

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Kathleen Mulligan-Hansel, Deputy Director, The Partnership for Working Families**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

**Kathleen Mulligan-Hansel:**

### **The Partnership for Working Families**

We're a national network; we have affiliates in about 18 cities in the country. Our affiliates are all involved in projects that do two things: Improve the quality of jobs coming into cities, and make those jobs available to low-income people. They're doing it across a range of industries and kinds of work, and usually in conjunction with environmental space and union leaders – in conjunction with a broader, progressive movement. At the national level, at the national organization we both support and facilitate the work that they're doing and also take the lessons of that local work – and a lot of it is incredibly innovative in terms of passing local policies that can really change the urban landscape – and we're bringing those lessons into the national conversation.

### **Lack of infra investment hurts low-income communities**

Infrastructure is vitally important to poor communities and I think that's a fact that anybody that looks at cities understands really well: that underinvestment in urban infrastructure is one of the problems that cities across the country continue to grapple with, and low-income people are hurt by that. There's a direct benefit to communities of things like transit build-outs in cities, improvements in rehab to schools – which is a kind of public infrastructure – and then the ongoing maintenance of urban streets, sidewalks, sewer systems. These are major components of urban life that have a lot to do with the desirability of those neighborhoods, and also making sure that low-income communities have access to high-quality services in a way that we know that middle-and-upper-income communities are likely to have.

### **The public needs to be engaged**

I think there's a lot to say about the lack of civic engagement. Some of it is just that the processes by which public entities make decisions about how to invest in infrastructure are really difficult for most everyday people to understand. Those decisions are not being made in a way that engages community members in a values-based discussion about why this matters to them, how they can be involved in helping to map out the parameters of how infrastructure is going to be developed in adjacent communities or in their own communities. And we see that as a really huge important part of our work: both doing leadership development in

low-income communities, helping community members understand why this matters, injecting a values base into discussions about how infrastructure investment is funneled into different types of projects and the impact of those projects, and making sure that we are investing in high-quality infrastructure that does lift up low-income communities; and to keep low income people in the discussion and to make sure that they're going to benefit from those investments as well.

### **Failing infra affects a large percentage of our population**

There is a fundamental set of challenges that face our country that have to do with maintaining the good infrastructure we have and improving and investing in places where the infrastructure is eroding. I don't know what has made it difficult for that conversation to be staged in the widespread way we need it to happen. I think there are a couple of things: One is that many of us grew up in a time where investment in infrastructure was a much – we saw a lot more of it and we didn't see so many of the things happening now, like the bridge collapse in Minnesota, other local events. Here in Milwaukee we have a bridge that's been in incredible disrepair, that's had years and years of reinvestment in order to rebuild it back up. I think people are starting to realize that the crumbling infrastructure has a direct impact on their lives, but I think for a long time they were able to take that for granted. And I also just think that a lot of these problems appear to be contained. The problems of infrastructure in urban areas is not a new phenomenon, but it's been contained to a particular set of stake holders: people who live in cities, many of them poor communities, who have less political power, and so have not had the ability to force the conversation. Yet now I think we're seeing that investment that needs to happen on a wider scale is actually affecting a huge percent of our population, it's not just an issue of urban areas and cities. It is directly related to related to greening our economy; it's directly related to re-injecting some economic growth to save our economy and it's connected to a much broader set of questions about what kind of country we are building.

### **Public services are under attack, and so is infrastructure**

There's a whole element of the broader political dialogue that is basically suggesting that public services of all kinds are not really needed and that everything should be "pay-as-you-go," and that if upper-income people can afford private schools, they should go to private schools. There's a whole element of our political discussion about privatizing everything that used to be a public service, and then of course that leaves low-income people in a much more difficult situation. They can't afford those services at the same levels, and they're often not available in areas where poor people live. And so infrastructure, to me, is a victim of that broader political dialogue. The question of "is it the role of government to invest in having good roads, and good schools, and good sewer systems?" Or "is that you pay for what you can, and if you can't pay for it you don't have access to that stuff?" And I feel like we're seeing those debates play

out in every city right now on a whole range of public services and to me, infrastructure really is another kind of public service. It has monumental implications, but when you're a resident of a low-income community and you rely on your transit system and your sewer system to work, to not have water backing up in your basement, these are things that people cannot afford to pay on the private market that historically we've had government provide. We really have to confront that attack on public services head on, and see infrastructure investment as a piece of it.

**[www.InfrastructureUSA.org](http://www.InfrastructureUSA.org)**  
**212.414.9220**  
**[info@infrastructureusa.org](mailto:info@infrastructureusa.org)**