If we say we’re going to do something, we need to do it.”





Director Kareem Adeem launches RainReady, Newark's green infrastructure program, to Newark's South Ward community members. Photo credit: Newark Water & Sewer, April 2024

One of Adeem's most significant achievements has been the successful execution of Newark's nationally recognized lead service line replacement program. Adeem's leadership played a crucial role in completing the project in just under three years—a feat many thought would take more than a decade.

His intimate knowledge of Newark's infrastructure, from its soil composition to the specific needs of its communities, allowed him to guide his team and contractors more effectively. As Adeem put it, "I knew where the obstacles would be because I knew the soil conditions or if tree roots were underground because a park used to be there." This practical expertise was key to his success.

But for Adeem, it wasn't just about replacing pipes; it was about lifting up his community. The project created jobs for Newark residents, particularly in Black and Brown communities that had been historically overlooked. "Imagine a mother seeing her son replace the lead service line in the house where she raised him,

he said. "That's what this program did—it gave people in the community a tangible way to improve their own lives and their neighbors'."

#### "Give Us Our Flowers Now"

Being a Black leader in a predominantly White industry, Adeem has had to overcome obstacles to

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rise to his current position. “A lot of the challenges are that you’re not qualified, you’re overlooked, you’re overworked, and underappreciated,” he admitted. Despite these barriers, Adeem has thrived, guided by the values instilled in him by his great-grandfather, who taught him to “let your hard work do the talking.”

Adeem is also passionate about increasing visibility and representation in the water industry for people of color. He frequently attends industry conventions and meetings, noting that while African American professionals are still a minority, their voices are increasingly being heard. “We’ve always done the work, but nobody let it be seen,” Adeem observed. “Now, it’s starting to be recognized.”

He emphasizes the need for wider acknowledgment and celebration of the work that Black and Brown professionals have been doing for years. “Give us our flowers now, while things are going right. Don’t just focus on us when things go wrong. Highlight our successes, because we’ve earned it.”

By giving visibility to underrepresented professionals in the water sector, Adeem hopes to show young people that they, too, can have a place in this industry. “We need to inspire future generations by showing them what’s possible. When they see people who look like them in leadership roles, it changes what they think they can achieve.”

As Adeem looks to the future, he is driven by a sense of responsibility to leave a lasting legacy for his community. “I want to be remembered as a visionary who believed that nothing can stop us but ourselves,” he said. His leadership has been a catalyst for positive change in Newark, not only by improving infrastructure but by empowering the very people who use and maintain it.

### Cathy Bailey: Uncharted Territory



Cathy Bailey’s entry into the water industry was serendipitous and, similar to others in this series of interviews, it was an unlikely path: “Water found me,” she explained. While studying chemistry at the University of Cincinnati, she worked part-time at the US Environmental Protection Agency

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before she was hired as a chemist in the Water Research Section after graduation. However, her career truly began to take shape when she joined Greater Cincinnati Water Works (GCWW) as a chemist at its new granular activated carbon treatment plant in 1992.

“Once I got into water, I was hooked,” Bailey recalled. “I really liked everything that went into making sure our water was safe. I had no idea that water was really this big chemistry equation.”

Her initial work was grounded in ensuring high water quality and adequate treatment, and once she moved to the administrative side, her career took off. Her willingness to say yes led to her being tapped as the interim executive director at GCWW, a role she initially thought would be temporary. “I thought I was just the interim. I didn’t even know any African American women water utility leaders. So I didn’t see it as a possibility that I’d get the job.”

Yet in 2015, Bailey made history as the first woman and African American woman to lead GCWW. “I was numb that first year,” Bailey admitted. The weight of being a trailblazer set in—particularly the responsibility of ensuring she did not “mess up” this unique opportunity. “I wanted to do it right and make sure the door stays open after I’m no longer in this position.”

