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Dear Santa: All We Want is a Little Respect

A 30-year-old City of Rockford, Ill., police officer was killed recently during an early-morning traffic stop. As authorities sorted out what happened, the public, the police department, and elected officials including Gov. Bruce Rauner mourned. Candles were lit and vigils held. Jaimie Cox was added to the city's Officer Down Memorial Page. Motorists were told to expect delays in areas around the funeral home and cemetery.

If that had happened to a public works crew member, as it all-too-often does, would the news make the local paper? Would the city council acknowledge the loss of an employee who contributed so much to the community's quality of life? Would anyone other than his or her immediate family and coworkers even know?

Is it too much to ask that public works be considered as important as police and fire? Public safety is a team effort. Dollar for dollar, in terms of services rendered, public works is more important.

Public works maintains the vehicles and equipment police and fire need to do their job. Public works provides adequate water pressure and flow to fight fires and arranges barricades to redirect traffic. Whether a disaster is natural or manmade, public works is the first out there assessing and reporting the damage. Public works crews and contractors clean up the mess and repair assets – stop signs, traffic signals – that maintain order. During the hurricanes this fall, skeleton crews in Florida, Texas, and all along the coast kept water and sewer service going as long as humanly possible despite worrying about their own families' safety.

No one reading this would denigrate the valuable service that police and fire provide. While you respect their work, I bet you'd like recognition for supporting them and the community overall. Public works professionals are humble people. You don't need top billing, just acknowledgement that you're an integral part of the team. If public works is the backbone of local government services, why does it so often take a back seat when it comes to funding and personnel?

It's not even Thanksgiving, but holiday decorations are up in all the communities I travel through during my daily commute. Their public works crews got the banners and bulbs and lights from storage, loaded them into trucks, drove downtown, and painstakingly wrapped them around streetlights and lampposts. The labor's not glamorous, but the results are uplifting. That's public works in a nutshell. **PW**

