Pushing Forward in the Changing Water Sector: An Interview with Kishia L. Powell, COO, DC Water

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Abstract

Kishia Powell is a licensed Professional Engineer in the District of Columbia, Virginia and Maryland. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering from Morgan State University's Clarence M. Mitchell, Jr. School of Engineering. Currently, Powell is Chief Operating Officer at DC Water, where she manages 80% of the water authority's resources. With over 22 years of experience, Kishia Powell sheds light on the value of water, her experience as a leader and a woman in the water utilities industry, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change in this interview with The Journal of Gender and Water. Through her storytelling of challenges, progress, and triumphs, not only do we get a window in Kishia Powell's career journey, but the water sector as a whole. From the complex conversations about racial equity, access, and affordability in public systems, to infrastructure investment we can see through Powell's experiences that she, alongside other empowered leaders, are actively addressing these matters and pushing the industry forward.

Keywords

water sector, utilities, diversity and inclusion, stormwater management

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Pushing Forward in the Changing Water Sector: An Interview with Kishia L. Powell, COO, DC Water
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STAY HYDRATED. WASH YOUR HANDS. BRUSH YOUR TEETH. FLUSH.

We talk about it. It sustains us, but do any of us really know the value of water?

Kishia Powell is the Chief Operating Officer at DC Water and manages nearly 80% of the water authority’s resources. From Emergency Management, Information Technology, and Customer Care to the Blue Plains Wastewater Treatment Plant, DC Clean Rivers, and the Departments in the Administration and Operations and Engineering clusters. Powell’s extensive experience in the sector and leadership of three regional water utilities prior to joining DC Water have equipped her to become an expert on the value of water.

Powell’s journey into the water sector was set in motion after a visit to her college advisor’s office when she was an undergraduate at Morgan State University in Baltimore, MD. There, she saw a photo of the great architectural wonder, Falling Waters, by architect Frank Lloyd Wright. “I was drawn to the way water flows through the structure, creating this beautiful picture [of] the relationship between the built environment and the surrounding natural environment. Our discussion led me to change my major from electrical engineering to civil engineering, from that point my internships were all focused on stormwater management in some way,” she said.

In an interview for The Journal of Gender and Water, Powell states, “In America, it seems as though water is something that we take for granted. Being able to turn on the faucet and...
have the water flow or flush and have it go somewhere else is a convenience that many in the world are not afforded.”

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Powell continues, “I think this pandemic has shown us the true value of water; that access to it is essential in order to live. Yet, we know that there are people without access to safe clean water in this country.”

On March 22, 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, DC Water announced that “disconnected residents will have their service restored upon request, assuring that every residential customer in the city has access to clean water.” CEO, David Gaddis stated, “We intend to take every possible action to help District residents get through this difficult time. The city has never confronted anything like COVID-19 before, and I am fully committed to doing our part to help everyone have abundant access to clean water” (Morris, 2020).

Powell was faced with the same decision in Atlanta, where she served as the Commissioner of Watershed Management:

In Atlanta, we suspended all disconnections in early March 2020, prior to the mayor’s executive order to do so, and at the same time, I wanted to take it a step further and reconnect customers that had been in disconnect status. In the process, we found that some customers elected to have their water shut off due to extensive property side leaks, causing property flooding or other damage and leading to high bills. We took the opportunity to assist those that qualified with the Care and Conserve plumbing/leak repair assistance program.

We also encountered a vulnerable community with residents shut off by a third party on behalf of the landlord because they were behind on inflated water and sewer bills: further proof of the inequities faced by the most vulnerable among us. Access and affordability are being actively addressed by water professionals who want to affect systematic change beyond infrastructure investment. Powell explains, “I know there are utility leaders who have grabbed hold of the idea that our jobs can be about more than just making sure water gets from point A to point B.”

According to Katie Meheen and her team of researchers, in the United States, there is “clear evidence that gaps in urban water access are neither random nor accidental but underpinned by precarious housing conditions and systemic social and racialized inequality” (Meehan et al., 2020).

As a member of the National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) Board and Vice President of the Association, Powell with her colleagues on the Board are working to address these gaps: “Not only are we focused on highlighting the importance of the work we do and why the water sector must receive more funding for everything from infrastructure investments and resiliency to workforce training, but we are also advocating for new affordability guidance on which to base Clean Water Act compliance programs and more funding in the form of grants.”

