

Standout Leadership in Facilities Management

MEET THE 2022 FACILITY CHAMPION AWARD WINNERS

-by Dave Lubach, Managing Editor, Facility Market





FACILITY MANAGEMENT

The Facility Market is proud to announce the eight winners of the inaugural Facility Champion Award, sponsored by Ferguson Facilities Supply.



More than ever in the last three years, the importance of leadership and creativity in facilities management has been magnified as institutional and commercial facilities have dealt with challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In many examples across the country, facility managers and maintenance and engineering managers have repeatedly proved their worth to organizational leaders and building occupants.

The Facility Champions have proven to be a cut above their peers.

"With the difficulties of the pandemic and now the new challenges of remote workplaces, facility managers have never been more deserving of recognition. The Facility Champion Award is designed to shine a well-earned spotlight on facility manager efforts," says Dan Weltin, Editor-in-Chief, Facility Market, Trade Press Media Group. "We were amazed by the overwhelming support of this inaugural awards program. There were so many worthy entries, we had a difficult time narrowing down the field to just eight winners."



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Ethan Fitterman

Chief Engineer, Marriott International/Gaylord Rockies Resort and Convention Center

"Taking the time to have one-on-ones or walk projects with the team has proven to have a positive impact in driving results."

It's rare to find a facility manager that grew up wanting to pursue a career in facility management.

Ethan Fitterman, a 2022 Facility Champion Award recipient, is an exception. He knew early on that facilities would be his eventual career path.

"For a few summers during high school and college, I worked at a golf course on Long Island for their grounds keeping team," Fitterman says. "This is where I first started to hear the term facilities. After two years of studying architecture, I realized that architecture was not my passion and decided to transfer schools. When transferring colleges, I found the school I was transferring to had a Facilities Management program which I knew I had to enroll in."

Fitterman, chief engineer of aesthetics for Marriott International — Gaylord Rockies Resort & Convention Center in Colorado, grew up in New York City, where he also started his career working as a facilities assistant and facilities coordinator with two different firms. His duties included managing small renovation projects, overseeing electrical shutdowns, coordinating contractor work, and also creating and processing purchase orders, among other duties.

Seeking a change in scenery, Fitterman found an engineering manager's position at a downtown Denver hotel where he oversaw central plant operations and HVAC and laundry teams before landing at his current position, one of the largest hotels in Colorado, that he helped open. He's been in his current position for three and a half

years. “I currently oversee our guest service technicians, craftsmen and rooms preventative maintenance (RPM) teams,” he says. “I also oversee our grounds, which I partner with our landscaping contractor, and assist with capital expenditure projects while aiming to improve our guest survey satisfaction maintenance and upkeep scores daily and manage our operational and contract budgets.”

Of course, as facility managers know all too well, those job requirements often require some outside-the-job-description duties. An example of Fitterman’s leadership was on display during the convention center’s opening months, when a new venue was just starting to get off the ground.

“I was most grateful for Ethan’s leadership one night our opening month we had a main sewer line back up,” says Gaylord’s Jim Obermeier, who nominated Fitterman. “Everyone was overworked and Ethan said he had it under control. Working through the night he and his team were able to uncover the problem. A contractor had closed the main line with a 4-by-4 in it; an intentional act of sabotage that reared its ugly head. What started as a clogged toilet call for one of his teams turned into a several-week

event having to mitigate and rebuild several rooms and a corridor. On top of all his opening responsibilities Ethan took this on and executed flawlessly.”

Fitterman defines achieving success by succeeding in two components: Communication and relationship building.

“I have found that sometimes you need to think outside the box and really hone in on your audience,” he says. “An example of this is when I send out a calendar invite to the departments that will be impacted by this work. In the body of the invite, I will modify floor plans in Adobe Acrobat and pictures of the area so the team is aware of the exact location and type of work happening.”

