

## JENNIFER MCNELLY ASSP Chief Executive Officer

**Jennifer McNelly, the eighth person to helm ASSP in the Society's history, talks about how her background aligns with advancing the OSH profession, shares insights on ASSP's membership, and discusses her perspective on engaging the profession internally and externally.**



### Jennifer McNelly

Jennifer McNelly is ASSP Chief Executive Officer, stepping into the role Aug. 16, 2018. She has 30 years of association, government, regulatory and business experience. As CEO, McNelly advances the organization's mission to create safe work environments worldwide through the prevention of injuries, illnesses and fatalities. Prior to this, McNelly was president of 180 Skills LLC, an online career and technical education company, and president of The Manufacturing Institute, the nonprofit affiliate of the National Association of Manufacturers. She served at the U.S. Department of Labor as director of the Business Relations Group and administrator of its Office of Regional Innovation and Transformation.

### PSJ: What drew you to the opportunity to join ASSP as chief executive officer (CEO)?

**Jennifer:** As an executive, I am driven by purpose, by the ability to wake up every day and go home at the end of the day feeling like what I'm doing is making a difference. In being approached to have the opportunity to be ASSP's new CEO, I felt very comfortable tactically—having the right skill set. The next question was, does it align with who I am as an individual? That's more of a values statement, that what ASSP and what our members do every single day has noble purpose.

There isn't an element within the Society that in some way, shape or form I haven't touched from a technical perspective. I felt drawn and, even in the interview process, said to the board, "If you are looking for a strategic leader, I am your candidate. If you're looking for a technical safety professional, please don't offer me the job. I am not that person. I will lead you where you want to go. I see a future for you that you may not even see yourself." In the context of the opportunity to be able to do what I do best every single day, and in the context of purpose and mission, grounded in the respect of our volunteer leadership and an unbelievable staff—that's any executive's ideal job.

### PSJ: What's something you have learned about ASSP members during your first few months with the organization?

**Jennifer:** I am at the very front end of the learning curve for the culture of the Society and understanding what draws people, what motivates people. But I've made a point, with formal structure as well as informal structure, to build my presence and relationships within the Society as a whole. It started with the staff before I got here by connecting through LinkedIn. Then it started with purpose to spend time where our volunteers spend time.

One of my first engagement actions was the Safety 2019 Professional Development Conference Planning Committee meeting, led by a group of volunteers guiding what is one of our strategic anchors of education. Our mission is to diversify the profession and ensure that we have the right resources to improve the knowledge base of our membership, and to ensure that what we are putting in the market meets the needs of what members face every day. What better way to do that than to sit down and understand the nuts and bolts of how volunteer leaders come together, how practitioners come together, to develop a curriculum that more than 5,000 individuals engage in.

The lesson learned is that there is a wealth of knowledge across our membership base from a

volunteer perspective, from a member perspective, from an expert perspective. And that capability needs to be harnessed to improve the productivity and impact of our members. We need to help them be better at what they do.

I also had the opportunity to sit down with the Council on Academic Affairs and Research in its first convening—a brand-new council for the Society. Again, this is linked to education and the value of the profession, looking at what transparency we want to have as to what our profession is. I had the opportunity to sit at the table with the leadership that's been put in place to do that.

Concurrent to that, I have continued to build those relationships through LinkedIn. I want to be accessible to our members. One opportunity that has resonated with me was conversations I've had with a volunteer leader in Lake Charles, LA, who is responsible for member recruitment. I found out he was a veteran in transition and that a year ago he had tried to get his CSP credential. He was going to be recognized for his time in service in the military—20-plus years as a safety professional in the military. And the rules of the game have changed—that experience no longer counts. So, unless he goes back and gets an academic degree, he can't pursue those credentials. He and I had a direct exchange that probably never would have happened if I hadn't made a point to reach out. I didn't have the answer he wanted, but that's the kind of leadership I want to have for the Society, where we're member-responsive, we're thinking about the challenges that they face. We are anticipating before they are. We are leading them where they want to go.

