

# PROFILES OF PUBLIC SERVANTS: The Millennial Generation

*Given this issue's focus on shifting demographics within the public service sector, ASPA asked several young public administrators to provide insights into their career aspirations, the reasons they chose the field and ways millennials will make a difference to its practice and study.*

## **Andrea Marie Headley**

**Age:** 24

**Current Occupation:**

Doctoral Candidate and  
Research Assistant

**Career Aspiration:**

Influencing criminal  
justice policy based on  
scientific research



## **Aaron Kestner**

**Age:** 27

**Current Occupation:**

Management Analyst

**Career Aspiration:**

Serving the nation as a  
Foreign Service Officer

## **Angie Kline**

**Age:** 30

**Current Occupation:**

Doctoral Candidate

**Career Aspiration:**

Teaching Nonprofit  
Organization Management  
and Public Administration



## **Zachary Wurtzebach**

**Age:** 34

**Current Occupation:**

Graduate Research  
Assistant

**Career Aspiration:**

Pursuing a career as a  
professor and/or researcher

Public service traditionally has been defined through the lens of the public sector or government. How do you define public service and what are its implications for the future?

**Headley:** To serve the public, benefit the greater good and contribute to a better society for all should not be a responsibility, an option or a spare time commitment. Rather, it should be a persistent, invasive lifestyle decision. Public service is not limited to the career path one chooses to enter; it can be achieved throughout all sectors, careers and organizations. There are two enduring questions to ask: Whose will am I pursuing? Whose ends am I fulfilling? My definition of public service is not necessarily bound by sectoral constraints; it is defined by the ends, not the means. If balanced correctly, this evolution of public service can potentially lead to greater services with multiple avenues for delivery. With this potential to expand, the public sector should first ensure amends are made to areas where they are needed so inequities do not continue.

**Kestner:** As public service becomes more innovative, I expect greater coordination and cooperation among government, nonprofit and for-profit organizations. Public service will become a definition for the outcome of projects and services delivered to the community, rather than merely for the organizations that fund them.

**Kline:** I think the traditional definition is outdated. Public service encompasses mission-driven activities that advance the needs of the community as identified by community members. Some traditionalists may not include nonprofit organizations in public administration, but millennials are very interested in learning about their management. My definition of public service includes nonprofit organizations and government, as well as social entrepreneurship and low-profit limited liability companies. In the years ahead, I anticipate more hybrid organizations in public service.

We will see more examples of leaderless organizations, like Black Lives Matter. I am looking forward to seeing its progress and how it can affect policy changes. It will be interesting to see if additional organizations emerge that follow the leaderless model and how they use technology among their supporters. Overall, we also will see

more examples of millennials wanting to work outside formalized structures.

**Wurtzebach:** The increasingly complex and networked nature of governance requires an appreciation for the role of markets, private actors and NGOs in providing public services. But, there also is danger that almost anything, such as “job creation” in the pursuit of profit, can be framed as public service. In my mind, public service involves the provision of public goods and values produced without the explicit intent to create private profit. It is an action that puts the public before the individual.

As a side note, I do think it is important to call attention to the role of state actors in coordinating, steering and providing accountability in complex governance networks. For all the emphasis on private sector and NGO public service provision, in my experience it is all too often state agencies—particularly key individuals in them—that provide the stable backbone essential for the provision of public services.

**How do you hope your generation impacts the public sector over the next 30 years?**

**Headley:** I hope my generation can bring a more diverse workforce to the public sector as it relates to demographics, skill sets, educational background and work experience. I hope my generation can help the sector become more competent in terms of cultural, racial, ethnic, gender and social class differences. Diversity competency in the public sector is essential to understand and correct for ways in which systems and institutions can engage in differential treatment toward the public. I hope diversification can lead to creative solutions to impending social problems, particularly that millennials can leverage technology to deliver data-proven policy solutions. With technological advances, it is imperative that we still maintain the human element of public service, specifically empathy and compassion for the entire public being served, particularly the marginalized.

**Kline:** I hope the respect and worthiness of public service will return to professions in the public sector. This is a tall order for a single group, so I think it requires attention from all generations. To quote a wise baby boomer, John Dilulio Jr., we need to “bring back the bureaucrats.” Until we staff our public sector with trained public servants, it will be challenging to develop a new golden age of public service. On issues of accountability and equity, it concerns me that government increasingly is turning to alternative service delivery models. I know we will never agree on what constitutes an inherently governmental function, but we need to keep talking about appropriate and accountable government contracting.

One way we can return the respect to public sector professions is through better marketing and storytelling. It is unfortunate that public servants are in the news for ethical or criminal infractions. We all know hard-working, ethical and resourceful public servants whose stories are not shared with the public. Millennials, let’s make public administration great again. We may need a better slogan, but we should think how to brand and market public sector professions.

