



Excellence  
In Government

# AWARDS 2022

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The Bureau of Governmental Research is a private, nonprofit, independent research organization dedicated to informed public policy making and the effective use of public resources for the improvement of government in the New Orleans metropolitan area. Since our founding in 1932, we have monitored and analyzed government policies, structures, finances and processes to identify critical issues and recommend best-practice solutions.

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# BGR Excellence in Government 2022 Awards Presentation

October 6, 2022

**Welcome**

**Norma Grace**  
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**Rebecca Mowbray**  
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*Samuel Zemurray Chair in Research Leadership*

**Merritt Lane**  
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**Introduction**

**Blake J. Stanfill**  
Excellence in Government Committee Chair

**Presentation of Awards**

**Lee Zurik**  
WVUE FOX 8

**Closing Remarks**

**Mr. Stanfill**

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*Thanks also to our host:*



# BGR Excellence in Government Awards

The Bureau of Governmental Research (BGR) Excellence in Government Awards honor local government employees and citizens for outstanding performance and creative problem solving.

## The Awards

**The Merit Award** recognizes outstanding performance by public sector employees. BGR will present four Merit Awards, with cash prizes of \$500 each.

**The Innovation Award** recognizes employees who have used innovative solutions to successfully address pressing problems. BGR will present three Innovation Awards, with cash prizes of \$1,000 each.

**The Lifetime Achievement Award** recognizes sustained performance over a career in public service. BGR will present two Lifetime Achievement Awards, with cash prizes of \$1,000 each.

**The Citizenship Award** recognizes private citizens who have worked to improve the quality of government. BGR will present one Citizenship Award.

## BGR Excellence in Government Awards 2022 Honoree Selection Committee

Blake J. Stanfill, Chairman

Susan G. Brennan

Jessie Haynes

Andrew R. Lee

Charles West

Norma Grace

Merritt Lane

Jennifer M. Neil

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# BGR Excellence In Government 2022

## Merit Award

### **Waldeen Mitchell**

Customer Service Manager  
Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans

Hurricane Ida significantly damaged many homes in New Orleans, including Waldeen Mitchell's. But for Ms. Mitchell, manager of the Sewerage and Water Board's customer service call center, it was time to go to work.

As she had done for previous storms, Ms. Mitchell worked tirelessly with her call center team in shifts around the clock in the emergency operations center at the Carrollton water treatment plant. They responded to customers across the city, while also detecting patterns in reports of flooding and other problems. They relayed their findings to help emergency operations staff and crews in the field. Sewerage and Water Board Executive Director Ghassan Korban praised Ms. Mitchell's ability to connect the dots, as if she "has a heat map in her head." Mr. Korban and Ms. Mitchell's co-workers also value her calm presence during emergencies and singular focus on S&WB customer needs.



And she works with equal dedication in day-to-day operations. Her colleagues say Ms. Mitchell, a former U.S. Marine, is strict about policy and procedure and expects her staff to be accountable. But she also coaches them and gives constructive criticism. Her balanced leadership helped the call center respond to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which triggered a spike in calls, staffing losses and a shift to remote operations. In fall 2021, call volume surged again after Hurricane Ida and the S&WB's decision to end a pandemic-related moratorium on collecting delinquent water bills. Ms. Mitchell trained her staff to respond patiently to customers and work out as many payment plans as possible. She has kept the call center focused on reaching its performance goals in 2022.

Ms. Mitchell has also become a leader for change within the broader Sewerage and Water Board. Understanding that the call center's ability to respond effectively to customer complaints depends on other departments, such as billing, collections and field operations, she has taken an active role in implementing the S&WB's new five-year strategic plan for operational improvement.

