

Women Leaders in City and Village Government

City and village elected officials and municipal staff, by virtue of their position are seen as leaders and ambassadors of their community.

Every individual is inspired and influenced by different motivators. This is your opportunity to tell us your story and motivate with your example.

Choose one or two to of the following questions to respond to and send your answers in an email to league@lwm-info.org with the subject line "Me in Government." We will update this website article and feature you in the League's social media.

1. Why did you choose a career in government?
 2. What advice would you give your younger self?
 3. Is there someone or something that made a difference in your career that others could learn from?
 4. What opportunities do you see for women in government?
 5. Tell us about one or two accomplishments that you are especially proud of in your career.
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Abby Bernhagen, Engineer, MSA Professional Services, Marshfield

What advice would you give your younger self? If I could give my younger self advice, it would be "don't be afraid to pursue your passion." I feel very fortunate to have chosen a career in engineering, even though it is still a male-dominated field. I have always enjoyed math and science, and I did well with those subjects. Even so, there were times in my high school and college careers when I questioned if I was following the right path for me. Despite my doubts, I'm very pleased that I persevered and stuck with this career. It's been very rewarding to work with municipalities to help them achieve their goals. Together we have improved the quality of life for residents by constructing new wells, replacing water and sewer systems and rehabilitating wastewater treatment plants and lift stations, to name a few of the projects that have been done to meet communities' needs. Pursuing something you're passionate about adds real purpose to your life and if you have that passion, it's a lot harder to fail. And as an added bonus, the goal you're trying to achieve may turn out to be even more rewarding than what you first expected.

One or two accomplishments that you are especially proud of in your career. I am proud to have chosen to work for a company right out of college that enables me to positively impact the lives of

others. Through my experiences as a new engineer at MSA Professional Services, I've helped communities improve their utilities' infrastructure from start to finish, beginning with design and seeing projects through construction. I've also become more involved in City of Marshfield community events, participating as a volunteer at June Dairy Days and as a fundraiser "jailbird" for the Muscular Dystrophy Association "lock-up," among other events. These opportunities have allowed me to grow personally and professionally and for that, I'm very thankful.



Allison Byrne – Alderwoman for the Sixth District of the City of Wauwatosa

League Lobby Team

Why did you choose a career in politics?

My vocational goals were never politics. While working on a Masters in Education I wrote a Department of Transportation grant for the city of Wauwatosa along with a pediatrician and an alderman. A seat was opening in our district and he suggested I run. I said no but eventually capitulated after looking into the composition of the city council of Wauwatosa. We have a very large council of sixteen, only three of whom are women. While gender is not the only area where varied perspective would be a benefit to Wauwatosa, and many municipalities in Wisconsin, it was an area where I could personally make a difference.

Like all people who seek public office, I believe my constituents will benefit by the votes I make while humbly serving in their interest. An additional motivator for me is that fact that I bring an underrepresented voice, that of citizen, mother, teacher, and care giver, to the composition of city council. This does not make me more qualified than the many attorneys on council, but it certainly does not make me less so.

What advice would you give to your younger self?

Find a mentor not afraid to tell you when you are wrong. Accept you will make mistakes, forgive yourself and move on.

Constructive criticism is limited as a public official. We often hear why a constituent is displeased with a vote, or even with a project beyond our control; however constituent feedback may not take into account competing government priorities. And while we personally have the benefit of understanding the city at large, self-assessing the effectiveness of our very isolating position as an elected official is difficult. Having a trusted advisor who can share honest feedback is a tremendous asset.

Leaving a meeting where we wished we phrased something differently, or brought more of a polished voice into the room, is not unique to our profession. However, working as a public official means all your time on the job is open for civic comment. Finding a trusted mentor, ideally one who understands the complicated dynamics at play for the municipality as a whole, to offer you sincere assessment and feedback is crucial for professional growth.



Barbara Dickmann, Village President, Village of Saukville, League Past-President, League Lobby Team Member

I am Saukville's chief elected official. The Village Board has six other elected members. We all serve two-year terms. I have held my position since 2004. I am responsible for Chairing the Finance Committee, Village Board, Plan Commission, CDA/IRC and am involved in the annual budget process for the Village. Saukville is served by a variety of committees that set policies. It is my responsibility to appoint those who serve. Saukville's population is 4,465. We are a bedroom community to Milwaukee and Sheboygan because of access to HWY 43. However, we have a very active retail district and a very healthy business park.