Another overarching theme is that we're not just talking to other safety professionals. When I think about the role and responsibility of safety professionals, 98% of our nation's employers are small and medium sized. They're not large companies with big complex systems that can create infrastructures and management systems, yet that's what we really need to keep everyone safe. Safety professionals could very well be the lone soldier and be tired every day because they're worrying about keeping everyone safe. I think we need to amplify the voice of our membership to external stakeholders. Whether those stakeholders are government or industry decision leaders. As a Society, we need to keep talking to ourselves—that's how we build capabilities, what is best and cutting edge. But we also need to challenge ourselves to expand our sphere of influence to drive systems change in the market.

**PSJ: That makes sense, talking outside of the circle to have a greater influence where it needs to be.**

**Jennifer:** Correct. How do we amplify the voice externally? How do we ground that voice in good data, good systems, good decision making?

**PSJ: Safety professionals may take an interest in many aspects of your background, including experience working at Department of Labor, as well as leading an organization that develops skills training for the manufacturing workforce. Talk a little about those roles and what insights you can apply to advancing the safety profession.**

**Jennifer:** When I think about the Society in total and I think about our responsibility around community, education, the role we play in standards and the value of the profession, I think about our role and responsibility in influencing the global conversation. My experience at the U.S. Department of Labor helps me better understand the regulatory environment in which our professionals operate every day. And that poses opportunities to ensure that we are informing a legislative agenda and a regulatory agenda that will keep people safe and send them home at the end of the day. I think my experience of balancing both sides of the aisle to the middle helps to ensure continuity. In Washington, we can be driven by a regulatory agenda and a legislative agenda. Our responsibility as a Society is to make sure we are supporting our members and what is in their best interest and what needs to happen in the marketplace in both of those sectors.

My other experience that's at the heart of our education and value of the profession initiatives is the work that I have done around standards. Not specifically safety standards, but around the philosophy of transparency, specifically around skills and skill development. During my time at the U.S. Department of Labor, I had the opportunity to run two presidential-level initiatives around education and job training. If you look at safety with a broader lens of being a systems deficiency and skills deficiency, I can understand that. Equally, I had the opportunity to serve on ANSI's Personnel Certification Accreditation Committee (PCAC). PCAC is the review point for ISO 17024, the standard around certification. So, while I may not know our technical safety standards, I understand the process and the importance of transparency.

At The Manufacturing Institute, I was the chief architect of driving standards into public investments, education and job training. Twelve years ago, when manufacturers were struggling to find the workers they needed, we convened a group of credentialing bodies and said, if we can speak with one voice about what our workforce looks like and we can infuse that transparency into the public education system, we will solve our pipeline problem in the long run. Because it will be driven to getting people skills to a standard that ultimately gets them a job.

In the end, if industry is driving the conversation about what "good" looks like from a standards perspective, then that creates transparency on what something should look like. So those two experienc-

es have clearly informed the way I look at the safety profession. It comes back to amplification, but it starts with transparency.

**PSJ: You served as president of The Manufacturing Institute. Tell us about your greatest personal achievements there.**

**Jennifer:** I am grounded in information. I would consider myself an evidence-based servant-leader. Am I doing the right thing on behalf of the audience and constituency I represent? And is there a data point grounded behind it that makes what I'm doing solid and informed from a decision-making perspective?

The Manufacturing Institute was an evidence-based organization. When I took over as president, I set a goal for myself that said, if we are not funded predominantly by our nation's manufacturers, we're doing all the wrong things. If we're meeting our customer needs, the money will come. We asked, what did the evidence say in the marketplace? How were we behaving? What was it our membership needed? What was it manufacturers needed? I let go of a lot of things we'd been doing because I couldn't directly say there was a data point associated with it and that it was anything other than someone was willing to give me money to do it.

So, it was the courage to make difficult decisions to realign the agenda and, within that, two legacy activities that have formed the way in which skills development happens. One is the credentialing efforts, driving transparency between the public sector and the private sector. The second is anchored in the skill development and workforce challenges that our nation's manufacturers face, which is a challenge every occupation faces. That is, we have a changing demographic, we can't find the people we need, they need to have certain skills.

One other piece of research we looked at was the role that women played in the manufacturing workforce. At the time, women in industry made up 47% of the labor force and 27% of the manufacturing

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workforce. In the first research report I did with Deloitte, I considered that an untapped labor pool. So, I launched an initiative to engage more women and raise the visibility to help create a movement, now known as the STEP Ahead initiative, which serves to help women understand great careers in science, technology, engineering and production.