As for the second component, “I have found that taking the time to have one-on-ones or walk projects with the team has proven to have a positive impact in driving results. Anyone can send an email or text in a picture, but is your message really getting across? Taking the time to walk with an associate can be very impactful. This is where you really get to know someone and learn from them.



Nico Viola

Director of Facilities, Holden Forest and Gardens

"Success is measured in the constant improvements to not just the physical assets, but also the processes by which you operate."

Nico Viola describes a career in facilities management the way many in his profession do.

"Facilities is a field where normally the better you do your job, the less people notice, as most people just expect things to work," says Viola, the director of facilities for Holden Forests & Gardens (HFG) which consists of Holden Arboretum and the Cleveland Botanical Garden in the Greater Cleveland area in Northern Ohio.

As a recipient of a 2022 Facility Champion Award, Viola is being honored for his efforts to keep HFG's 3,600-acre facility among the best and most diverse properties in the country. The sites include two large event halls, a café, retail area, and two large biodomes — one named Madagascar and the other Costa Rica. The biodomes each have custom-built HVAC systems to maintain conditions identical to the conditions of the real-life climates in those countries. Both buildings require building automation systems to maintain remote monitoring. In addition to those facilities, the site has two research facilities with labs, in addition to all of the outdoor gardens.

Managing so many different kinds of facilities keeps Viola busy while his team strives to reduce HFG's carbon footprint. He's currently considering converting the site's vehicle fleets to electric while enacting other practices such as eliminating single-use plastic, building composting stations for recycling organic waste and doing lighting upgrades to accomplish sustainability goals.

During all of these projects, some moments are more special than others.

“At the Cleveland Botanical Gardens, we renovated an underutilized art gallery into the Perennial Playplace,” he says. “This was a project that I was involved in with our exhibits manager and the designers on from day one and personally oversaw all of the architectural design and the construction and installation of the exhibit. The space is very vibrant and well-received by families and children. Seeing the joy that kids get out of projects like this makes the late nights worth it.”

Viola has 20 years of experience working in facilities and construction management roles, starting as a maintenance manager at a large apartment complex before moving on to director roles throughout the Midwest before landing at HFG in 2020.

During that relatively short time, under Viola’s leadership, HFG achieved a 12 percent reduction in energy consumption through projects such as LED, HVAC and insulation upgrades. He’s reduced the fleet footprint by disposing of declining assets, replacing older and inefficient trucks with newer models that improve fuel mileage and reduce carbon footprint. He’s also worked with local and regional organizations to make sure that water runoff from HFG’s watershed areas does not cause damage to area rivers and streams.

All of those accomplishments qualify as successes in the facility management world, but Viola describes success in his profession in another way — by simply making sure everything works.

“Success is knowing that all of the people and departments that count on you for things to be working properly do not have to worry about whether or not the event hall will be ready for a wedding, or that the research lab is not going to have an outage in the middle of an experiment, or that a fleet vehicle is going to leave an employee stranded on the side of the road,” he says. “Success is measured in the constant improvements to not just the physical assets, but also the processes by which you operate.”



Doug Pearson

Associate Vice President Facilities Planning and Operations, Kent State University

"Success in facilities management is exceeding the expectations of your customers."

It's often said that successful facility managers need to wear many hats in their profession.

Doug Pearson, the vice president of facilities planning and operations at Kent State University in Ohio, agrees.

"The ideal facility manager must have Aristotle's logic and Solomon's wisdom, a priest's discretion, and a gambler's poker face, a lawyer's shrewdness, a marketing director's charm, a gladiator's guts, a marathon runner's perseverance, a sprinter's speed, a leatherneck's toughness and a dancer's agility," he says.

Not to mention, "Lots of luck, and 30 hours per day," he adds.

Pearson, a 2022 Facility Champion Award recipient, has seen plenty during a 35-year facilities career in K-12, health care, the federal government and higher education, including Kent State, where he is responsible for more than 8 million square feet and more than 350 employees across 10 campus locations.