### Making Her Own Playbook

Bailey’s tenure as executive director has not been without its challenges, and as the first African American and Black woman in that position at GCWW, she had to develop her own playbook. “There had been no one like me in this role before, so I had to figure it out as I went,” she noted. As Bailey learned how she could be most effective as a water utility leader, she moved forward with several initiatives to better protect drinking water quality in the Cincinnati community. One of her proudest accomplishments has been spearheading GCWW’s lead service line replacement program. “It was a shot in the dark,” she said, reflecting on how a proposal from her former boss to remove lead lines shortly after the 1991 Lead and Copper Rule did not make it to city





Cathy Bailey shares and explains the lead line replacement process to Ohio Congressman Greg Landsman during a site visit in Cincinnati. *Photo credit: Greater Cincinnati Water Works*

council. Bailey thought it was possible the same could happen to her, but she didn't let it influence her drive to remove lead service lines in Cincinnati.

"It was personal. Coming from a steel-mill town in Weirton, West Virginia, and witnessing the water crisis in Flint, I saw how community challenges can be forgotten, with issues pushed out of focus. I didn't want that to happen here," she explained.

The program was a massive undertaking, requiring buy-in from city leaders and overcoming internal hesitation. However, under Bailey's leadership, full lead service line replacement became a reality in 2018.

This work shows Bailey's connection to the community and, for her, being visible and engaged is paramount: "I don't just send people into the community; I go out myself. I want to talk with people, not at them," she explained. "Building relationships is how you get the community to allow you to help. They need to see you, know who you are, and trust that you have their

best interests at heart." This mindset has been crucial in her success at GCWW, where she has worked to ensure that everyone in the community is seen, heard, and supported.

### **Promoting African American Women in Leadership**

As one of the few African American women in a leadership role within the water industry, Bailey understands the importance of seeing people who look like her in high-profile roles.

"There were not a lot of women leaders, let alone African American women, when I started. Now, there's a shift, and we're more visible," she remarked. "We reach out and support each other."

Bailey is committed to making sure people of color and women feel empowered to step into leadership roles. She is also a strong advocate for treating women and under-represented groups better in the workplace. "We're often on the receiving end of micro-aggressions, mansplaining, and disrespect. The sector

needs to treat us like they want us to stay." Bailey calls for the creation of allyship programs—spaces where leaders work deliberately to remove obstacles and create opportunities for those traditionally left out of leadership roles.

Whether it's advocating for lead service line replacements or challenging the status quo, Bailey's leadership is defined by "choosing courage over comfort" and her willingness to step into uncomfortable spaces for the greater good.

In addition to courage, Bailey emphasizes the importance of authenticity. "I show up as my full self, with my Afro, my clothes, my culture. I don't change who I am for anyone," she declared. "I bring that every day to this job, so I'm hoping others have seen that and know that they can do the same." Her message to the next generation of leaders is to embrace their true selves and lead with integrity. That's how you leave a lasting impression.



### Calvin Farr: From Hardwood to Front Office



Calvin Farr's high school years were shaped by his passion for basketball, which overpowered any interest in a future career. However, his love for sports and competition created a strong work ethic that would be useful on the path that led him to the water industry.

It started with an eye-opening moment in the classroom that ultimately steered him toward engineering. "Since I excelled in math and science, my 10th grade math teacher mentioned there was a shortage of engineers," he recalled. That's when the seed was planted.

Initially, Farr pursued computer engineering at Old Dominion University, only to find that computers were not his strength or his passion. Eventually, an internship at the naval base in Norfolk, Va., introduced him to civil and environmental engineering, particularly in water resources and waste management. "That's when it clicked for me," Farr said. "I saw the application of everything I learned in school, and that's when I knew the water industry was where I wanted to be."

Once Farr started his career in the water industry, he was happy working behind the scenes. Leadership wasn't something he sought out, but early in his career, a mentor encouraged him to embrace his potential. "He asked me if people came to me for advice, even outside of my job, and I realized that was true," Farr said. From then on, he embraced the idea, going back to graduate school to study public management and honing his leadership skills.

As someone comfortable behind the scenes, Farr had to overcome suppressing his voice; he didn't



Calvin Farr speaks to a group of people at Prince William Water's brand launch event in June 2024. Photo credit: Prince William Water

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—Calvin Farr

see many Black men speaking up in the industry because of the small numbers at the time. Now, as general manager and CEO of Prince William Water (Virginia), he is using his voice to foster change and make broader improvements. One of his most significant achievements has been guiding the organization through the development of a refreshed strategic plan that included input from a board of directors and nearly 60 managers and employees. “It was really gratifying to see everyone come together and take ownership of the strategic plan. They didn’t always agree, but they worked through it and produced something that reflected everyone’s input,” he said.