# BGR Excellence In Government 2022

## Merit Award

### **St. Charles Parish Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness Employees**

**Jason Tastet**, Director (current)

**Joe Ganote**, Director (former)

**Kristi Bernard**, Emergency Management Administrative Specialist

**George Dugas**, Emergency Coordinator

**Lee Hebert**, Emergency Coordinator

**James Kokemor**, Emergency Coordinator

**Jim Polk**, Senior Emergency Coordinator

**Steve Sirmon**, Senior Emergency Coordinator

**Brandon Touchard**, Emergency Coordinator

**Michael Tregre**, Emergency Coordinator

**Eric Zammit, Jr.**, Emergency Coordinator

The St. Charles Parish Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness does not let a minute go by without focusing on the safety of residents and businesses – quite literally. The department’s emergency operations center, or EOC, is one of only a few in the state with around-the-clock staffing all year long. The employees proactively train and prepare for a wide range of threats and emergencies. They collaborate closely with other parish agencies and are known for “going the extra mile” in their work.

Their dedication, expertise and leadership were central to the parish’s resilience in the face of Hurricane Ida. When other lines of communication were down after Hurricane Ida, team members working in the EOC used ham radio to request essential supplies and assistance for St. Charles Parish and neighboring parishes that also suffered heavy damage. Additionally, the team’s responsiveness and ability to find solutions when waiting was not an option were critical to quick set-up and smooth operation of distribution points for food and other necessities.

Outside of storms, the team has improved security in the parish. In 2020, the team played an instrumental role implementing a drone detection system to prevent



Front Row (left to right): Lee Hebert, Michael Tregre, Jason Tastet, Brandon Touchard, George Dugas, Jr., Kristi Bernard

Back Row (left to right): Eric Zammit, Jr., James Kokemor, Steve Sirmon, Jim Polk, Joe Ganote

attacks on critical infrastructure, which could cause catastrophic damage in the heavily industrial parish. When a drone enters the airspace near a government facility, chemical plant, refinery or other sensitive site, the system detects the location of the drone's pilot. This allows law enforcement officers to investigate and interrupt possible security threats. The team secured funding for the system from industries that benefit from the additional protection, resulting in significant savings to the parish.

With their can-do attitude and proactive approach to addressing diverse public safety challenges, these employees have consistently exceeded expectations in their service to St. Charles Parish.

# BGR Excellence In Government 2022 Merit Award

## **Bryan M. Wallace**

Chief Administrative Officer  
City of Harahan

The City of Harahan in Jefferson Parish is home to about 9,000 residents. Despite its relatively small size, Harahan is making great strides with economic development initiatives and planned upgrades to its aging sewer system. Much of the credit for this progress goes to Bryan Wallace, who became the city's Chief Administrative Officer two years ago.



Mr. Wallace played a key role in the city's adoption of a detailed strategic plan for economic development and its certification as a Louisiana Development Ready Community by the Louisiana Economic Development agency in 2021. Fewer than 50 municipalities in the state, and only four others in the New Orleans metro area, have earned that designation. The strategic plan and the designation will facilitate efforts to obtain funding for infrastructure work and other projects relating to economic development.

In addition, Mr. Wallace has aided Harahan in its efforts to secure funding to repair and upgrade the sewer system, one of the city's top priorities. The city estimates it will need about \$18 million to address those needs. Through state and federal grant applications, other funding initiatives led by Mr. Wallace and federal pandemic relief, the city secured almost \$3 million for sewer projects in 2021 and 2022, with another \$2 million anticipated in the coming months. Mr. Wallace is spearheading efforts to obtain an additional \$12 million for sewer and drainage improvements. The current and prospective resources would come close to meeting the \$18 million need without a tax increase.

In each of his endeavors – from building partnerships with public and private entities to revitalize Zeringue Park and honor Harahan's military heroes, to coordinating recovery and business assistance efforts after Hurricane Ida – Mr. Wallace has demonstrated great resourcefulness and dedication to the city. At his suggestion, Harahan has adopted the slogan, "Small Towns Can Do Big Things." Mr. Wallace has been a driving force in making that statement a reality.

# BGR Excellence In Government 2022

## Merit Award

### **Ira Wilson**

Principal, Strehle Community School  
Jefferson Parish Schools

For Ira Wilson, being principal of the Strehle Community School in Avondale is not a job, but her life's calling. She believes strongly in second chances, and the school she leads helps youth from across Jefferson Parish who are at risk of dropping out of school get back on track. Many of Strehle's students have been expelled from their regular schools or come from juvenile detention centers and find themselves at Jefferson's only alternative high school. Ms. Wilson ensures Strehle's teachers and counselors work closely with students to



address academic and behavioral issues and find the resources students need to solve the problems that hold them back. She also sets clear expectations for students that encourage them to seek their full potential.