At DC Water, Kishia Powell is confident that good working relationships have been maintained with the EPA and the District Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE). Powell describes this as an opportunity for DC Water to engage on water issues and “weigh in on policy matters whenever there is an opportunity to do so.”

Additionally in her position, Powell intends to redefine “how investments in infrastructure are made by bringing a focus on equity.” Cities are often organized in districts or wards, and in order to achieve equity, Powell explains why some areas of a city may need more investment than others to “thrive on equal footing.”

From what I have seen in all of the cities that I have served, including in London, England, there are areas of a city that grapple with flooding issues and basement backups more than others. These issues can lead to disinvestment and a lack of economic viability compounding the issues of what tend to be the most vulnerable communities and more often than not, communities of color. We have the ability to be intentional about the investments we are making on behalf of our ratepayers such that all communities have the solutions that they need, rather than what we think they need. Here at DC Water, we are keenly aware that in order to be resilient we have to strive for equity in our approach to water management.

The protests against police brutality and systemic racism have amplified the need for complex conversations about racial inequity in public systems, but Kishia Powell reveals that the water sector has been tackling these issues for years. Particularly through the Water Agency Leaders Alliance (WALA), a group of peer utility leaders across the Country, once led by San Francisco Public Utilities Commission Powell participated in WALA’s efforts to address water sector equity issues: from workforce development and affordability to equitable infrastructure investment, and the availability of safe, clean drinking water.
Through an apprenticeship training program, DC Water has the ability to provide a livelihood for individuals that otherwise may not have found their way to the water sector. Powell explains that commonly people do not like to live around the water sector’s improvement projects, but when people have an opportunity to work and serve the facilities and learn about the water sector, there is a “value that can’t be captured” in both economic and social terms.

I always like to quote a very good friend of mine, Andy Kricun, who was the former Executive Director of Camden County Municipal Utilities Authority. He talks about this concept of utilities being anchor institutions in our community. I always repeat that because I think it’s true. When you look at what DC Water is doing with our Workforce Development Program: being able to capture at-risk youth or at-risk young adults and giving them opportunities to work in the water sector.

This pandemic has allowed our workers to see that no matter where they are on the frontline - water, wastewater, our sewer services, they are so vitally important to our response to this pandemic.

In regard to economic impact and the value of water (or more so the value of the work of those in the water sector) Kishia Powell tells us, “sometimes you need to put it in economic terms for people to understand.” In addition to participation in the U.S. Water Alliance’s ‘Imagine A Day Without Water,’ the City of Atlanta Department of Watershed Management, with Powell as Commissioner, completed a study to illustrate what a day without water in Atlanta would be like (Value of Water Campaign). It was concluded that in one day there would be a $250 million economic impact. By the end of the week, Atlanta’s economy would be severely diminished: “It’s because of the businesses that are there, obviously residences, but when people cannot flush and facilities cannot be used, there is a huge economic impact, and it has rolling implications...I happen to think that water fuels economies.”

Water infrastructure is evidently integral to our economy and economic development. Looking at it on the macroscale, like the ‘Day Without Water’ study does, makes this clear. On the microscale, or through the day to day lens, it remains clear. Powell describes this by explaining that one can obtain a building occupancy permit where there are potholes outside but cannot if the water and sewer permits are not in order. Yet, when discussing infrastructure, “the lead is always transportation, roads, and bridges.” Powell continues, “We don’t hear enough about the need to invest in our water infrastructure in this country.”

Kishia Powell describes a case she saw firsthand when working with the Mayor of Jackson, Mississippi: “We had a lead action level exceeded. The city was faced with having to take out an emergency loan that it could not afford to take, yet we were able to get grant funding for roadway projects with a 20% match...The priorities on infrastructure, the policies around funding, need to change.”

Investing in water infrastructure is quickly becoming more important than ever as projects require stronger resilience in response to climate change. DC Water has been implementing green infrastructure, but Powell understands that it is likely not at the scale that it needs to be. She states, “I think this is really going to be one of the biggest challenges of our time in the water sector: making sure that we have programs in place for climate resilience.”

