

International Network of Asian Public Administrators (I-NAPA) Leader Spotlight –

REYNA FARRALES, DEPUTY COUNTY MANAGER, COUNTY OF SAN MATEO, CA
October 15, 2016 (courtesy of Cal-NAPA)

1. (General Background) What or who inspired you to pursue a career in local government?

I thank my mom for introducing me to a career in local government. She worked in Finance for the Santa Clara County Transportation Agency when I started college, and she brought home an internship application for me to complete. My first assignment was with the Airports Administration in the summer after my freshman year. I helped managers prepare budget requests and Board reports, and analyzed revenues and expenditures during the fiscal year. I got a chance to work with budget analysts from the County Executive's Office of Budget and Analysis (OBA), which is where I got assigned my next internship. I loved working with the OBA Analysts—they were committed to public service, fun to be around, and were great teachers and mentors to me. I always felt that, even though most of our work was done in meetings and in our offices writing reports, we were helping make decisions that improved people's lives, especially those who were underserved and most vulnerable in the community. When I graduated from Santa Clara University in 1989, I applied and was offered an Analyst position in OBA. I worked there for 3 years, then went into public sector consulting before going to the San Mateo County as a senior analyst in 1994, and where I am currently a Deputy County Manager.

2. (Being API) Has being an Asian Pacific Islander (API) helped develop or influence your leadership perspective or style?

Leadership is about individual intention, initiative, and the desire to help people. We are shaped by our life experiences, our education, and our own vision for serving the world. I was born in the Philippines and emigrated to the U.S. with my family when I was 10 years old. My parents left their home and successful careers to bring all eight of their children here so we could have more opportunities for a better life. This immigrant drive explains my focus on working toward progress, and approaching situations through a lens of opportunity for all. Being a Filipino woman makes me different from what most people are used to seeing among their local government leaders. I attribute my success to my parents and my supervisors and mentors who saw potential in me and supported me throughout my career. They made me believe that being different is a strength along with other unique qualities that make me a good person and effective leader. While I acknowledge that stereotypes and biases still exist, which can be really discouraging at times, I choose to lead in a way that values difference, that aims to understand all perspectives in helping organizations improve and communities thrive.

3. (Important event / Challenge) What has been the most significant experience and or challenge in your career that changed you professionally?

When I was in Seattle attending the annual conference for the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) last year, one of the keynote speakers was Verna Myers who spoke about overcoming biases as local government leaders, and valuing diversity and inclusion in our communities. During her talk she called out the different ethnic minority groups and asked those of us in the audience to stand as the group we most identified with was called. When she called “Asian-Pacific Islander” less than 20 of us stood up in the room of about 2,000. I knew there were few of us, but it was shocking to see. In that moment, I felt alone and isolated. I know I’m making contributions to coaching and mentoring aspiring API public administrators, but this really inspired me to want to do more.

According to the 2013 ICMA Membership Diversity Strategic Plan, less than 1% of ICMA’s full members self-identified as Asian American—applied to 2016 membership of over 11,000, that’s roughly 100 people. U.S. Census data show that Asian Americans are 6% of the total population at 20.5 million. We are the fastest growing multicultural segment, up 25% from 2009-2014, and projected to grow to 25.7 million by 2019. We need more of us in local government leadership! After the conference, a number of us including Ed Shikada from Palo Alto, CA, Rey Arellano from Austin, TX, Genesis Gavino from Tacoma, WA, and other city/county colleagues worked with ICMA to get a survey out to Asian American members so we could plan and prioritize next steps. Networking and coaching/mentoring came in as top priorities. We held a session at this year’s conference in Kansas City, MO to go over the survey results. We had about 20 attendees, way more than our past meet-and-greets. There were a few students and one manager from a community that was majority Asian. It’s exciting and fulfilling to be part of this growing effort. More to come!

4. (Tips/Inspiration) Do you have any tips for aspiring APIs in local government?

Many of my mentors taught me the importance of both technical proficiency and people skills to advance in my career. I always encourage those starting out to go into consulting for a few years. That experience of traveling to different cities and counties helped me make friends quickly and learn best practices that could be applied wherever I went next.

I would also challenge aspiring APIs to be more self-aware about their behavior when they choose to exercise leadership. Leaders “show up” and are prepared to engage in productive conversations. They seek to listen and understand all perspectives in their decision-making process. There are many low-risk safe spaces to grow more comfortable with conversations, including networking, training and coaching sessions, and volunteering for leadership roles in professional associations and nonprofits. You can also get a coach and other free resources at <http://icma.org/coaching>.

5. (Cal-NAPA related) What would you say to encourage somebody to join Cal-NAPA?

I often get comments from API women, interns and others I work with that they are inspired to see someone like them in a senior leadership position. I truly believe in the words of Pat Martel, City Manager of Daly City in her inaugural speech as ICMA President, that people

“can’t be what they don’t see”. I’m fortunate to have mentors like Susan Muranishi, County Administrator for Alameda County, and Charles Ozaki, City/County Manager for Broomfield, CO, and other API colleagues who encourage me and make it possible for me to see what I can be.

Cal-NAPA’s mission is to increase and promote Asians in public administration through networking, mentoring, and providing other resources that can help advance Asians to administrator and executive level positions. We have had successful events that include opportunities to get to know API government leaders, skills building and networking with other API local government professionals. We also volunteer to be mentors and coaches for our own organizations and our professional associations, including ICMA, Cal-ICMA, and MMANC. As we look ahead, our affiliation with ICMA will expand to more events and professional development opportunities. If you are serving a community with a large Asian Pacific Islander population, it is important for you to invest time in your own growth so you can be an effective leader for your organization and community. We are here to help you!

6. (Fun) What do you like to do for fun?

Fun for me nowadays is time in the evenings with my husband on the family room couch, working on our laptops while catching up on “Game of Thrones” or “Walking Dead”. It’s being together and getting our alone-time at the same time. Our son is 22 in his last year of college with a job lined up after graduation, and our daughter is a 14 year-old high school freshman who still needs to be driven everywhere, so we’re half-empty nesters looking forward to more time together in a few years. I’ve recently gotten into meditation, which I find fun in that I look forward to doing it and learning from it each time. I do 20 minutes when I wake up and 20 minutes before I go to bed, and it’s really helped with my focus and state of mind throughout the day.