

AZA Kicks Off Fifth Year of Professional Development Training Program for Potential Future Executives of Accredited Zoos and Aquariums

Silver Spring, MD (January 26, 2018) – Ten talented zoo and aquarium professionals will begin training to become the next generation of leaders of AZA-accredited facilities through the AZA's Executive Leadership Development Program (ELDP), now in its fifth year. Based on a survey of directors at AZA aquariums and zoos, it is estimated that there will be approximately 20 zoo or aquarium director openings per year for the next 10 years at facilities accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Knowing this, the AZA is proactively working to educate and train the next generation of leaders of AZA-accredited zoological facilities through the ELDP. AZA has announced the 2018 class, which consists of the following ten individuals:

- Linda Criss - Vice President of Communications, Akron Zoo
- Nik Dehejia - CFO and Vice President of Business Affairs, Oakland Zoo
- Sheri Horiszny - Deputy Director - Living Collections, Oregon Zoo
- Shareen Knowlton - Director of Education, Roger Williams Park Zoo
- Aaron Marshall - Director, Education & Volunteer Programs, Santa Barbara Zoo
- Hayley Murphy - Vice President of Animal Divisions, Zoo Atlanta
- Gwen Myers - Chief of Animal Health, Zoo Miami
- Matt Thompson - Director of Animal Programs, Memphis Zoo
- Gerry VanAcker - Chief Operating Officer, Detroit Zoo
- Wei Ying Wong - Vice President of Education, Woodland Park Zoo

"AZA is proud to welcome the next class of zoo and aquarium leaders to the Executive Leadership Development Program," said AZA President and CEO Dan Ashe. "The selection of these candidates reflects their strong commitment not only to their own personal growth and development, but to the advancement of the zoological profession. The 2018 class consists of an exceptional group of diverse candidates from various professional backgrounds and different areas of the country, who will bring their unique experiences and vision to the group and further AZA's conservation mission."

The goal of the ELDP is to develop the Zoo & Aquarium Executive Director Competencies, which are the behaviors, knowledge and skills needed to be most effective in this role. The competency model developed for this program emphasizes three tiers of competencies and includes:

- Executive Leadership Behaviors, which defines the heart and values of an effective leader and their leadership approach to *Inspire, Model, Challenge, Enable, and Encourage* others to deliver on the mission of their facility. This 360-degree assessment of Leadership Behaviors was created by James M. Kouzes and Barry Z.

Posner and is included in their book, "The Leadership Challenge, Fourth Edition." The book is considered the gold standard for research-based leadership and the premier resource on becoming a leader.

- Executive Focus, which defines the skills and knowledge an executive needs to possess in order to sustain a viable facility and includes Animal Welfare/Conservation Development, Board/Committee Development, Business Acumen, Business Development, People Management/Development, and Planning.
- Executive Oversight for Zoo/Aquarium Operations, which defines the skills and knowledge needed to provide executive oversight for each operational area reporting to the Zoo/Aquarium Executive Director. This includes Animal Care, Communications, Conservation/ Science, Design/ Exhibit, Education Programs, Events, Finance, Government/Legal Affairs, Guest Services, Human Resources, Marketing, Member/Donor Management, Public/Community Relations, Safety, and Security.

A variety of experience-based learning methods are used to develop the key competencies for the zoo/aquarium Executive Director role. These experience-based development methods will include forming action teams to address real and complex issues; having dialogues with current executive leadership to transfer institutional knowledge and lessons learned along the way; and creating a customized individual development plan. Participants will also benefit from leader and mentor relationships and build competency through relevant learning opportunities.

"Through this rigorous, custom-designed program, participants have the opportunity to further develop skills necessary to meet the challenges of sustaining a viable aquarium and zoo operation that benefits the animals in their care, their local communities, and global wildlife conservation initiatives," said AZA Executive Director Kris Vehrs.

"Throughout the year these rising leaders are connected with current directors to share their expertise and foster a leadership development culture throughout our community."

The development of this custom program, which launched in 2014, was a collaborative effort between the AZA Board of Directors, top executive consultants, and many current zoo and aquarium executives. The kick-off session for the 2018 class program was held January 29 in Monterey, Calif., with many other development events planned throughout the year, both virtually and in-person.

The executive development of identified senior leaders will be an ongoing effort by AZA, and a new ELDP group will be selected each fall for participation in the program the following year. To learn more about the ELDP, visit <https://www.aza.org/executive-leadership-development-program>.

About AZA

Founded in 1924, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the advancement of zoos and aquariums in the areas of conservation, animal welfare, education, science, and recreation. AZA is the accrediting body for the top zoos and aquariums in the United States and eight other countries. Look for the AZA accreditation logo whenever you visit a zoo or aquarium as your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience

for you, and a better future for all living things. The AZA is a leader in saving species and your link to helping animals all over the world. To learn more, visit www.aza.org.

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