**How do you think we can best attract millennials to public service?**

**Kestner:** By highlighting the benefits the private sector might not be able to provide. So many millennials leave college with student loans to repay, forcing them to take jobs that offer the best possible salaries. Educating millennials on public service loan repayment plans and similar programs would be a huge draw toward public service for our generation.

**Kline:** Public service organizations need to provide opportunities for millennials to learn new skills and advance in their careers. I hear millennials say they do not stay at jobs as long as previous generations. Part of high turnover is compensation and benefits, but part of it is also the work environment. A big misconception among employers is that millennials are interested in professional development opportunities because we are looking to move to a new job. These opportunities are important to us because it shows that the employer is investing in me and values my contribution to the mission. When I worked at the United Way, I felt appreciated when my boss handpicked me to attend a software training or grant writing workshop.

The other criticism I am reluctant to accept is that millennials are the “everyone gets a trophy” generation and require constant affirmation in the workplace. If it is true, investing in workplace-based professional development is a mutually beneficial strategy of gaining knowledge for the organization and giving the millennial that gold star.

Some practical changes to attract more millennials to careers in government: Shorten the time required to hire new employees and ban the box that stigmatizes criminal records among job candidates. Changing policies like these will cultivate public service professionals who reflect the communities we serve.

**Wurtzebach:** Many of us are idealistic and genuinely want to make a difference in the world. As a whole, millennials seem more concerned with issues like social inequality and climate change than previous generations. But, I feel there is confusion in what to do about them. Perhaps it is because

our culture so lauds individual entrepreneurs and private sector innovators as agents of change. There also are troubling and inaccurate stereotypes about government bureaucracy and bureaucrats. Countering these narratives is challenging, but there are a few important strategies. For one, teachers can make a difference by highlighting exciting and innovative public sector work being done by agencies, NGOs, private organizations and collaborative networks. Attracting young and exciting practitioner guest lecturers with whom students can relate—such as city planners, GIS application specialists or outreach coordinators—is one strategy I have found effective in my own class for getting younger millennials interested.

#### Why did you choose to study public administration?

**Headley:** My interest stems from the constant desire to contribute to the betterment of society. From a young age I have witnessed and personally experienced the effects of disadvantage. Early on, these experiences instilled within me the importance of such values as equality and fairness, diversity and inclusion, and service and community. During my undergraduate years I held a double major in Community Development and Criminology and interned at nonprofit and local government organizations. It was then that I realized solely providing direct services to help others was no longer gratifying; I wanted a deeper understanding of societal problems and to analyze, if not inspire, solutions. As I learned more about the larger criminal justice system, I understood the interconnectedness with other administrative, governmental and social systems. So, I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in public administration, with a specific concentration in criminal justice.

**Wurtzebach:** I always have been interested in policy and public service. But, if some sage from the future told me when I was 21 that I would devote my career to *studying* public administration, I would have spat out my beer on the spot. Only during my first semester of grad school did I realize I really was interested in the specific mechanisms of governance. How do a few confusing sentences of legalese get translated into public values on the ground? How do public organizations navigate complex demands placed on them by diverse laws, citizens, interest groups and political principals? How do they innovate and adapt to new challenges over time? I chose to study public administration because I find these questions intellectually stimulating. More importantly, they have real and practical implications for practitioners and policymakers. I cannot imagine another field that would provide me the same opportunities to engage meaningfully in theoretical inquiry and real-world problem solving.

#### Why public service?

**Headley:** I envision a society where there is an equitable provision of goods and services for all, a society where the public sector is responsive, accountable, transparent and engaged with all of its citizenry, including those marginalized. Moreover, it is the realm of public service where there is power to ignite and facilitate change at micro-, meso- and macrolevels within society.

**Wurtzebach:** I always have been interested in public service. A lot of it has to do with my upbringing. Both of my parents were public servants, as are many other members of my family. Ever since I was a kid, I was concerned with issues of social inequality and environmental degradation, and it seemed like public service was the most obvious way to make a difference. In any case, I have yet to be convinced that a startup can do more for marginalized populations—of either species or people—than the public sector.

#### What does the millennial generation bring to public service that is different from previous generations?

**Headley:** Similar to other generations, millennials want to contribute to social progress by giving back or through civic engagement. But, for millennials, this contribution can be made at the intersection of their work and technology. Technology and other 21st century resources have provided us a unique opportunity to impact and engage in new ways. Also, we are able to maximize relationships and stay connected through social networks and technology. In my opinion, millennials are entrepreneurial, solution oriented and assertive, making swift decisions, multitasking frequently and thinking critically and creatively. This can be beneficial because it can advance innovative and efficient ways to better serve the public. Also, millennials are not bound by institutions and often take public service across various sectors. They do not try to fit into a system that is already in place, but challenge systems and create their own spaces to generate solutions.