### **Driving Diversity in Water**

As an African American leader, Farr has seen positive changes in the water industry. “Back in my day, in engineering school, you might have seen two or three Black students,” he recalled. Today, he sees a much more diverse workforce emerging. However, he is quick to point out that there’s still work to be done. “We need to let people know about all the opportunities in this field. It’s not just for engineers—there’s room for tradespeople, chemists, and many others.”

Farr believes outreach is key to increasing diversity in the water industry. He is passionate about reaching young people, especially those from underrepresented communities, to show them the range of careers available. This is reflected in Farr’s local initiatives around STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education. “We have a program with a group of teenage boys of color. They come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and I make it a priority to show up and engage with them personally,” he said. “When I show up, it’s not just a check-the-box moment. It’s a priority for the organization.”

His involvement goes beyond just talking to students; he ensures they get real-world experience. Recently, two students from the STEM program worked on a geographic information system (GIS)

project for Farr’s water utility. “They were doing practical, real GIS work. That kind of experience builds trust and helps these young people see what’s possible.”

### **Being Remembered for Integrity and Vision**

Farr not only is focused on operational success but also on how his utility can fully and fairly support the community it serves. “I want to be remembered as someone who treated everybody right, who led with integrity and made sure we completed our mission in the right way.” Whether it’s ensuring his utility delivers safe, reliable water services or providing opportunities for the next generation of leaders, Farr’s focus is always on the bigger picture—continuous improvement in the industry and his community.

### **Kishia Powell: The Art of Engineering**



As a young girl, Kishia Powell had intentions of attending Rhode Island Institute of Design to pursue interior design. However, Powell’s professional path took an unexpected turn during high school, when a NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Admini-

stration) engineer’s presentation inspired her to shift from art to engineering. At the time, she didn’t know that decision would set her on a path to excel in the water industry.

Powell went on to major in civil engineering at Morgan State University, where she found a connection between engineering and her love for art and design. “Civil engineers are the designers and builders of our quality of life, and that really excited me,” she said. Through internships, Powell found herself drawn to stormwater management, and by the time she graduated, she was already handling a full workload alongside the engineers at the City of Baltimore. Powell would later be appointed by the city’s mayor as the first woman to head the Bureau of Water and Wastewater.

### **Leading With Authenticity**

Throughout her career, Powell has worked for five major utilities, a testament to her expertise and leadership in the field. From Baltimore, to Jackson, to Atlanta, and





Kishia Powell addresses WSSC Water commissioners at their monthly board meeting. *Photo credit: Ronald Williams, WSSC Water*

eventually her current role at Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC Water) as general manager and CEO, Powell has consistently chosen roles that allow her to make a difference. “It’s the ability to have a direct effect on people’s lives, especially in communities that have been historically underserved, that keeps me in this work,” she explained.

Powell recalls her time in Jackson as a prime example. “People had come to expect living with chronic flooding. They had been calling for help for so long, they stopped believing anyone would come.” She believes that it is in these moments of crisis when true leadership is needed, particularly from someone

who not only understands the issues but who also comes from a background that resonates with the community. “When you walk into a room, you have credibility because people identify with you,” Powell said. “They trust that someone who looks like them will see them and their issues—and go the extra step to address them.”

Despite her successes, Powell acknowledges the uphill battle she has faced as an African American woman in a leadership role. Early in her career, she struggled with downplaying her strengths to avoid being seen as a threat. “I had a mentor tell me once, ‘Stop saying you’re laid back. You’re not giving

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yourself credit for how strong and driven you really are,” she recalled. This advice shifted her perspective, and today, Powell unapologetically embraces her authentic self.

### Pushing for Progress

Powell emphasizes the importance of having people from diverse backgrounds in policy-making roles, especially as the water industry grapples with issues of affordability, environmental justice, and infrastructure investment. “We need decision makers who understand water issues and how they intersect with communities of color,” she said. “If we don’t have people in positions of power whose values align with the policies we need, we risk squandering this moment of historic investment in water infrastructure.”

