

PHOENIX

PUBLIC WORKS

Phoenix water supervisor earns state honor

Matias Mendez stepped up for his city when things went bad

By Tony Boom
for the Mail Tribune

The Alameda fire put Matias Mendez, Public Works superintendent for the city of Phoenix, to the test in more ways than one.

Not only was the ability of Mendez and his crew critical to maintain the city's water supply in the immediate aftermath of the fire but Mendez lost his own home to the blaze.

His abilities during the crisis have since been recognized. In an announcement delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mendez was honored recently for his response to the Alameda fire, and his dedicated service to the community, as the state's 2020 Water Operator of the Year by the Oregon Association of Water Utilities.

Mendez was honored in two ceremonies, including at the association's conference in Sunriver during March and at a City Council meeting last month.

Two association employees who were conducting training sessions in Douglas County drove to the council meeting to honor Mendez in front of his city leaders. Mendez' family



ANDY ATKINSON / MAIL TRIBUNE

Matias Mendez was not only dealing with the city water situation during the Alameda fire, but he had to rebuild his Phoenix home as well.

and co-workers were present for the ceremony.

"Matias was selected for this award based on the type of person that he is, the letters of support from co-workers and staff recognition of the leadership he provided for his city over the years," Scott Berry, operations manager, told the audience of Mendez's selection from the more than 2,000 water operators in Oregon

"We would be here without the fire. The fire just really solidified in our minds that he is someone who puts in those kinds of hours and that kind of dedication to his community," said Berry. "We very much appreciate Matias and all he done for the city of Phoenix and for this industry. You are a leader in the industry."

Right after the fires hit multiple locations in Oregon, the association made a list of all the ways the fire could affect water systems, as well as remedies to limit problems, said Heath Cokeley, a circuit rider and program manager. They then called 60 water systems that were affected by the fire.

"We made the calls shortly after the fires. What was apparent and reassuring was that (Matias) was on it," said Cokeley. "He was dedicated to his duty; he already knew what to do. He was getting water back into the system and flushing those lines. That response was so helpful to the community."

Mendez and this three-person crew put in many long hours in the weeks following the fire. Crews from

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Ashland, Central Point and Medford came to help with the work.

Reservoirs in the water system dropped to low levels as leaks developed where the fire had destroyed service lines to buildings. By the end of the day after the fire, the crew was able to re-pressurize the lines.

"The biggest challenge that we had at that time was running water. We had to move water along so it kills bacteria," said Mendez. With little residential draw on the system, the crew needed to open fire hydrants numerous times to flush the system.

To ensure contamination from the fire hadn't entered the system, Mendez led testing efforts.

"Every service that was damaged by the fire, we had to run a test. We did it for the safety of the citizens, to make sure there was nothing in the water," said Mendez. An estimated 175 damaged water meters were also replaced.

Mendez accomplished the many fire-related tasks despite losing his own home in the fire. He and his son, Adan, subsequently rebuilt the family home working evenings and long weekends.

Mendez has been with the city for over 20 years, starting as a temporary employee. He is a graduate of Phoenix High School.

"Maintaining the water pressure, those efforts he made were amazing," said City Manager Eric Swanson. "He is very dedicated to the work in the Water Department, maintaining the system. He's called out all hours of the night when we have a leak."

As superintendent, Mendez also oversees a number of other city responsibilities. Those include parks maintenance, work on the storm drain system, road repairs and wetland mitigation.

Currently he is assisting with the rebuilding of the Blue Heron Park playground, Swanson said.

"He inspires his crew to be as dedicated as he is. He is very passionate about the community he serves," said Swanson. Mendez' knowledge of the city infrastructure and its history is very

helpful in maintaining services for the town's 4,500 residents, said Swanson.

The award is given "to acknowledge and honor an individual who regularly goes above the call of duty," says a framed certificate given to Mendez during the Sunriver conference in March. "They represent the (association) through their work ethic, integrity and servant attitude that they regularly demonstrate at their place of work."

Mendez was acknowledged for his professionalism, performance, attitude and care of the city's water system, the certificate states. He takes pride in his work, is extremely conscientious, does not take short cuts, is willing to learn, and shares the things he has learned with others.

At the council meeting, praise didn't just go to Mendez. He thanked Cokeley and Berry, who showed up after the fire with boots in hand ready to help.

"They came with a truck ready to work," said Mendez. "They found water leaks and helped cut water losses."