The university is currently in the middle of the first phase of the Kent State Gateway Master Plan, an \$110 million capital improvements project that was developed coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic that focuses on better HVAC systems and flexible learning spaces to include remote and blended education opportunities, and smaller, shared working spaces.

A part of that project and one of Pearson's prouder projects is a \$9 million HVAC project.

"It's a front campus chilled water loop and plant project," he says. "This project will replace six chillers in three buildings with a centralized chiller plant with two magnetic bearing chillers. The chilled water supply and return piping will feed 11 buildings, improving efficiency and building comfort."

Like many FMs during the pandemic, work-from-home wasn't in the vocabulary for Pearson and his staff, which spent its time on campus transforming it for the time when students and staff would return to campus. The staff made HVAC modifications and worked with health professionals on learning more about and obtaining personal protection equipment (PPE) and created isolation dorm rooms before purchasing and distributing PPE and sanitizing materials. Pearson also worked with Kent County health officials to set up a vaccination space in the athletics fieldhouse. Despite all of the projects and happenings during his day job, Pearson found time to write about his experiences in a leadership book titled, "Facility Management: What Really Matters."

"The book covers eight critical areas," Pearson says. "They include basic human needs, emotional intelligence, change management, conflict management, motivation, recognition, power of positive attitude and customer service."

In a profession that requires the ability to manage many tasks at once and occasionally put out fire after fire, Pearson stresses that customer service is an important — even if it's a forgotten — aspect of facilities management.

"Success in facilities management is exceeding the expectations of your customers," he says. "Businesses expect facility managers to lead in a variety of ways — technically, socially, during times of crisis and during change. All the while they must control costs and improve service.

"In addition, leadership in facilities management should occur in all directions — downward to staff, sideways to colleagues and upward to senior management. We have the responsibility to develop the facility management department into a professional operation, train and re-train staff, establish procedures and conduct quality assurance and performance management.



Kristin Podwojski

Director of Operations, Variety the Children's Charity of the Delaware Valley

"My ultimate goal is to put my organization in a position to be a leader in the disability services field for the next 87 years."

The road to a career in facilities management is rarely a straight-line path. Even considering that, Kristin Podwojski's journey might be the most unlikely path of them all.

Podwojski is the director of operations for Variety, the Children's Charity of the Delaware Valley, located outside of Philadelphia. Variety is a national non-profit organization that empowers people with disabilities. The 77-acre campus includes a number of aging buildings as well as two greenhouses and an accessible 99,000-gallon pool.

She arrived at Variety with a background in Behavior Therapy, working with children with disabilities, and was a camp director, events and development associate before being promoted to director of operations, "because of her attention to detail, ability to navigate complex systems, ability to manage external relationships well, and passion and interest for facilities, fixing things, and saving money," says Dominique Bernardo, the Variety CEO who nominated Podwojski for this award.

Excess funds and non-profit organizations don't always go hand-in-hand, meaning extra hurdles for Podwojski in her position. With a staff of only 1.75 employees, she has a team of 1,000 volunteers who help with repairs and cleaning. The small staff also encourages her to get creative, so she recruited a team of employees from a local big box home improvement store to renovate the first floor of the campus' farmhouse that dates to the 1700s to use for vocational training for young adults with disabilities.

“Every cost-saving measure as well as every in-kind donation means more resources for our kids,” Bernardo says.

The position also requires a lot of heart. When the pH levels in the Variety’s pool were unbalanced and forced to close, instead of ceding the day, Podwojski improvised with various supplies and water toys to design a slip-and-slide water table to ensure kids still got their water time.

“In the recent eight-week summer season that our organization just completed, we have upwards of 100 children and young adults with disabilities on our campus on a daily basis working on education goals, learning vocational skills, and engaging in recreational activity,” Podwojski says. “Keeping the facilities in a high-quality state requires careful preparation, problem solving in crisis situations, and a watchful eye. The learning, growth and fun the kids are able to have is a testament to the work the team I supervise puts in as well as our organization as a whole.”