I can't say that I'm the only one who drove this, I would never be that bold. Somewhere along that journey, in my 5 years of leadership under the STEP Ahead initiative, someone asked me, "So, Jennifer, what have you done that's made a difference?" And if decades—back to Rosie the Riveter—hadn't moved the needle, what made me think I had? Part of that was a question of why am I giving you money? The other was, is my money getting an outcome that is different? There was a research report that came out just after I left. Today, the figure of women in the manufacturing workforce is closer to 29%. Can I take credit for that? No. The labor market did that all on its own. But what I can take credit for is through that program, the empowerment I gave women themselves to be their own advocates and to amplify their own actions is now documented in a research report with Deloitte. The 500 women who have been recognized because I asked them to go "do" have now impacted more than 300,000 individuals. That, to me, is the pebble in the pond.

I think about that in the context of the Society. If we think about our members as the pebble, and the pebble drops, how do we get the ripple effect to the outcomes that we desire to make the world safer? My legacy will be credentials and the role of opening up opportunities in the industry under a very different rubric that says, don't wait for systems to change. What can you do today? Can you talk to your niece or nephew? Can you talk to your son or daughter? What responsibility do we as adults have to help young people, people in transition, our returning veterans, and people who don't look like us to know what the opportunities could be?

**PSJ: You talked about the STEP Ahead program, engaging women in manufacturing. You also launched an initiative that addressed the next generation workforce, National Manufacturing Day. What was your most unexpected lesson in leading those initiatives?**

**Jennifer:** I think I learned the same lesson in both and it is the lesson I'm trying to apply here at ASSP (so, to all of our readers, feel free to send suggestions). National Manufacturing Day actually came out of another association and we were one of the first groups approached. Ed Youdell, at the Fabricators and Manufacturers Association, had a good idea that said, "If people don't understand modern manufacturing, let's open up our doors and invite people in." Good ideas by somebody else. Four of us came together to say, "Let's start this. Let's empower." Because for as long as I was at the Institute, long before, and I'm sure long after, the whole idea of the "Got Milk" campaign for manufacturing would come up. How do you drive a public image campaign around manufacturing?

My philosophy as an executive is that action happens on the ground. What people think about manufacturing careers isn't going to happen because I put a commercial on television. What's going to make a difference is to create an experience for somebody that changes their perception.

There's a report that we produced with the Educational Research Center of America that looked at student behavior specifically. What we found may surprise some readers. Through surveys of more than 12,000 high school students considering post-secondary education—at the point of deciding where and what they were going to do—what the research told us is 64% of students make decisions on careers based on interest and experience. That is the predominant leading indicator, followed by dad at about 22%, mom at 19%, an influential adult who could be a teacher or a coach in the high teens, peers at about 6%, social media at 4% and guidance counselors at 3%. So, the perception of where we need to create an experience was skewed. And according to research we did at NAM, counselors don't even think they're the right point of influence because they don't know enough about the market.

So, how do you create an experience? Manufacturing Day is an example of that experience. How could we get manufacturers to open up their doors, invite people in and build a movement? In the first year, we had 200-plus participants. I'm guessing this year there will be 2,500-plus, with a reach of millions with partners like The Discovery Channel now running ads around *How It's Made*. That, to me, is the unintended consequence of doing the right thing.

I do not feel as a Society we need to solve every problem. What we need to do is empower our membership on the frontlines where reality happens, to do what is right and best to advance the profession. And I learned that lesson with STEP, and I learned that lesson with National Manufacturing Day. If I had set out to define those events, outcomes and expectations—anything other than the expectation of do something—it would have controlled what has been an organic movement



owned by other people that's changing lives and redirecting careers. And I never could have scoped that out under a "Got Milk" campaign.

**PSJ: But in the end, the result is the intent.**

**Jennifer:** Correct—as it should be. That goes back to what did I learn along that journey? It's about enabling and empowering others to do, to have impact at the point of transaction. I think about that for our safety professionals and the role they play in their companies. How do we increase, influence and support their sphere of influence? We as a Society have discussions about the role that the C-suite plays. We want them to understand why it's important, why systems matter. But, at least in manufacturing, which I can speak to more, decisions happen on the frontlines. So, if our focus with the safety professionals is how they influence and inform the frontline—and that to me is not just about the safety practice, that's about the people who show up at work every day. It is that shared accountability that change happens with every person who walks into a company. Boy, that would change the outcomes of the global injuries every single day.