One of Powell’s proudest moments in her career has been shifting the workplace culture at WSSC Water toward greater inclusion. She has worked hard to create an environment in which employees feel a sense of belonging. “One of the new employees told me she looked at our leadership on the website and felt like this was a place she could belong. That visibility is so important, and it wasn’t there when I started.”

Powell is determined to leave a legacy of progress, not only for her organization but for the entire water industry. She is a fierce advocate for a federal low-income household water assistance program, driven by her personal experiences with her grandmother’s struggles. “My grandmother used to conserve water by not flushing the toilet because she was worried about the cost,” Powell said. “That’s why I’m such a staunch advocate for customer affordability.”

As Powell continues her leadership journey, she remains focused on ensuring that the water industry will become more equitable, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of all communities.

### Gary Brown: A Career Rooted in Service



Gary Brown’s career is defined by public service, a value introduced to him at a young age. “I was raised with the values that you should give back and provide a service to your community,” he explained. This sense of duty led him to enlist in the Marine Corps in his early twenties and later join the Detroit Police

Department, where he served for 26 years.

Following his time in law enforcement, Brown was elected as president pro-tempore (vice chair) of the Detroit City Council and was later appointed chief operating officer of the City of Detroit during its historic bankruptcy (the city filed for chapter 9 bankruptcy in July 2013). This role brought him into contact with the water department, which was struggling under a federal consent decree that had lasted more than 30 years.

“When the bankruptcy ended, a federal judge asked me to help create a regional authority for the water system,” Brown recalled. “I agreed, and when the Great Lakes Water Authority was created, I became a board member. From there, the mayor asked me to become the director of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department.”

Brown believes his background in public service and management uniquely equipped him for this role. “I can always hire great lawyers and engineers, but managing people is what has made me successful.”

### An Advocate for Affordability

Brown’s commitment to service is evident in his approach to addressing Detroit’s water challenges. Under his leadership, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) has made significant strides in improving water affordability and infrastructure.

This is highlighted by DWSD’s Lifeline Plan, which provides income-based water bills for low-income residents. “We built income-based affordability programs that show when you give a low-income customer a bill they can afford, they actually pay it,” Brown explained. The program, which includes paying off past-due bills and fixing plumbing issues in homes, is a model for compassionate solutions to affordability issues. To date, the Lifeline Plan has enrolled 30,000 households, giving them a fresh start and ensuring they have manageable bills going forward.





Gary Brown joins city leaders and stakeholders to announce Detroit's new income-based water affordability program—the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department Lifeline Plan—in June 2022. *Photo credit: City of Detroit*

Another major initiative spearheaded by Brown is the city's lead service line replacement program. With a goal of replacing 80,000 lead lines in Detroit within seven years, Brown is confident that this project will significantly improve public health. "I'm proud that kids at risk today won't be at risk once we remove those lines," he said.

### Laying the Foundation for Future Leaders

As one of only a few African American leaders in the water profession, Brown is acutely aware of the obstacles African American professionals face. "There aren't that many of us who run large water utilities in the United States. I know them all by name," Brown said candidly. Brown understands that representation is important, especially in cities like Detroit, where the water department serves a predominantly Black population. "I firmly believe that the people who run water departments in large urban areas should look like the community they serve," he said. He also believes mentorship is a key component in addressing this disparity. He noted, "Mentoring is a big part of how we will improve the minority

numbers in this industry." He credits mentors in his own life for helping navigate his career, and he is committed to doing the same for the next generation of African American leaders.

As Brown looks toward the future, his focus remains on building a more diverse and inclusive water community. He is committed to creating a pipeline of African American professionals who are prepared to take on leadership roles in utilities across the country. "When

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I leave here, I want to make sure there are a number of African Americans in a position to take my place or go to any other utility in the United States,” he said.

Brown also wants to ensure that the water industry is working to address systemic issues of poverty and unemployment in urban areas. With unprecedented federal funding for infrastructure improvements, he sees this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create jobs and uplift underrepresented communities. “Shame on us if we miss the opportunity to use those dollars to help create the future leaders of this industry,” he affirmed.

### Angela Charles: A Model for Endurance



Angela Charles didn't plan on pursuing a career in water, but her lifelong connection to water and passion for service led her to become one of her profession's most influential leaders. “I always had a natural affinity for water,” she said. Growing up in the South, swimming and playing in creeks were

part of her everyday life. Decades later, Charles is the first African American and first woman to serve as the director of Charlotte Water (Charlotte, N.C.).