Fundraising is also an important part of Podwojski’s role at Variety.

“Kristin has brought in at least three new corporate groups over the past year to volunteer on our campus, which will have long term benefits as the relationship grows,” Bernardo says. “Kristin played a lead role in a new event called Holiday Lane that brought 1,400 people to campus in December and grossed \$30k in revenue. The event centered around our facilities and decorations, and she worked collaboratively with hundreds of volunteers to make the event a success.”

Though she has already made the unlikely leap in careers from Behavior Therapy to Facilities Management, Podwojski continues to try and expand her knowledge base as she’s currently completing her certification in Facilities Management. And she has set some strong goals both for her future and Variety’s chapter in the Philadelphia area.

“My ultimate goal is to put my organization in a position to be a leader in the disability services field for the next 87 years,” she says. “Having held many positions and fallen in love with the work and the people I get to do it with, I am determined to put the organization in a position to continue its mission. My near goals in the future revolve around making sure that the transition from our existing campus to the new campus we have begun building is seamless and not disruptive to the work we do.”



Brandon McCullough

Facilities Manager, Northville Township

"We need to continue to lower our carbon footprints...I can't think of anything better than promoting sustainability while lowering operating costs."

Brandon McCullough knows a thing or two about building something from nothing in the facilities world.

After a career in construction at Habitat for Humanity, where he oversaw the construction and rehabilitation of more than 200 homes in the Detroit area, McCullough jumped to Novi, Michigan, as the city's first facility manager.

"Novi, at the time, did not have anything in place to manage the facilities properly, and I had the opportunity to create a functioning division," says McCullough, a 2022 Facility Champion recipient. "Within three years the division was providing a standardized FM service to the entire city that included City Hall, police, fire, public works, parks and an ice arena."

Eventually, McCullough's role expanded to the Park Maintenance division, which included bringing in more than 30 employees under his management as well as serving as the city's representative on projects such as construction of a new Department of Public Works building, a police gun range classroom addition and an ITC storage facility — three projects totaling more than \$11 million in value.

The Public Works building, a \$9.8 million project, is one of McCullough's proudest achievements.

"The project was hard-bid and took up an immense amount of time to ensure the project maintained the city's best interest, while keeping on scope and within budget, both of which were achieved," he says.

Other communities were taking notice. In September 2020, he was recruited to another community, nearby Northview Township, to overhaul its building maintenance department. He also serves as a city council member in his hometown of Livonia, a city of 93,000 people and was recently appointed to the Michigan Municipal Services Authority Board by Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. The board works with fellow municipalities across the state to collaborate on programs, enhance services, and lower costs for residents. Among the upgrades McCullough has completed at Northview are:

- Created a centralized work-order system
- Created a preventive maintenance program that includes HVAC, electrical, plumbing and state/federal requirements
- Standardized janitorial services and staffing requirements
- Integrated the FM project into Microsoft Teams to provide a single point for project updates
- Completed COVID-related upgrades including installation of touchless faucets and flushers, sneeze guard shields, hand sanit

The programs have already saved the township thousands in energy savings and maintenance tasks.

McCullough's background as a local politician helped reach the people who are most important in local municipalities to get tasks completed – the people who are in charge of funding projects and getting their approval.

"I think that his political road plays a large part in (his success) as he has been able to put FM on a way larger platform," says his wife, Kacie McCullough, who nominated him for the award. "This is one of his strongest attributes and should be a strong case for his leadership."

No matter if McCullough's future includes another building job or something else as his career journey unfolds, he will continue a few basic focuses. "Keeping up with industry trends and new practices," he says. "With new tech, it's extremely important to stay up-to-date, and is needed during capital planning. We also need to continue to lower our carbon footprints. That needs to be a priority. I can't think of anything better than promoting sustainability while lowering operating costs."