In both DC and Atlanta, Powell provides a first-hand account of more extreme weather events in a shorter period of time and more intense rainfall:

We just had a major flash flood event on September 10 [2020], which impacted more than 200-300 homes where people had basement backups; Roughly, one-third of the collection system in our service area in the District is combined sewers. We also had some homes in the area that are separately sewered, which has a different set of issues, but the discussion since then has been that even as we make billions of dollars of investment in tunnels, there is a recognition that we have to take other measures to be resilient and to adapt to a changing climate. In 70 minutes, we received a 10 to 25-year storm event. We received the same amount of rain as we did for a previous weather event that happened over a few days (Streit & Samenow, 2020).

When I was in Atlanta, I experienced snow in very cold winters. That led to an increase in water main breaks. In January of 2019, we had the highest number of water main breaks in recent history in any one month. I’ve been able to see the cycle of a changing climate and how it is taxing infrastructure.

Kishia Powell at a work site

Billions of dollars are now being invested in finding solutions, although there are apparent challenges to address in the process.
Wherever you have a storm event that exceeds the capacity of your system, you cannot all of a sudden go and scale up your system to address the next biggest storm. That’s not how it works. We have to think about it, and we are...We’ve got to look at things holistically, and taking an integrated planning approach for at least the next 50 years out...We have to make sure that policies are aligned, that we are looking at different solutions, that we are optimizing the use of green infrastructure.

Researchers agree with Powell that in order to prevent future devastation, a variety of scenarios, including unexpected changes and outcomes, must be analyzed using comprehensive models to increase a city’s resilience (Mikovits et al., 2018).

Powell recounts a defining moment of her career when overseeing an adaptation project in Atlanta: “I think if I had to have a highlight of my career, it was standing at the bottom of 400 ft quarry in Atlanta, where we were repurposing the old rock quarry to become a new raw water reservoir to take the city’s water supply from 3 or 5 days to 30 to 90 days. That’s resilience. What I am most proud of is that the decisions we made to enhance the project were driven by equity.”

DC Water has already started the efforts to reinforce the Blue Plains Wastewater Facility against floods, which is featured by the EPA serving as a case study and success story (“Blue Plains Wastewater Facility,” 2020). But, DC Water’s implementation of green infrastructure in the District will ramp up significantly under the DC Clean Rivers program. Kishia Powell states, “I think it is most impactful when it is done at scale, so I’m looking forward to being a part of that work here.”

An additional program Powell spoke highly of is the Lead Free DC program launched by CEO David Gadis in 2019. The intention is to replace the remaining lead service lines over the next ten years. Thoughtfully, Powell describes that this program “comes with a very high price tag,” however to her team that only means refining assumptions, identifying funding sources and updating the framework, so the project can move forward effectively and at a greater pace.

Since the beginning of her career when she learned that “as a woman to be successful in this career, I have to work doubly as hard,” Kishia Powell has been delivering solutions. She is intentional in choosing her staff, seizing the opportunity “to give folks that may be underrepresented an opportunity to step up and lead.” Ultimately, Powell has held her mission close in everything she has accomplished and continues to push the industry forward.

Powell described what a win looks like to her, what it means to her to work in the utility management space, and what she wants aspirational young professionals to know:

Where I have worked, from Baltimore to London and Atlanta, I can drive through the city, and I can point out improvements that we have made, even if it was fixing a broken catch basin at the corner of two streets or a new subdivision that wouldn’t exist if we weren’t creative in getting water to it without compromising the integrity of the distribution system. Just going back through the pictures of my teams’ work, I know that a lot of hard work, passion, a lot of thought, a lot of heart, went into those projects. When we expose a grid of water main to find a problem leak on a critical 48” water main leaving the water treatment plant that has persisted for ten years or more and the team makes the repairs without disrupting service to 60% of the city, and it results in a cost savings and improved infrastructure for future generations...those are the wins.

It’s a reminder that we, every day in the sector, have the ability to impact lives in a way that people may never know, people may not ever celebrate. Everything doesn’t come with a ribbon-cutting, but the services we provide are so vitally important. We know what others have come to see in this unprecedented time, the true value of water and the value of the workforce.

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