

Profile



2015-2016 NASBP
President Susan Hecker

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Get to know NASBP's 2015-2016 President

WHEN NASBP'S 2015-2016 President Susan Hecker considers everything she's gained from her association membership, one benefit tops all the others: "It's all the friendships I've made," she said. "There's not a place in the country where I can't pick up the phone and find someone to help me if one of our customers has an issue."

Hecker, Executive Vice President and National Director of Contract Surety for Arthur J. Gallagher & Co. in San Francisco, has been developing those friendships for 38 years. She got involved in the surety industry by accident—literally.

"I was in nursing school, studying for an exam, cooking and watching TV at the same time. A pot of grease caught on fire, and I was badly injured, spending a month in the hospital," she said.

The hospital stay delayed her nursing classes, so Hecker accepted a job in the bond department with Fireman's Fund in 1977. "I really loved it, and after a couple of years I wanted to become an underwriter," Hecker recalled. "Back in those days, there were female underwriters, but they were either on the fidelity side of the business or in commercial surety, but I knew my passion was working with contractors."

With the support of management, Hecker entered Fireman Fund's training program in 1980. She remained with the company for 20 years, eventually transferring for a management position. When she left the company, she was running the flagship surety operation in San Francisco.

"I had a number of opportunities to go over to the broker's side, but never the right opportunity at the right time. Then along came one that was," Hecker said. She joined Lamberson Koster & Company, which had just been acquired by Arthur J. Gallagher, which needed surety continuity and creation of a construction practice.

Hecker has never regretted her move from nursing to surety. "I like there are tangible things you can see," she said. "I'm making a contribution and making a difference. Whether our customers are building roads, buildings or something else, I'm adding value to their businesses. Many families get fed and housed as a result of the projects I've helped those businesses acquire and manage over the years."

"I'm incredibly fortunate to represent a wonderful group of companies, where I'm a trusted partner helping people make good business decisions. It gives me an enormous sense of accomplishment. What we do is important," Hecker added.

Showcasing new leaders

During her decades of involvement with NASBP, Hecker has served on the Membership Committee and chaired the Government Relations Committee. She served two terms on the NASBP board as a Director-at-Large before entering the chairs.

As a long-time, active member, she understands how important it is for those with years of experience in the industry to share the knowledge they've gained with younger generations.

"From a talent perspective, our industry didn't do a good job of training people for a long time, so we have a big gap," she said. She credits Stephen Cory, NASBP's 2006-2007 President, for seeing that need during his tenure and setting up the 5-15 Leadership Circle Committee in response.

2015-2016 NASBP Leadership,
from left, Third Vice President
Robert Shaw, First Vice
President Lynne Cook,
President Susan Hecker,
Immediate Past President
Tom Padilla, and Second Vice
President Howard Cowan

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"The 5-15 Committee includes people who've been in the business for at least five years, but fewer than 15," Hecker explained. Agencies nominate people they believe have the potential to be industry leaders. NASBP leadership gives special attention to those members as they attend its meetings and schools, provides a mentor, and creates opportunities for access to the executives of many surety companies. "We're developing a whole group of young all-stars. They're ready for the national stage, and I can't wait for everyone to see what we can see," Hecker said.

Two of the emerging leaders, Bryan Ayres with LA Surety Solutions in Louisville and Chad Martin of TIS Insurance Services in Knoxville, will serve as her annual program co-chairs. "Part of the 2016 program at The Broadmoor will be devoted to these young people," she said. "We want to show their employers how their investment in NASBP is benefiting their companies, and how the 5-15 is helping their employees grow, which hopefully will result in a thriving business."

Hecker is planning a Leadership Conference on October 22, the day before NASBP's Mid-Year Board Meeting at the Omni Hotel in Nashville. Rick Ciullo, Chief Operations Officer at Chubb Surety, has agreed to sponsor facilitators for the event. "We're using a consulting firm, which is working with several of our Past Presidents to get feedback, so the program will be tailored towards surety professionals. I'm really excited about it," Hecker said.

She emphasizes this conference is not geared just to emerging leaders but is open to everyone. "I'm trying to create ways people can further develop so they can build their own thriving businesses—a component necessary to have fully engaged people working on behalf of industry issues."

Members' success is essential to the association's success, she added. "You have to be working for a thriving business or you have no time to be out there doing the activities that

move the industry forward. I want to get the message out that we're providing tools to better our companies."

In the closing paragraphs of her acceptance speech at the San Diego Annual Meeting, Hecker made a special request of the NASBP's affiliates to help create their own 5-15 Committee for emerging surety underwriters: "In closing, I have a request for our affiliates here in the room. Your young leaders want to engage with ours. We hear it on a regular basis not only from our side, but also from yours. I really do understand your reluctance to form your own Affiliate Committee to mirror our 5-15 out of fear that, when you identify your up-and-coming all stars, it may make it easier for people to poach them. But I'm going to challenge your thinking."

"Be brave," Hecker said. "Trust in your own thriving businesses and leadership to develop their potential so they will want to stay with you. We have a tremendous amount of collective knowledge amongst us to transfer to a new generation. Only when that's done will our legacies be complete."

She concluded, "Our business is now and always has been about the people. The best way for us to protect it is to invest in our people to their full potential and engagement together. I, for one, look forward to the journey."

Hecker is happy to report that evening she had four surety company executives come to her and each committed to nominate several employees for the new committee, with several others following suit since the Annual Meeting. "I'm very encouraged we're going to provide the platform for the next generation to begin building better relationships with each other, which hopefully will result in many more thriving business opportunities for all."

Limitless opportunities

Hecker knows the year ahead will be a busy one, but her family—husband Jeffrey, daughter Stephanie and two grandchildren, Morgan and Devin—are accustomed to her hectic



Hecker with, from left, William Painter, Cory Bentley and Joshua Etemadi



Hecker serving as a panelist at the 2014 NASBP Annual Meeting

schedule. Hecker is a charter member of the CFMA and a member of the Beavers, a heavy engineering construction association.

Hecker is a Producer Advisory Board Member for Liberty Mutual Surety and regularly writes articles, speaks to construction industry groups and represents the surety industry on panel discussions.

As an 11-year breast cancer survivor, Hecker knows how to overcome obstacles to reach her goals. She sees the surety industry as offering many opportunities for success for people who are willing to work hard at achieving their own objectives.

"There are no limitations on what you can do or where you can go," Hecker said. "Whether you're a young man or a young woman, it's a wonderful industry with a lot of opportunity." ●