

The Ion Expands Leadership Team As It Prepares for 2021 Open

The new hires will enhance The Ion's partnerships, operations, and community engagement strategies

HOUSTON - (January 8, 2020) - [The Ion](#), the physical centerpiece and hub for Houston's innovation ecosystem, is pleased to announce the addition of three new leaders, effective immediately. Deanea LeFlore, Dr. Jan E. Odegard, and Chris Valka joined the organization to operationalize and strengthen the Ion's offering to the local Houston community, entrepreneurs and corporations.

The Ion, the renovated former Sears building that will become the centerpiece of Rice Management Company's South Main Innovation District, is currently located at 1301 Fannin Street and will move to its new space in early 2021. The three aforementioned leaders will guide the Ion's activation and operations by developing and implementing a strategic focus on workforce development, academic partnerships and thought leadership, digital skills training, funding and networking opportunities, and resources for entrepreneurs at all stages of development and commercialization. All three will report directly to Gaby Rowe, the Ion's Executive Director.

"To grow the Houston innovation system and spearhead our mission for the Ion we've hired three new leaders with fresh perspectives, ideas, and approaches," explained Allison K. Thacker, President and Chief Investment Officer of the Rice Management Company. "Each individual has a unique connection to Houston and the Ion, and we're thrilled to have them join our effort to build on the culture of innovation across our city, and within the community we're cultivating at the Ion."

Details and credentials of each new hire below:

- **Deanea LeFlore, Senior Director, Community and Corporate Engagement.** LeFlore oversees The Ion's community and corporate engagement strategy and related programming. With a passion for promoting Houston as a place to invest, work and live, LeFlore is proactively identifying Houston's business challenges and developing new programming to take local businesses and entrepreneurs to new heights with the help of The Ion. Prior to joining the Ion, LeFlore served as the Director of Community Engagement, Partnerships, and Education at Station Houston, where she focused on creating high-impact programming and providing opportunities for Houston's diverse communities to participate in the innovation economy. Prior to that LeFlore served as chief of protocol for the city of Houston and a vice president of the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau, serving under four Mayors over 17 years.
- **Dr. Jan E. Odegard, Senior Director, Industry and Academic Partnerships.** Beginning January 1st, 2020, Odegard will oversee the Ion's Academic Partner Network, which is currently comprised of the ten 2 and 4-year post-secondary institutions headquartered in Houston, which include TSU, Houston Baptist University, University of Houston, HCC, San Jacinto and Rice University, among others. Odegard will also be responsible for developing further academic and

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academic/industry partnerships that will enable the Ion to fulfill its promise to be driving force in the development of groundbreaking innovations that support the primary industries of Houston. In support of this effort, Odegard will also oversee the Ion's cutting-edge labs which include a Human/Robotics Interaction Lab, an Immersive Reality Lab and an Industrial Prototyping lab. Prior to the Ion, Odegard served as Executive Director of the Ken Kennedy Institute and Associate Vice President Research Computing at Rice University where he supported a research community of over 160 faculty members to accelerate research in data and computation, and develop industry partnerships. Odegard brings 20 years of experience supporting and enabling research in computing and data technology and will bring his energy and experience to the Ion. Prior to his role at Rice he was a faculty member and department chair in electrical engineering and computer science at the University of Stavanger in Norway.

- **Chris Valka, Senior Director, Operations.** Valka directs the organization's ongoing operations and procedures for Finance and Accounting, Human Resources, Operations, and Facilities Management, and is implementing a broader, long-term operations strategy as the Ion prepares to move its facility to its future permanent residence. Prior to joining the Ion, Valka served as the Chaplain & Director of Campus Ministry at the University of St. Thomas. In his role, Valka served the President's Cabinet which addressed the financial, student, faculty and operational aspects of the University.

"As we prepare for The Ion's opening in early 2021, we are excited to welcome Deanea LeFlore, Dr. Jan E. Odegard, and Chris Valka, to our growing team," said Gaby Rowe, Executive Director of the Ion. "I am excited to see what this diverse group of experts will bring to our efforts to build an inclusive innovation hub in a tech-forward environment that promotes all that is great about Houston."

For more information about job opportunities at the Ion, please email Scory@ionhouston.com.

About The Ion

The Ion (4201 Main Street) will anchor the 16-acre South Main Innovation District and is destined to become the epicenter for Houston's innovation ecosystem as an inclusive, dynamic, vibrant and highly dense hub focusing on quality collaborations between entrepreneurs, incubators, accelerators, corporations and the academic community when it opens in early 2021. The 270,000-square-foot building will accommodate multiple uses, including shared workspace, prototyping and maker resources, event space, classrooms, food and beverage offerings as well as indoor/outdoor communal areas with shared amenities. For more information, please visit <https://ionhouston.com>

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