Like others interviewed for this article, her ascent to executive leadership followed a winding path. After college, Charles took a job managing stormwater, a role she initially thought would be temporary. But in 1989, when Hurricane Hugo hit the Carolinas, Charles found herself on the front lines of disaster recovery, working seven days a week to restore the city's water systems. It was then that water became more than just a job; it became her calling, along with her devotion to public service. After transitioning from stormwater to water and wastewater services, Charles found her true niche. She particularly cared for the people in the water community.

As Charles navigated her way through the ranks, she ran into skepticism when she became the first person of color and the first woman to lead her water distribution group in 1992. “There were 120 people; 115 of them were men. And there was this bet going on about how long I would last,” she remembered. However, she remained undeterred, leaning on her mentor, the director of utilities, who believed in her potential. “People felt like, ‘If he put Angela in that position, there's something to her,’” she said.

“It has not been easy,” Charles admits. “I had challenges back then, and I still have challenges today.” Whether

it was being the only person of color in the room at meetings or struggling to gain the respect of her peers, Charles had to prove her capabilities at every step. Yet these challenges only fueled her commitment to diversity and inclusion. “A lot of what I have done in my career in the water industry is to pave the way for others,” she said. She believes strongly in mentorship, recruitment, and creating spaces where everyone feels they belong. “If you're talented and have some ability, you can work in the water industry,” she stated firmly. “I want you to stay and have the longevity that I've had because it is so rewarding.”

### Innovative Leadership

Charles believes that access to clean, safe drinking water is a right for all. This belief drives her work, particularly in underrepresented communities. She recounts a story about her former mother-in-law, who lived with “red water” every time she washed clothes because she didn't feel empowered to report the issue. Charles's intervention led to a solution for the entire neighborhood, highlighting her dedication to ensuring everyone's voice would be heard.

Charles has also led several groundbreaking projects that reflect her commitment to innovation and sustainability. One of her most significant accomplishments is the creation of the One Water facility in Charlotte, a state-of-the-art building that integrates water, wastewater, and stormwater services under one roof. Another project close to her heart is Renew Brew, an initiative that uses recycled water to brew beer, making Charlotte the first in the Carolinas to implement such a program. “I'm very proud of that, because we're planting the seeds in our community about how we use and reuse water,” she said.

### A Legacy of Endurance and Service

In addition to her innovative projects and initiatives, Charles hopes to leave a legacy that represents endurance. Her journey from frontline worker to overseeing one of the country's largest utilities is a testament to that endurance. “If a five-foot-one-and-a-half, 120-pound Black woman can do it, think about the possibilities for

**“If you're talented and have some ability, you can work in the water industry. I want you to stay and have the longevity that I've had because it is so rewarding.”**

—Angela Charles





Angela Charles, in her element, stands with two Charlotte Water front-line operators. *Photo credit: Cam Coley, Charlotte Water*

others,” she said. For Charles, it’s not just about personal success, it’s also about serving. “At the end of the day, you can feel good about your contributions to your community and society. It doesn’t get any better than that.”

### Building Momentum Through DEIB

Porter’s historic AWWA presidency is another peak in a journey of achievements for African American leaders in the water profession. AWWA’s ongoing Water 2050 initiative, which envisions the future of water and charts a path to achieve that vision, aspires to create a future where “the water sector workforce . . . reflects the diversity of the communities it serves.” The ascension of African Americans to the leadership of water utilities throughout North America is an important step in fulfilling that vision.

Black History Month, in February 2025, is an ideal opportunity to share the stories of transformative African American leaders in the water industry. While several are mentioned here, many more are rising to top leadership

positions throughout North America as well. AWWA’s newly adopted strategic plan, with its five-year horizon, carries an objective to “champion a culture of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging to empower members to better serve their unique communities.”

While the face of water leadership is changing, more work remains to achieve more balanced representation of diverse leaders heading up water organizations. Visit [www.awwa.org](http://www.awwa.org) for more information about AWWA’s 2030 Strategic Plan, the Water 2050 initiative, and additional diversity initiatives. 💧

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