Mindy Stevens

Director of Sustainability, Hinds Community College

"We aspire to have the cleanest, safest, and most efficient higher education facilities in the state of Mississippi."

When Hinds Community College hired Mindy Stevens as energy manager in 2008, the Mississippi college hoped to reduce energy consumption by 20 percent.

"We reached that goal within 12 months," says Jason Pope, the associate vice president for physical plant and auxiliary services at Hinds. "Mindy has never reached a point of being content with a certain percentage saved."

Stevens, a 2022 Facility Champion, continues to push the bar higher for energy saving and sustainability achievements at Hinds as her position has evolved into sustainability director.

Since that original goal, Hinds has realized energy savings by more than 34 percent — more than \$23 million in costs — through projects such as LED lighting and HVAC upgrades since Stevens arrived on campus. On the sustainability side, Hinds has earned praise from other state institutions for its work for its efforts in recycling and reducing solid waste.

"Due to COVID-19, the college has initiated multiple projects in our Facilities Management department," says Stevens, who says the college is projecting 50 percent savings from modernizing the equipment. "One of these projects includes new HVAC systems to help reduce the spread of COVID-19. We are replacing some of the older HVAC units with newer modern units. These units will not only improve indoor air quality for our users, but they will also decrease our energy consumption. We are not even halfway through the HVAC replacement process and we

have already started seeing a decrease in consumption and costs.”

As is the case with many public-school districts and universities and colleges, funding is always a challenge at Hinds. Often the budget can't meet the desires of managers like Stevens, who are constantly searching for ways to find energy solutions despite occasional shoestring budgets.

“One of the biggest challenges I face is the need to make energy efficient improvements and the lack of funding to do so,” Stevens says. “We have aging infrastructure that limits what we can do in certain buildings. It's very challenging knowing that opportunities to decrease energy consumption exist but not being able to move forward with the latest technologies.”

Achieving sustainability goals requires cooperation at all levels of an institution. Through the years, Stevens has embraced that concept, working with a number of state and local organizations focused on recycling and the state's Association of Physical Plant Administrators of Universities and Colleges chapter, as well as students, staff and faculty to accomplish these goals at Hinds.

“We aspire to have the cleanest, safest, and most efficient higher education facilities in the state of Mississippi,” Stevens says. “I define success in Facilities Management as providing safe, comfortable, and efficient structures for our faculty, staff, students and community to enjoy. This can be done in multiple ways, but I strive to make an impact through sustainability initiatives. We strive to reduce energy consumption, reduce waste, and increase recycling efforts on a daily basis.”

Pope knows that Stevens' influence extends beyond Hinds' doors.

“Mindy has led the sustainability program through many different budget cuts and employee cuts,” Pope says. “She continues to fight for the program even when some folks question the need for the program. Her activism for promoting the program is one reason she has become a leader throughout higher education in Mississippi.”



Dwayne Ellison

Assistant Superintendent of Operations, Scott County Schools

"I continue to learn every day."

Dwayne Ellison joined the Scott County School District at an exciting time.

He started working in Facilities Management in the Kentucky district as the director of maintenance, and since then, it's been one project after another for one of the fastest growing districts in the state.

"I have been working facilities for Scott County Schools since 2015," says Ellison, now the assistant superintendent of operations and 2022 Facility Champions recipient. "We have been doing the day-to-day maintenance and new builds at a pretty fast rate over those years with great support from our community and leadership, and having a great team of on the ground guys that know how to get the job done."

The school district's growth reached a peak from 2017-2019, when Ellison oversaw a \$100 million project that included the building of a new high school and athletic complex, an elementary school as well as the addition to a middle school and the renovation of another elementary school.

With those projects out of the way, there was another new project waiting for Ellison. With funding always an issue in public school districts, Ellison fought to ensure that a new high school would be completed.