**PSJ: What are your goals as the organization's new staff leader?**

**Jennifer:** I was brought on board to help realize elements of the strategic plan as approved by the membership. We've now codified and updated both our mission and vision—who we are, what we do, why it matters—and our value statements. Associated with that are four pillars of action with explicit goals. We have a pillar on community with a series of strategic goals, a pillar on education and a series of strategic goals, a pillar on standards and strategic goals, and a pillar on value of the profession. Because of my manufacturing background and how I've been schooled by executives in industry, for every one of those we have objectives and tactics with key performance indicators (KPIs). Strategically as the staff leader, how do we look at what we're doing against KPIs in where our membership and our volunteer leadership has asked us to go. And I think we have work to do on that front.

Equally associated with a growth mind-set for the Society, I also see my responsibility to not just manage the strategy of the Society and how a top-notch team executes against that strategy, understanding the vision and their role. I equally have responsibility for the fiscal well-being, the infrastructure and the talent. If you don't have the people to execute, you're in trouble. I will look to pull forward into that strategic conversation, if we're headed somewhere with strategy, what does it mean from a talent perspective? What capabilities do we need to build within the Society? Where do we need to look at our offerings and make sure they're still meeting the mark? And to be okay with letting go of things or bringing new innovations forward.

Looking at our membership (and this is a broad generalization, so I'm sorry), in general it is risk averse. So, how do I take risk with a balanced scorecard? And how do we stage-gate considerations for what we do and how we do it? And how are we con-

stantly process-improving who we are and what we do toward the advancement of the strategic goals of helping our members make the world a safer place?

From a leadership perspective, I'm responsible for the whole pie. I may bring a different lens to the staff than what the staff has expected to date. I'm not going to sit in a corner office; I'm going to get out and have conversations and understand what people are doing every day. Just in my walk this morning, I learned we have a new marketing piece going out around standards, and I asked, "Have we used this phrase before?" The answer back was, "No." "Awesome, how we going to measure success? Are we getting the outcomes we want?" I didn't go to a director to have that conversation. I popped into somebody's cube and said, "What are you doing today?"

I want to be accessible to members, to staff. I want to support the directors in their functional roles as we think about the management of the Society. I want to look to the Board of Directors as our strategic compass, as the voice of the profession, and our member volunteer leadership as the compass that guides us as we are trying to execute.

**PSJ: So, just as with industry driving the direction of the organization, so too the needs of the profession drive the tooling of the staff function.**

**Jennifer:** Correct. The term that I've used is a *learning and development ecosystem*. Whatever we are doing has a cascade impact across expectations. We are governed by a set of bylaws and Society Operating Guidelines. But those guidelines are not in absence of how we execute activities, how we engage members, how we deliver value. One of our pillars is around education, and I would like to have an ecosystem that helps inside the building and outside, that is, first and foremost, customer-centric, regardless of where somebody sits. And second, that understands the interdependencies of that ecosystem. It's not us or them; it's not this chapter or that chapter, or this council or that council. It's about the interdependency of that ecosystem toward the greater good of the goals of our members.

**PSJ: How has being a certified coach helped you be a more effective leader?**

**Jennifer:** It's an interesting question, because the certification gives me a stamp—credible by a group like Gallup, an evidence-based data-driven organization—that says, Jennifer is a coach, and certified in that capacity and capability, and what that means. I think it is inherent in who I am as a person to create an environment of interaction with the people I serve and the customers I serve. When I think of my customer base, it's our members, our leadership board and the staff I've been asked to lead. I think the "coach" gives me a credential. But who I am is a framework of caring about all sides of how I help and support those who make me successful.



I learned early in my career that the most successful executives are surrounded by people who are smarter than they are, who they trust, who they build relationships with and who they challenge. And there are milestones in my career, including in the last 6 months. My very first assistant came back to me in an e-mail. A) I'm still in touch with her, B) the answer back was, "25 years of reflection, Jennifer, and here's what I learned from you." My greatest accomplishment will be the day that somebody I developed is my boss. That to me is a huge outcome. I want everybody to grow, to do more and to think big.

