

MSD shows major progress in hiring more female and minority contractors

By [ELI CHEN](#) • JANUARY 25, 2018
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The Metropolitan St. Louis Sewer District announced Thursday that it has made strides in hiring more women and minorities for contract work.

The NAACP and minority advocacy groups like MOKAN have pushed the sewer utility for several years to make more diverse hires for its contractual engineering and construction work. They stepped up such efforts after [a Clean Water Act settlement in 2011](#) required the MSD to spend \$4.7 billion on sewer upgrades over the next two decades.

In 2013, MSD and multiple community organizations signed a community benefits agreement that committed the utility to do so. For example, MSD aimed to hire African-American firms for at least 17 percent of its construction work, which it achieved.

"We are extremely, extremely happy that MSD took the time and effort to sit with us continually to work through all the issues we had identified as potential problems," said Adolphus Pruitt, president of the NAACP's St. Louis branch.

There still remain areas, however, that the utility needs to improve, said Brian Hoelscher, executive director and CEO of MSD. He said the utility hasn't met its goal of obtaining 30 percent of its labor hours from minority workers in the area of treatment plants and pump stations. It also set a goal of increasing the number of women working in construction to 7 percent, but currently the utility is only halfway there.

"Our issue is not getting the women out of the labor halls," Hoelscher said. "It's helping the unions find women who want to do that type of work."

MSD has funded work training programs for women, but the district also wants to start approaching younger women who may be interested in construction work while they're still in high school, instead of waiting until they reach their early 20s.

Hiring more female and minority contractors improves community relations and helps lower costs, Hoelscher said.

"By doing this diversity program, allowing other companies to participate, build their expertise, build their size, it always guarantees we have vendors available who have the capacity to do the work as we go forward," Hoelscher said. "If we didn't and we ended up with a vendor pool that ran out of capacity, they'd start kicking the prices up. This prevents that from happening."

MSD will also hire a consultant this year to conduct a formal study of its hiring practices.

"We do want to get to a point where you don't have to monitor goals and diversity just kind of happens as a normal course of business," Hoelscher said.