Why did you choose a career in govt.? My first full-time job was for a local bank and it was there that I learned all of the intricacies of money. Large numbers were commonplace. This work prepared me for the financial part of my Village Presidency and how to use money wisely and frugally. My full-time job for the last 30 years of my career was as Office Manager to the Founder of the Manpower Group. In this position I learned the value of business communication, ethical business practices, the ability to communicate with members of the business community in all walks of life and from around the world. This job again prepared me to take on a leadership position in government. I was first appointed to Saukville's Library Board. A few years later, I ran for Village Board and was elected. That was in 1999. In 2003 I ran for Village President, was elected, and have served in that role since then.

Tell us about one or two accomplishments that you are especially proud of in your career. Since I became Village President, our team has been able to improve Saukville's Moody's Bond Rating; construct an efficient and functional Police Department building; create a thriving retail center east of the freeway; add businesses to our very active business park; combine and share services with surrounding communities; use non-lapsing reserve funds for various department purchases; are in the process of creating a master Financial Plan for Saukville; annually review and make necessary changes to staffing to improve efficiency and service delivery.



Deborah Hoffmann, City Attorney/Director of HR, City of Fond du Lac

Why did you choose a career in gov't? I was idealistic when I was younger. I hoped to help people and strengthen our government by working from within the system. I find inspiration in the [starfish story](#) (Loren Eiseley), about the little child throwing starfish back into the sea after a storm washed thousands of starfish onto the shore. You may not be able to help all of them, but for the ones you are able to throw back into the ocean, you've made a difference.

What opportunities do you see for women in government? Local government is in the midst of reorganizing. All levels of government need to reach out to each other and work together to avoid duplication of services, to make the best use of scarce resources and make sure great service is being provided to our constituents. Women are known for empathy, communication and caring for others. These skills will be of great use when blending two communities or school districts or fire departments into one to reduce costs and duplication, while respecting the traditions and standards of each.



Elizabeth Doyle, City of Verona, City Council President, District 1 Alderperson

Why did you choose a career in gov't.?

I choose a career in government because I wanted to ensure that future generations would have a high quality of life. Protecting the environment and investing in strong educational and economic infrastructural systems are key components of this. Becoming a parent brought these issues to the forefront for me and I decided to take action instead of just worrying about what kind of world my daughter would grow up in.

What opportunities do you see for women in government?

The public sector is ripe with opportunities for women. Differing perspectives and experiences make policies and the resulting discussions more comprehensive and successful. I would encourage other women to pursue whatever governing body or department is of interest to them and utilize their skills to make a positive impact on their communities.



KateLynn Schmitt, Deputy Treasurer/Administrative Services Coordinator, Village of Richfield, League Lobby Team

What opportunities do you see for women in government? Public service holds a promising future for anyone willing to work hard and dedicate themselves to their profession. The landscape of local government is changing every day. Department heads, managers, and municipal officials are moving closer to retirement preparations while eager assistants, clerks and administrators poise ready to step in. The emerging workforce is now comprised of more females than ever before, and those females are stepping into positions in local government as not only Municipal Managers but also as DPW Supervisors, Planners, and Community Services Directors to name a few. Woman looking to get into government should not limit themselves to previously designated female positions. If you are excited about any area of government go for it and pursue those avenues because the jobs will be there for those enthusiastic about a career in local government.

One or two accomplishments that you are especially proud of in your career. Whenever starting a new job I seek to accomplish two things. One, increase my knowledge and experiences in the profession. And two, contribute to the organization in some profound way. Finding ways to align these goals is extremely important for me to feel successful within any organization. Since working for the Village of Richfield I have helped to develop the Capital Improvement Plan and achieve the Governmental Finance Officers Association's Distinguished Budget Presentation Award. Working for the Village of Richfield I have learned that nothing can be accomplished on your own. It takes a great team to develop and implement usable policies, procedures and documents that will improve the organizations effectiveness in serving the community. I consider the knowledge I have gained in Richfield to be fundamental to the foundation of my career.



Megan Stritchko, Municipal Advisor, MSA Professional Services, Inc., Madison office

Why did you choose a career in government? I have known that I wanted to work in and with government since I was a teenager; I believe that government provides essential infrastructure and services to grow and strengthen communities. With proper planning and analysis, government can continue to evolve and make positive changes to meet the needs of the public in the most effective and efficient ways possible. While I began my career in state government, I am fortunate to now have the

opportunity at MSA to work closely with local governments to find cost-effective means of financing essential public projects that will positively impact the lives of people around the state.

