



REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS: A NATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS INITIATIVE TO BUILD TRUST AND ENHANCE THE REPUTATION AND INFLUENCE OF U.S. PUBLIC CLEAN WATER UTILITIES

RFP ISSUE DATE: JANUARY 6, 2025
PROPOSAL DUE DATE: JANUARY 24, 2025

BACKGROUND

The National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA) represents the interests of public wastewater and stormwater agencies (clean water agencies) of all sizes nationwide. NACWA's members include these clean water agencies, as well as private consulting firms and law firms that support them, across the country. The Association's unique and growing network strengthens the advocacy voice for public clean water agencies, and ensures they have the tools necessary to provide affordable and sustainable clean water services for all. More about NACWA, its mission and its members can be found at www.nacwa.org.

In 2023, NACWA's Board of Directors recognized the need to rethink and reshape the narrative around the public clean water sector— both in terms of how the public and policymakers think about the sector and how utilities talk about themselves and the essential service they provide. For too long, the clean water sector has not received as much recognition, public acknowledgment or federal funding as other infrastructure sectors, despite its vital role. This communications gap results in the sector being misunderstood, unappreciated and inaccurately portrayed by a wide variety of stakeholders. In short, others are telling the sector's story— often in misleading ways— and the sector needs to reclaim its own narrative.

In 2024 NACWA engaged KGL Communications to perform initial research to determine the clean water sector's self-perception and obstacles to communication. From the results of this research — which included a survey, one-on-one interviews and a series of focus groups — NACWA's leadership determined there is a clear and compelling need to develop messaging that clearly explains the value and importance of public clean water utilities.

OBJECTIVES

The ultimate goals of NACWA's communications initiative are twofold. The first is to increase the overall reputation of public clean water utilities to enhance trust in

their services, both within their local communities but also within the larger national infrastructure policy discussion in the United States. For example, water infrastructure should be on par with – if not more important than – surface transportation infrastructure when national policymakers discuss the nation’s broad infrastructure needs and objectives. That is not currently the case, but the goal of this initiative is to help maximize the influence of the clean water sector so that this paradigm shift can occur over time. When clean water agencies increase trust and influence at the local level, they can also improve their influence at the national level via improved grassroots advocacy. Using effective communications to better educate the public and policymakers about the critical role of public clean water utilities and increase trust in these utilities will be an important part of this effort.

The second goal of this initiative is, from a NACWA organizational standpoint, to elevate communications advocacy to the same level as NACWA’s legal, legislative, and regulatory advocacy. As such, this initiative is not meant to be a “one-time” campaign but instead the first step of what will be a long-term commitment to boost the role of communications in NACWA’s overall advocacy agenda and to increase the Association’s commitment to providing meaningful communications resources to its members on the array of priority advocacy issues facing clean water agencies.

Messaging for the initiative will be developed jointly by the selected contractor and NACWA, but will focus on a variety of issues as identified by members including:

- Clean water infrastructure investment needs
- Increased federal funding for clean water, including a greater focus on low-income household assistance to pay clean water bills
- Affordability
- Workforce development
- PFAS and other emerging contaminants
- Effective communications with a wide variety of stakeholder groups, including customers, citizen groups, governing bodies, local elected leaders, and environmental activist groups

In addition to messaging, NACWA’s communication initiative will also include actions utilities must take to enhance their own reputations within their communities and, through concerted action, increasing influence for individual utilities and the sector as a whole.

SCOPE

The scope of work for this communications initiative should include, at a minimum, the following elements:

- Continue development of the research, included but not limited to professional polling, with customers, citizen groups, governing bodies, local elected leaders, and environmental activist groups to better understand the communications gap leading to this sector being misunderstood, unappreciated, and inaccurately portrayed (at best) and targeted for criminal and civil liabilities (at worst);
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- Environmental scan of strategies and tactics used by 3-5 other infrastructure sectors (telecom, electric, gas, etc.) to identify potential approaches that may be applied to our efforts;
- Develop messaging (elevator pitches and words that work) to communicate the role and importance of public clean water agencies to key stakeholder groups (i.e., ratepayers, elected officials, governing bodies, media, etc.);
- Convene diverse focus groups to test potential messaging;
- Develop recommendations and materials to engage trusted community partners, including proposed types of entities, recommended tactics and suggested materials to facilitate outreach and engagement;
- Develop recommendations and materials for toolkits for NACWA members that can be tailored and localized (e.g., template press releases, letters to the editor, social media posts and graphics);
- Develop a set of recommended actions that individual clean water agencies can take at the local level and that NACWA can take at the national level to operationalize the suggested messages and implement them in the most effective manner.

