The Little Rock area in Arkansas has a history of overcoming cultural challenges, such as the racial integration of Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957. In the same spirit, when the Little Rock and North Little Rock water utilities merged in 2001, inclusiveness and integration were priorities, and a new page in Arkansas water history was written.

Central Arkansas Water (CAW) is a metropolitan water system serving approximately 400,000 people, with 123,000 residential, commercial, industrial, and master-metered customers in Pulaski, Saline, and Grant counties. The utility is a core partner in a regional initiative to secure a future source for all of Central Arkansas, an urban area with a population of more than 750,000 people. CAW direct service boundaries encompass the cities and communities of Little Rock, North Little Rock, Alexander, Brushy Island Public Water Authority, Cammack Village, College Station, Sherwood, Wrightsville, and Unincorporated Pulaski County.

In addition, CAW provides the entire treated water supply for Shannon Hills and Bryant in Saline County, and Ridgefield Estates Public Facilities Board. The facility also provides supplemental supply to Jacksonville, whose service area includes Little Rock Air Force Base in Pulaski County; the city of Cabot in Lonoke County; the community of Salem in Saline County; Sardis Water Association Public Water Authority (which serves parts of Saline and Grant counties); North Pulaski Water Works Association (which serves parts of Faulkner County); and Woodland Hills.

Utility’s Award-Winning Initiative Unites Workforce and Community

The Little Rock area in Arkansas has a history of overcoming cultural challenges, such as the racial integration of Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957. In the same spirit, when the Little Rock and North Little Rock water utilities merged in 2001, inclusiveness and integration were priorities, and a new page in Arkansas water history was written.

Central Arkansas Water (CAW) is a metropolitan water system serving approximately 400,000 people, with 123,000 residential, commercial, industrial, and master-metered customers in Pulaski, Saline, and Grant counties. The utility is a core partner in a regional initiative to secure a future source for all of Central Arkansas, an urban area with a population of more than 750,000 people. CAW direct service boundaries encompass the cities and communities of Little Rock, North Little Rock, Alexander, Brushy Island Public Water Authority, Cammack Village, College Station, Sherwood, Wrightsville, and Unincorporated Pulaski County.

In addition, CAW provides the entire treated water supply for Shannon Hills and Bryant in Saline County, and Ridgefield Estates Public Facilities Board. The facility also provides supplemental supply to Jacksonville, whose service area includes Little Rock Air Force Base in Pulaski County; the city of Cabot in Lonoke County; the community of Salem in Saline County; Sardis Water Association Public Water Authority (which serves parts of Saline and Grant counties); North Pulaski Water Works Association (which serves parts of Faulkner County); and Woodland Hills.
MERGER INTRODUCES NEW ERA

The history of CAW and community water service in the Little Rock–North Little Rock metropolitan area dates back to springs and wells in the early 1800s. A basic system of providing and transporting water to homes and businesses has today become Arkansas’ largest water utility. CAW is nationally known for excellent water quality, exemplary regulatory compliance, outstanding system reliability, affordable rates, exceptional customer service, and strong public involvement.

In 2000, “Water for Our Future: Overcoming Regional Paralysis,” a study by the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, introduced a new era in interlocal cooperation and the concept of metropolitan services for the cities of Little Rock and North Little Rock. At the time, the two cities had a 64-year-old history as water supplier and customer. On July 1, 2001, the utilities officially merged human resources and operations. The utility merger marked the start of a movement away from geographical differences and toward corporate interests benefiting the good of the entire customer base, as well as surrounding areas in Central Arkansas.

To increase diversity throughout the utility, build better relationships among employees, and encourage employee contributions to achieve better business results, CAW instituted a Diversity and Inclusion Initiative in its strategic planning process in 2008. As stated then by CAW’s chief executive officer Graham Rich, “It is the right thing to do, and there is a strong business case for creating a diverse and inclusive culture within an organization.”

THE BENEFITS OF UNITY

The initiative was implemented the same year with the creation of the Diversity and Inclusion Team, which was composed of 14 members representing all six utility departments. These committed team members shared the belief that all CAW employees should work to create a positive, inclusive, and respectful work environment—one that would unite co-workers by recognizing and appreciating similarities and differences. Members of the Diversity and Inclusion Team realized the clear benefits of embracing diversity and inclusion; doing so would allow utility employees to better represent all of CAW’s stakeholders, raise cultural awareness, and educate employees about how to appreciate differences and work to create better workforce unity. The team saw that diversity and inclusion were the vehicles that would help remove the “us and them attitude,” and form a “we” atmosphere in the workplace and in the community.