"The high school project came in about 10 million dollars over what we were capable of paying for the project," says Daniel Wells, the district athletic director who nominated Ellison for the award. "Rather than just let the new

project fail, Dwayne worked with the contractor and all of the sub-contractors to get the project under budget. The project was then approved by our board and the ground was turned in August. What was once a dead-in-the-water project was able to continue because of his leadership."

Other signs of Ellison's strong leadership skills shine through both in the community and in other aspects of his career.

In addition to his duties as a superintendent, Ellison acts as school safety director and also coordinates a monthly group of 20 facility managers from Central Kentucky school districts to share issues and solutions with a group of peers. Outside the district, Ellison serves as a county magistrate and manages a 5-kilometer run that raises about \$70,000 annually to benefit sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) to benefit the Finley Foundation after losing a son to SIDS in 2013.

"Dwayne can negotiate a 100-million dollar building project and that same day fix a pothole or a leak," Wells says. "He is vested in his career and one of the greatest parts is he invests time into making sure

others in the same line of work have access to the same information and contractors that he does. He is a huge asset to our school system and our community."

Ellison is a humble sort who served as an educator, coach and principal before landing in facilities. He developed a knack for facility work when he helped his father remodel houses when he was younger.

"I continue to learn every day," says Ellison, who defines success in his position as, "when you maintain or build a facility that people feel has warm, enjoyable spaces, that has a very practical and efficient operation that meets the needs of its users."



Justin Tankersley

Senior Manager - Facilities, Firstsource, Ltd.

"I believe that facilities management is a career where you can continue to excel, evolve and be professionally challenged."

To realize where Justin Tankersley is now, one has to consider where he was over a decade ago.

Tankersley, a 2022 Facility Champion, was wounded in Afghanistan while serving in the United States Marine Corps as an Infantry Section Leader when he suffered a traumatic brain injury after being hit by an improved explosive device. Tankersley spent six months in the Wounded Warrior Battalion learning how to read and write again.

After leaving the Corps, Tankersley found a career in Facilities Management, which he started in 2014 in the credit union industry before moving to Firstsource, a global financial company with offices across the country and satellite companies in India, the United Kingdom, and the Philippines.

His specialty comes in digitalizing the facilities' operations and other connected businesses so they can operate on a single platform.

"I was part of digitalizing our entire facilities department including all our other geographies," Tankersley says. "This was built in-house, using Microsoft 365 and included asset management, visitor management, data center management, room booking and a work order ticketing system."

Tankersley has managed projects that value more than \$1 million that assist in operational needs. He developed a robotic process automation that forecasts \$750,000 in savings from the tasks that are removed because of the

digital processes.

“The lack of automation takes unnecessary time away from facilities professionals,” Tankersley says. “Through automation and digital technology, we are pushing the company to incorporate these initiatives to allow employees to focus on higher value-based tasks.”

Tankersley manages a team of six employees, who oversee 23 offices in the U.S. and one in Mexico. His training seminars also are used by the company’s other geographies to teach best practices throughout the worldwide network.

“Success in facilities management comes in two forms,” he says. “One is ensuring business operations are uninterrupted and the other is providing a workplace where the employees truly enjoy the environment that they work in.”

That environment is one that Tankersley challenges his employees to match his passion for continuing to learn and improve.

“The biggest challenge I face in management is finding like-minded individuals that believe Facilities Management is more than just a job,” he says. “Being the maintenance guy, I believe that facilities management is a career where you can continue to excel, evolve and be professionally challenged.”

Tankersley’s story as a veteran continues to resonate well beyond a decade after an injury that changed his life. He’s currently writing a book about his time in Afghanistan as he was part of the largest joint operations in taking the Taliban stronghold of Marjah, an operation that was documented by HBO.

“One of the biggest things that I think makes Justin stand out is his service to this country,” says Eric Johnson, who nominated Tankersley for this award. “Justin fought through a brain injury and has become the resident expert on facilities matters. He truly has worked hard and continues to work through the injuries he still suffers from.”