Ms. Wilson has created flexible options at Strehle to help students earn the credits they need to graduate or obtain a high school equivalency diploma. These options allow students to complete courses at their own pace and are especially critical for students who are working full-time or caring for children. During Ms. Wilson's tenure, more students have also successfully transferred to a regular high school to graduate after a brief enrollment at Strehle. Before her arrival, more than 40% of students were sent back to Strehle after attempting a return to a regular high school, but that figure has now fallen to 20%.

Colleagues describe Ms. Wilson as positive, innovative and creative at finding ways to work through the obstacles that prevent students from being their best selves. She instills confidence in students and gives them a fresh start to succeed. School district officials note that she is unique in seeking out opportunities where she can bring her skills to bear, no matter how tough the environment.

# BGR Excellence In Government 2022 Innovation Award

## St. Charles Parish Assessor's Office Employees

**Timothy J. Vial**, Chief Deputy Assessor

**Cathy Albanese**, Receptionist

**Alicia Bustamante**, Administrative Assistant

**Constance Carter**, Residential Transfer Clerk

**Gregory Champagne, Jr.**, CLDA, RES, Appraisal Director

**Faye Christen**, CLDA, Residential Director

**Tania Joseph**, Homestead Exemption Clerk

**Kori Matherne**, CLDA, Residential Appraiser

**April Noel**, CLDA, GIS Analyst, Commercial Appraiser

**Joe Otilio**, CLDA, Commercial Appraiser, Auditor

**Hayden Petit**, Deputy Assessor

**Bruce Pitre**, CLDA, Field Director

**David Pizzolato**, Field Appraiser

**Ashley Plaisance**, Deputy Assessor

**Angeline Singleton**, File Clerk

Part-time employees:

**Alayna Cunningham, Mary Griffin, Clyde Jackson, Harry Zeller**

Hurricane Ida caused widespread property damage in St. Charles Parish. The Assessor's Office employees designed and implemented a rapid, accurate process for individually reviewing all residential and commercial properties in the parish – about 20,000 parcels – for storm damage and adjusting the assessed value accordingly without requiring taxpayers to submit proof of their damage. The team's goal was to proactively assist taxpayers whose lives had been disrupted by the hurricane without unduly delaying the collection of 2021 taxes. They succeeded in both respects.

The parishwide reassessment was an "all hands on deck" operation that began soon after the storm, despite major damage to the team's office space and extensive power, cell phone and internet outages. Although many members were dealing with storm damage to their own homes, the team completed the reassessment within about three months, a remarkable achievement.



Front row (left to right): Alicia Bustamante, Kori Matherne, Ashley Plaisance, Constance Carter, April Noel, Angeline Singleton, Faye Christen  
Back row (left to right): Greg Champagne, Jr., Harry Zeller, Clyde Jackson, Joe Otilio, Alayna Cunningham, Timothy Vial, Tania Joseph, David Pizzolato, Bruce Pitre

The team used a combination of aerial photography, exterior photographs from vehicle-mounted cameras, and field inspections of parcels requiring more extensive review. They devised a five-point scale for classifying the level of damage to each parcel and adjusted the assessed value based on the damage classification. Their method led to adjustments for more than 14,000 parcels and achieved an exceptionally high degree of taxpayer confidence in the results, with fewer than 1% of property owners seeking further reductions.

Throughout the process, the team kept taxpayers and other parish agencies informed of their progress and the anticipated reduction in tax revenues. Tax bills went out later than usual, but sooner than in some other hurricane-damaged parishes that did less extensive damage assessments. Crucially, the team's accomplishments allowed St. Charles Parish to collect property taxes in time to avoid revenue shortfalls that could have disrupted critical services.