I actually think what the coaching certification brings to me as an individual executive is moderation. It has put me in the passenger seat of the journey of those who I am in service to. It is not my responsibility to drive their car. But I need to understand and help them understand where they're going and how they get there. Without the explicit certification activities, I don't know that I would have been as conscious about who's driving the car.

**PSJ: It must be gratifying hearing from someone you worked with and having had an impact on their lives, which then has a ripple effect on other people's lives.**

**Jennifer:** Yes. People who have worked for me have gone on to do tremendous things in their own right, young and old.

I'll share a story. During my time at the U.S. Department of Labor, I served in the capacity of what was called senior executive service (SES). It is the top level as certified by the Office of Personnel Management to have the characteristics of executive leadership in government. At that point in my career, I was in my early 40s. I was asked to be the manager of the professional team that oversaw the \$15 billion publicly funded workforce investment system. So, the regional executives who were all SES executives, overnight, reported to me. All of them had greater technical depth than I did, and longevity in their terms of service, and had not necessarily been respected for their contribution to the agency. You can imagine as the youngest person sitting at the table, and I think one of the youngest people approved by the Office of Personnel Management, for the SES, I had a whole lot going against me—age, experience and why this person? That's a lot to take on at that point in one's career knowing legacy systems that existed.

So, I had eight people who reported to me all around the country, in total 309 individuals in that cascade of teams. The day I submitted my resignation, I received a call from Joe Juarez, who was the administrator in Dallas, TX. I received what I would consider my greatest professional compliment from Joe, who said, "I heard there's a rumor. Have you submitted your resignation?" And my answer was, "Yes, Joe. I have in fact submitted my resignation." And his comment back to me was, "I have seen you do more in that job in your tenure," and my tenure was about a year, "than anybody has in my entire career." I didn't teach Joe how to do his job. I taught the team how to be a team. That to me is my long-term legacy. It's not

about me. It's about the people I lead internally and externally, and the impacts that they have.

**PSJ: Leaving things better than you found it?**

**Jennifer:** Correct. And sustainable, and everything else that happens when you are part of a high-performing team. Empowering people to do their jobs better.

**PSJ: So, your 1 year had an impact much longer.**

**Jennifer:** Absolutely. To me, that is the most important aspect any executive can have in the chair they sit in. This is why we have a Leadership Conference, the legacy of our volunteer leadership and our membership is leaving things better off than they were when they started because of the people who they've touched. That to me is what ultimate legacy is.

**PSJ: What are ASSP's greatest challenges?**

**Jennifer:** I believe our greatest challenge is how we amplify the voice of the profession to drive impact. Members engage with us because of the networks they build and the technical capabilities they gain; we are the go-to source on standards and education. Other people need to understand why that's important. So, I think the greatest challenge we face is how what we do within the technical expertise of the profession impacts the global outcomes we are trying to drive to make the world a safer place. That's a big undertaking, because for so long we've been focused internally. So, now, how do we take some of that and focus it externally?

**PSJ: What do you hope to accomplish in the next 2 or 3 years?**

**Jennifer:** During the interview process I was asked that question by the board of directors. I was asked to give my State of the Society 2 years into my service as its executive leader. I anchored my vision for the Society in what I'd call a BHAG—a big, hairy, audacious goal. That if the point is to make the world a safer place, let's make that big. I anchored it in a campaign around ISO 45001 and the importance of systems management, and the role that our volunteer leaders, academic leaders and member leaders play to impact the entire workforce. So, 2 years from now, will we have a big, hairy, audacious goal that we're all driving toward? I hope so. That is now a negotiation in reality of where we are as a Society and everything else we have planned. But unless we hang it out there, we never know that we'll achieve it.

**PSJ: Final thoughts?**

**Jennifer:** I wake up every single day thinking about the difference we can make. As I said to the board during the search process, "If you're not looking for that vision, I'm okay with that. Don't let it be me." But one of the first actions that I took on as the CEO was to pick up the phone and call all of the board members. We'd had a shift in our volunteer leaders and building relationships is really important to me. One of the board members said to me, "You presented a vision I didn't even know was possible." How do we do that? That's the challenge that I have for the team, for the board and for our membership. How do we be more than who we are with intent, purpose and impact? **PSJ**