PROJECT DURATION

The project will be awarded to the selected firm no later than April 30, 2025. A time for final deliverables will be negotiated by NACWA and the selected firm as the project unfolds, although NACWA would ideally like to have all final deliverables by the end of 2025.

PROPOSAL SUBMITTAL INSTRUCTIONS

Please conform to the following instructions for submitting proposals. Proposals not conforming to these instructions will be rejected without further consideration. Any costs incurred by the contractor in preparing or submitting proposals are the contractor's sole responsibility.

Contractor Provided Information:

All interested contractors must provide the following information requested as part of their response to this proposal:

- Name and address of company
- A single point of contact for contract negotiation and oversight
- Information on the proposed project team, including resumes or curriculum vitae

Diversity and inclusion are core values of NACWA, and NACWA is committed to fostering a workplace culture that values and promotes equal employment opportunities. NACWA encourages Minority Business Enterprises (MBEs), Women Business Enterprises (WBEs), and other business enterprises representing underrepresented groups to apply for this RFP.

Content:

Proposals shall be prepared simply and succinctly providing a straightforward, concise description of the contractor's abilities to satisfy the requirements of this request. Proposals should discuss the contractor's experience with projects of a similar scope, including examples of past work.

Please provide at least three case studies of work with similar aligned organizations (e.g., municipal authorities, national trade associations, clean water organizations, etc.) and detail the scope of work and results.

Page Limit:

Proposals, inclusive of project description, deliverables and proposed schedule, must contain no more than eight (8) type-written pages (full page, single column),

in Times New Roman, minimum of 12-point font. Additional information on the proposed project team, including resumes or curriculum vitae, may be attached but should not exceed fifteen (15) pages.

Questions:

Any questions regarding this RFP may be submitted via e-mail by 12:00 NOON Eastern Time on Wednesday, January 15, 2025. No telephone inquiries will be accepted. Questions should be directed to Rahkia Nance, NACWA's Director of Communications, at rnance@nacwa.org.

Deadline & Delivery:

Proposals will be accepted until 12:00 NOON ET on January 24, 2025. Late proposals will not be accepted and will be returned to the contractor. Proposals should be submitted by PDF electronically to rnance@nacwa.org. Submittal of proposals by fax is not acceptable.

PROPOSAL REVIEW AND AWARD

All proposals will be reviewed to verify that interested contractors have met the minimum requirements set forth in this RFP. Proposals that do not meet minimum requirements will be eliminated from further consideration.

Proposals will be reviewed by an evaluation committee comprised of NACWA staff and member utility representatives. The top-ranked potential contractor will be contacted to enter into contract negotiations, at which time the proposals from other potential contractors will be held in abeyance until successful contract negotiations have been completed.

The technical criteria for evaluation of proposals will be as follows:

- **Qualifications/Experience**
This category will consider the qualifications of the firm's experience, the number of years in the industry, work on similar projects and with similar clients to NACWA, and the success of the firm.
- **Personnel**
This category will consider the experience and qualifications of the project manager and other personnel assigned to this project.
- **Proposal**

This category will consider the quality of the proposal submitted by the bidder. Maximum ranking will be awarded for clear, concise, complete, and compelling proposals.

- Cost
Interested contractors should include in their proposal an amount they believe is reasonable to accomplish the goals and scope of this initiative as outlined in this RFP. NACWA will consider cost as it reviews submitted proposals.

Interested contractors are hereby put on notice that this is a Request for Proposal, not a request to contract, and that any proposals submitted in response to this Request for Proposal shall not be considered contract offers. All qualified proposals will be evaluated and an award may be made to the selected contractor whose proposal is deemed to be in the best interest of NACWA. No contract discussions shall begin between NACWA and any potential contractors until such time as an award is made by NACWA and any award made is subject to a signed contract.

If a contract between the selected contractor and NACWA cannot be negotiated and consummated in a timely fashion and to the Association's satisfaction, the award may be withdrawn. NACWA reserves the right to withdraw the award at any time for any reason during the contract negotiation process. In the event the selected contractor does not execute the contract as required, the award of the contract may then be offered to another contractor or NACWA may decide to solicit new proposals.

All responses, inquiries, or correspondence relating to or in reference to this RFP, and all other reports, charts, displays, schedules, exhibits, and other documentation submitted by contractor will become the property of NACWA when received.