# BGR Excellence In Government 2022 Innovation Award

## **Tiffany Delcour**

Chief Operations Officer  
New Orleans Public Schools

Perhaps no pandemic-created challenge was as complex – or consequential – as sustaining children’s access to education and the services schools provide. Tiffany Delcour grasped this immediately and lost no time developing solutions that responded to students’ and schools’ evolving needs.

Within two days of the governor’s order closing schools statewide, Ms. Delcour had organized multiple sites where students could pick up complete meals – an essential service for a school district where close to 90% of students are economically disadvantaged and receive two-to-three meals a day from their school. She quickly expanded the pick-up program by coordinating with the dozens of charter schools that manage their own federally funded meal programs and obtaining the waivers necessary to combine schools’ resources to efficiently serve students citywide.



When the Louisiana Department of Health rolled out a COVID-19 testing program specifically for schools, few districts opted to participate. Ms. Delcour, on the other hand, jumped at the opportunity. She recognized the clear benefits of the program, which offered regular testing, regardless of symptoms or exposure. Regular testing would provide a much more accurate picture of COVID spread in schools, showing families that schools were some of the safest places for children during the pandemic. It would also more quickly identify outbreaks when they did occur, which could ultimately save lives. Ms. Delcour worked closely with schools to ensure smooth program operations and build strong student and staff participation. Her efforts paid off, with 20,000 tests conducted during peak weeks.

Throughout the pandemic, Ms. Delcour played a critical role in developing, reviewing and communicating NOLA Public Schools’ policies and guidance for its largely autonomous schools. She made it her responsibility to gather as much information from public health experts as possible and understand how different decisions could impact each school. In addition, Ms. Delcour created opportunities for schools’ own health professionals – school nurses – to have focused discussions with medical doctors. The discussions helped alleviate unwarranted fears and built nurses’ confidence in their schools’ ability to keep students and staff safe.

# BGR Excellence In Government 2022 Innovation Award

## **Rachelle Thomas, MSW**

Social Services Unit Supervisor  
Special Victims Division  
New Orleans Police Department



As a social worker with the New Orleans Police Department's Special Victims Division, Rachelle Thomas works closely with detectives who investigate reports of sex crimes, domestic violence and child abuse. During the past five years, she has been instrumental in the NOPD's successful implementation of initiatives to expand the role of the division's social workers to better serve survivors and increase the amount of time detectives can devote to investigations. Key initiatives Ms. Thomas has helped launch include:

- Having social workers accompany detectives to crime scenes in the most serious cases to provide immediate social and emotional support to survivors, witnesses and family members in a manner that does not impede detectives' investigative work.
- Creating a guide for survivors that clearly explains the investigative process and facilitates their communications with NOPD and other agencies.
- Having social workers provide frequent updates to survivors about the status of pending investigations, which has reduced complaints against detectives for not following up.
- When an investigation does not lead to an arrest or criminal charges, having social workers coordinate an in-person meeting with the survivor and the detective so the detective can explain why the case cannot move forward.
- Having social workers help survivors complete applications for reimbursements for certain crime-related expenses specified in state law, which has resulted in more and faster application approvals.

These and other initiatives Ms. Thomas has supported advance the NOPD's ongoing efforts to provide greater transparency and more victim-centered policing. Through her compassion, dedication and leadership, Rachelle Thomas has helped the NOPD address complex challenges and improve its service to the public.

# BGR Excellence In Government 2022 Lifetime Achievement Award

## **Robert Graham, Jr.**

Director of Operations  
Lake Pontchartrain Causeway Bridge  
Greater New Orleans Expressway  
Commission

Robert Graham, Jr., has faithfully served the public through his 27-year career with the agency responsible for operating and maintaining the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway. The Causeway is the world's longest continuous bridge over water. Its two spans are each about 24 miles long, and neither has a continuous shoulder. Thousands of commuters and other motorists cross the bridge each day, and their safety is the number one priority in bridge operations.



From his early days as a vehicle maintenance mechanic to his current position as Director of Operations, Mr. Graham has played a key role in initiatives to enhance the Causeway's safety. Through his efforts, the vehicles that respond to emergencies on the bridge are more reliable, and it takes less time for first responders to reach disabled vehicles and move them from traffic lanes. This has reduced the number of accidents involving stalled vehicles.