What advice would you give your younger self? The advice I would give my younger self is that the greatest risks often produce the greatest rewards. Many of the most rewarding experiences I have had are those that were intimidating and uncertain. Every instance in which I've challenged myself to step outside of the box and try something new and different, whether it be a job, an idea, or an experience, has been rewarding and helped me grow both personally and professionally. While it is usually scary and intimidating at first, these challenges provide value because you always learn something.

Is there someone or something that made a difference in your career that others could learn from? I have been fortunate to have had a number of women (and men) who have mentored and encouraged me throughout my career. Without those people who have taken a few extra minutes in their busy schedules to offer advice, feedback, and encouragement, it would have been very difficult for me to get to where I am today. One of the most valuable resources we can offer aspiring women in government is our time, and it is my hope that I can be as helpful to others as the mentors in my life have been to me.



**Scottie Ard, Alderman District 2, The City Beautiful – New Richmond WI
League Lobby Team**

Why did you choose a career in govt.?

Government Service offers the greatest opportunity to utilize my skills, knowledge and experience for the betterment of my community, state and country. I have the honor of speaking for the individuals who elected me and placed their faith and trust in me.

What advice would you give your younger self?

If you've hit a brick wall, dismantle it and use the bricks to build the road to your goal. The challenges you face, the individuals and issues you defend will cause the world to be better and you will be stronger in character and knowledge for the experience.

Is there someone or something that made a difference in your career that others could learn from?

"Never be afraid to fight for your rights and the rights of others; knowledge is the greatest power and God and your family will always have your back." This mantra was represented by the fearless women in my family; Ellen Scott, Peg McDermott and Esther Wentz. These amazing women triumphed against employment, religious, cultural, economic and educational barriers and in so doing changed the course of life for themselves and others.



Tara Krista, Professional Engineer, Short Elliott Hendrickson Inc. (SEH), working as a Civil Engineer out of the Chippewa Falls office

I am a Project Manager and Civil Engineer with 16 years of experience in a variety of transportation related projects from bridge and culvert design, rural and urban roadway design, resurfacing, reconditioning, reconstruction, new construction as well as in-service bridge inspection.

What advice would you give your younger self?

If I could give my younger self advice it would be "nothing great comes from staying inside your comfort zone." When you push yourself to operate outside of your comfort zone new opportunities are often found. When I was in high school, and even in college, I chose to stick close to the activities that came easy to me and to the people I knew well. As I have grown in my career as an engineer and even in life, it wasn't until I started to step outside of my comfort zone (by joining different teams, enrolling in new courses or taking on a different type of project), where much greater learning and growth occurred. You don't always have to have the answer; you just need to know where to begin to look for it.

Tell us about one or two accomplishments that you are especially proud of in your career.

I am proud of all of my projects, whether a small bridge rehab project or a major intersection replacement, all projects are important to me. At SEH our moto is "Building a Better World for all of Us." I truly feel I touch each community that I work for by providing safe facilities and improving the quality of life for the traveling public. I am proud of the work that I do; because I help communities make their communities better.



Teresa Anderson, P.E., leads an engineering team in the Rice Lake office of MSA Professional Services

Why did you choose a career in government?

I grew up in Rice Lake, Wisconsin (less than 10,000 people), and wanted a career that would let me continue to live and work in a small town. And I wanted to be able to use my affinity for math and science to make a positive impact. What I've found in civil engineering is the opportunity to help small communities meet their infrastructure needs. It's been a pleasure to work with many different elected and appointed officials throughout northwest Wisconsin who are dedicated to helping their Cities and Villages remain great places to live. And it's been a privilege to be part of the projects that help them meet their goals.

What opportunities do you see for women in government?

Being “in government” is not about being male or female, it is about working hard to do what is best for the people you represent. Throughout my career, I’ve met many strong women with various roles in government, from mayors and village presidents to municipal clerks and treatment plant operators. I’ve come to realize that women in government represent many different skill sets: executive, administrative and hands-on, but what these women have in common is a passion for serving their communities to the best of their abilities. Opportunities for women in government are plentiful, we just need to rise to the challenge.