This newly created Diversity and Inclusion Team quickly set to work drafting vision and mission statements, and a business case for supporting these belief statements. The team created and adopted the following guiding principles as set forth in its vision statement:

- To embrace diversity and inclusion of all people and obtain their assistance in our journey as a world-class utility.

The mission of CAW’s Diversity and Inclusion Initiative is to:

- Embrace diversity, incorporate inclusion, respect differences, and implement company values by utilizing and optimizing the talents, experiences and passions of our employees.

The team’s work plan for attaining this vision specifically addresses the following key items:

- recruitment and job sourcing with particular regard for currently under-represented groups and individuals in order to mirror the makeup of the utility’s stakeholders,
- developing all employees to attain their potential and foster ownership in the company,
- creating an environment free of negativity and bias, and
- building accountability for diversity and inclusion throughout the utility, realizing that this process is not simply a function of human resources.
The Diversity and Inclusion Team designed a logo to be used in disseminating the initiative throughout the organization. The logo and its underlying purpose have been integrated throughout the utility, and it serves as a prominent reminder of the interconnected nature of all employees in meeting the initiative’s goals. Each employee is given a t-shirt and reusable tote bag printed with the logo, and it is prominently featured on employees’ name badges.

### EMPLOYEE TRAINING

One major component of CAW’s Diversity and Inclusion Initiative in 2011 was participation in a one-day diversity and inclusion workshop by every active employee. This workshop-style training effectively addressed all key items outlined in the Diversity and Inclusion Team’s action plan.

Offered by a local community-development organization, the mission of the training was to embrace diversi-
ty and establish a place where every person is valued, every voice is heard, and everyone has a fair chance to succeed. The training helped employees explore key diversity and inclusion concepts:

• the results and costs of leaving some employees “out of the loop”;
• the dimensions of human diversity;
• sources and nature of prejudice, including stereotyping, prejudging, discrimination, and oppression;
• the definition of culture and understanding cultural identities;
• the nature of unearned and earned privilege and power; and
• how expectations affect behavioral outcomes.

Employees were open to and engaged in the training. They gave positive feedback to the workshop facilitators and to members of the Diversity and Inclusion Team. This utilitywide training was followed in June 2012 by a one-day, four-hour session, attended by managerial and supervisory staff and designed to break down stereotypes and promote understanding and respect among people.

A COMPREHENSIVE, CONTINUOUS COMMITMENT

CAW has sponsored a number of additional programs as part of its Diversity and Inclusion Initiative, which are described in Table 1. The utility also updated its strategic plan in 2012 and continued its commitment to this initiative through proposed diversity and inclusion activities on Employee Appreciation Day, events during Diversity and Inclusion Month (October), and progress reports sent to utility management and employees.

In addition, the Diversity and Inclusion Team, in conjunction with CAW’s purchasing department, saw an opportunity to pull from a large supplier pool (which is focused on small and diverse businesses) by participating in and supporting, since 2010, the Arkansas Procurement Conference. The conference’s matchmaking-style format allows buyers and vendors to be matched based on buyers’ commodity and service needs. The conference gives CAW the stage to provide guidance to potential diverse suppliers on how to do business with the utility. By participating in these forums, CAW has been able to extend its diverse supplier base.

Diversity and inclusion are incorporated throughout the organization—in its community and stakeholder outreach efforts, its hiring practices, employee training and employee performance standards, internal and external communications, purchasing practices, management emphasis, and strategic planning.
CAW strives to be a leader in regulatory compliance, customer service, system integrity, affordability, and fiscal management. Perhaps most indicative of CAW’s commitment to customers are multiple Public Water Supply Environmental Excellence Awards from the US Environmental Protection Agency Region 6 and a 2001 America’s Crown Communities Award. Both awards reflect outstanding operations and maintenance practices and a dedication to quality in all aspects of service to customers. In addition, CAW is honored to have received the 2013 AWWA Diversity Award at ACE13 held in June in Denver, Colo. (See the sidebar listing AWWA products and programs that support diversity.)

A major part of what makes CAW such a great water utility is its outstanding staff; the Diversity and Inclusion Initiative has served to better unite its stellar workforce. By incorporating diversity and inclusion in the organization’s culture and moving past our differences, we are able to focus on doing our jobs to the utmost of our ability—and to provide outstanding drinking water to our communities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT
This article was prepared with support and assistance from Water Quality Specialist Sharon Sweeney and Chief Technical Officer Robert Hart.

—Blake Weindorf, a senior engineer at Central Arkansas Water, is a registered Professional Engineer and a licensed Water Distribution and Treatment Operator. He has been a member of AWWA since 2004 and is currently the chair of the Southwest Section of AWWA. He can be reached at (501) 377-1224 or blake.weindorf@carkw.com.