Mr. Graham was part of the team that found a way to further reduce such accidents by adding safety bays to both spans. Located between the bridge's existing crossovers, the bays provide more space for emergency stops. The team also led efforts to raise the railing height on the southbound span, which has greatly decreased the number of overboard accidents. And for two decades, Mr. Graham has been instrumental in protecting the bridge and motorists during Southeast Louisiana's seemingly endless weather emergencies.

No matter the challenge, Mr. Graham has worked tirelessly to keep the Causeway running smoothly and safely. Although much of his work is done behind the scenes, his commitment to excellence at every stage of his career has been exceptional.

# BGR Excellence In Government 2022 Lifetime Achievement Award

## **Leslie Long**

Chief Financial Officer  
St. Tammany Parish Government

In her two decades at the helm of St. Tammany Parish Government's finances, Leslie Long has achieved a track record of excellence. Clean audits of the Parish's financial statements have become the norm, and the Parish has received a national award for excellence in financial reporting every year since 2003. Her careful management has paid off for taxpayers by helping to achieve higher bond ratings and lower borrowing costs, as well as increasing general confidence in the Parish's internal controls and its management of federal funds.



Ms. Long's careful management of post-storm FEMA reimbursements is a prime example. After Hurricane Katrina swept through St. Tammany in 2005, Ms. Long recognized that the Parish's chances of recouping tens of millions of dollars in debris cleanup and recovery costs depended on getting the paperwork right. She and her staff cracked open the federal regulations, developed procedures for preparing reimbursement requests and set up an internal auditing process to catch errors and stay on track. A 2007 federal audit commended the cost savings achieved by the internal audit process. Ms. Long and her staff have applied their knowledge to the storms since Katrina.

Ms. Long's colleagues could not think of a better word than "meticulous" to describe her management of the Parish's finances. She embraces her duty to manage the public's funds with a high degree of accuracy. She also stresses the importance of keeping Parish government leaders and citizens informed about financial matters in clear and simple terms. Both current Parish President Michael Cooper and former Parish President Kevin Davis, who hired Ms. Long in 2001, note the indispensable value of her thoroughness. And colleagues told BGR they often seek out Ms. Long's advice on a wide range of issues because of her extensive knowledge of Parish government.

# BGR Excellence In Government 2022 Citizenship Award

## **Andrea Neighbours**

Secretary, New Orleans Public Library  
Board of Trustees

Andrea Neighbours joined the New Orleans Public Library's volunteer board of directors in 2016 because she is passionate about the impact libraries can have on the lives of people at every age. She sees the library as the city's largest non-formal educator – assisting childcare centers, providing summer enrichment for kids, helping citizens find jobs, and guiding residents through tax forms and assistance applications.



In the fall of 2020, New Orleans voters faced decisions on three property tax propositions.

The propositions would have replaced the original tax for the city's public libraries with a tax that had a much lower rate, while increasing rates for taxes dedicated to several other purposes. Based on the City's plan, the proposed tax would have reduced the library's budget by about \$8 million, or 40%. However, information provided to voters did not clearly and accurately explain the proposition's impacts.

Disturbed by the replacement tax's potential to diminish library services and voters' lack of complete information, Ms. Neighbours chose to go public with her opposition to the proposition during the library board's last scheduled meeting before the election. She also spoke with the news media to explain the proposition's full impacts and her reasons for opposing it. The clear public opposition voiced by a member of the library's leadership drove new support to the Save Your NOLA Library coalition, a group of citizens and community organizations working to defeat the proposition and sustain library funding. Ms. Neighbours also volunteered her time raising money for the coalition, recruiting new members and distributing campaign materials.

Her efforts succeeded in more ways than one. Voters rejected the 2020 proposition, and then they overwhelmingly supported a proposition the following year that will sustain the library's funding through 2041. Ms. Neighbours worked closely with the board and other stakeholders to develop and pass that proposition. It will allow the library to implement a new 10-year strategic plan it developed with input from a diverse group of residents, public officials, civic leaders and community organizations.