**Kestner:** Millennials are much less accepting of the status quo and more willing to make outside-the-box changes. Most of our lives have been defined by consistent technological change, to the point where we consider it normal and stasis abnormal. Bringing that attitude to public service hopefully can lead to similar changes.

**Wurtzebach:** For one, millennials are skilled and savvy with IT and social networking tools in ways previous generations are not. Generally speaking, they have tremendous enthusiasm for the potential applications of new technology to transform public service, be it through innovative Web- or app-based public participation and outreach strategies or

sophisticated data analytics. At the same time, many millennials are less constrained by disciplinary or sectoral boundaries. Many of my students and peers are omnivorous in their studies, familiar with many different domains of knowledge and specialization and eager to work on transdisciplinary teams. Compared to previous generations, it seems we are somewhat more familiar with the broad array of policy tools that can be used to solve public problems and the importance of networks and networking. There also is a cultural emphasis on innovation and creativity in millennial culture that hopefully will be reflected in a willingness to innovate public service delivery. Finally, millennials are the most diverse generation the United States has ever seen. In terms of public service outcomes, this may prove to be our most important feature.

**Which public servant or public administrator is most inspiring to you and why?**

**Headley:** My undergraduate professor, Laura Kohn-Wood, and Ronald H. Brown have been inspirational public servants. Although Dr. Kohn-Wood may not be considered a public servant in the traditional sense, her community-based research and the issues about which she cares display public servant values. Through her, I first became engaged in research and learned its importance in creating change. She remains a role model and a lifelong mentor, asking only that I pay it forward as I advance in my career.

Ronald Brown devoted his life to public service; he served in the Army, worked at the National Urban League, chaired the Democratic National Committee and served as the first African American secretary of commerce. The Ron Brown Scholar Program, which provides support for high achieving yet economically challenged African American students, was particularly beneficial to me. It helped cultivate my leadership skills and continually reinforces the values of public service and community engagement. It is noble to do good work while alive, but even more admirable when others are inspired to honor your legacy after your passing.

**Kestner:** In the years following his presidency, Jimmy Carter has been a great inspiration due to the work of his nonprofit center, especially on the topic of disease eradication. He has been willing to put aside much of his life in the political eye to make a greater difference in the health of others.

**Kline:** My grandmother, Maribel Swasy, served as an Army nurse in World War II in what was then Burma, present-day Myanmar. She is 94 years old and talks about her service with pride and patriotism. She is a great public servant because she is practical and can make the best out of a situation with limited resources. She is patriotic, but a good

critic of the government. Like any good nurse, Maribel is sympathetic to people in pain. Following the war, she volunteered as a nurse with the Red Cross in western Pennsylvania and cared for burned miners following a coalmine accident. She was a strong advocate on behalf of her own educational opportunities and jokes that Penn State should rename a building in her honor after sending five of her eight children there.

**Wurtzebach:** Gifford Pinchot, creator of the Forest Service. He skillfully articulated the case for a system of forest reserves as a strategy for conservation and public benefit, and then effectively built and institutionalized an organization for managing them. It took a lot of political and administrative skill to do so, something critical for effective public service delivery. In terms of natural resource conservation, it created a template that has been replicated around the world.

*Andrea Marie Headley is a doctoral candidate in Public Administration and Criminal Justice at Florida International University. She holds a Master of Science in Criminal Justice from there and a Bachelor of Science in Education from the University of Miami. Headley's dissertation research, which recently was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics, centers on the intersection of organizational behavior and police community relations. She can be reached at headley.andrea@gmail.com.*

*Aaron Kestner is a Management Analyst at the National Governors Association, a position he has held since June 2015. He earned his Bachelors of Art in History from the University of Arkansas in 2011 and his Masters of Public Administration from George Mason University in 2015. He lives in Washington, DC. He can be reached at Kestner.aaron@gmail.com.*

*Angie Kline is a doctoral candidate in the University of Delaware's Ph.D. program in urban affairs and public policy. Kline is working on her dissertation, which studies how communities operationalize and measure social equity in local social indicator initiatives. She can be reached at adkline@udel.edu.*

*Zachary Wurtzebach is a Ph.D. candidate at Colorado State University and a graduate research assistant with the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute. His research focuses on the administrative aspects of climate change adaptation, science integration and information management in public land management agencies. He is working with the U.S. Forest Service on a project related to the implementation of new regulations for forest planning. He can be reached at Zachary.wurtzebach@colostate.edu.*