

Emergency assistance, operator training program helps systems

Since July 2004, public water systems that lose their only certified operator have had the benefit of immediate help. Under a program developed by the Kansas Department of Health & Environment (KDHE), the Kansas Rural Water Association (KRWA) has been responsible to contact and be onsite with the new operator in those systems within 24 hours. This program is available to public water systems that serve less than 3,300 population. Although the program does not need advertising, I thought explaining the program might help reassure some systems' governing bodies and administrators when facing the possibility of not having a certified water operator.

No operator? What to do?

When a water system loses its certified operator, it's a requirement for that system to notify KDHE. If a new person is employed, KDHE will issue an "Operator in Training" (OIT) license to the new person hired to operate the water system. KDHE



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then notifies KRWA of the new OIT. That notice from KDHE is the request for KRWA to provide help. The OIT status can be maintained for a full year. After a year the operator is expected to become certified. KDHE may grant an extension, depending on circumstances.

KRWA is required to contact the new person within 24 hours of notice, which also includes

weekends and holidays. Generally the OITs are being issued to small systems that have one operator. A new operator often needs assistance in knowing what to do on a regular basis. This ranges from chlorine residual sampling to performing repairs on the distribution system. The purpose of the new operator assistance program is to make sure that safe quality water is being delivered to the customers. The assistance will

Since July 2004, KRWA has been assigned to assist 78 new operators. KRWA makes at least one visit to the operator monthly. Each system and operator have different needs and operational problems. These range from purchasing water from another system to treating surface water. Obviously the OIT that is operating a surface water treatment plant is going to need more assistance than a person would that

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vary. In some cases, the new operator may not even know where repair parts are located let alone the application of parts and other materials. Learning how to shut down sections of the distribution system is nearly impossible without a set of accurate maps. The former operator may know the system, but the new OIT will typically not have any idea on how to isolate a line for repairs.

purchases water from a neighboring system.

In 2004, KDHE assigned 20 OIT's to KRWA. One of these operators worked for a private water system that is no longer in business. The operators in three other systems quit. These systems were then required to either hire a person who was certified or contract with a certified operator until a new employee was trained and certified. In most cases, the

From July 2004 to June 15, 2007, 78 operators have qualified for the new Emergency Technical Assistance program. Of these, 30 operators have passed their certification requirements, 8 have resigned, 1 system is no longer in service and the remaining are working to complete their certification.

Year	New OIT	OIT Certified	OIT resigned	System no longer in Business
2004	20	16	3	1
2005	16	11	5	Working to obtain certification
2006	26	3	1	22
2007	16			16

Kansas Rural Water Association staff are required to make contact with newly assigned OITs within 24 hours of notice from the Kansas Department of Health & Environment, and to provide assistance as necessary, 365 days per year.

contract operator already is employed by a neighboring water system. The other 16 OITs have passed the certification examinations and are now certified operators.

In 2005, another 16 OIT's were assigned by KDHE. From this group, 5 operators did not continue to work for the individual water systems. Those entities were then required to hire or contract with a certified operator. The remaining 11 OIT's have passed their certification requirements.

From 2004 to 2005, nine (9) of the 36 OITs discontinued their work for the water systems they were employed by.

In 2006, 26 OITs were identified. One OIT found other employment when conflicts arose with the city council. The council was micro-managing the day to day duties of the employee, who was not willing to put up with their interference. As of June 1, 2007, three additional OIT's have completed their certification. The remaining 22 have not completed their OIT requirements to obtain certification. In 2007, 16 more OIT's were identified from January 1 to June 20.

Why does the operator quit after being hired as the OIT?

Often, a new operator may be the only employee. Not only does the operator need to "keep things running," he/she may have inherited a long-time history of issues in a problem water system. Another reason for not staying is a conflict with the board/council; micro-managing can be very counter-productive. Also being on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, can be unattractive to some people.

The main thing for water systems to focus on is that there is help available for new operators. Every person goes through a learning process for a new job and must be allowed to attend training and be given the tools needed to do their job. Without the support

Two new operators say "Thanks!"

The Emergency Operator Assistance program was very worthwhile to me and the City of Esbon. I started this job with no experience of working for a water system. I was an auto mechanic for years. As a new operator my first experience with KDHE was when Marsha Carpenter with the North-Central District office in Salina performed an inspection for the city. As a new operator, KRWA Tech Doug Guenther worked with me extensively; he provided needed information and assistance to help me in this job. When I began work for the city, records indicated we were losing more than 30% of our water. We used our own wells and also purchased water from a neighboring rural water district. Doug assisted in testing meters for accuracy and locating water leaks. We are now operating with a water loss of 10% or less every month. I was interested in learning all I could in order to pass the operator certification exam. I attended training sessions sponsored by KRWA, KDHE and other providers. Without the assistance of KDHE and KRWA, I don't think that I would be the operator for the City of Esbon. Without the assistance of KRWA most of the smaller cities would not be able to afford the training and help needed. Your assistance and patience has been exceptional."

– Robert Wumuller, City of Esbon

The assistance provided by KRWA was extremely important for a new operator. KRWA Tech Lonnie Boller assisted in every facet of this job when needed. This ranged from chlorine monitoring, sampling, reporting, sampling plans, etc. I attended training sponsored by KRWA and Lonnie also assisted in studying for my certification. The Emergency Technical Assistance program was very beneficial to me and the City of Maple Hill in providing safe water to our customers.

– Tom Mayer, City of Maple Hill

of the governing body, new operators have an uphill battle.

Thanks to KDHE's vision to address the needs of new operators. As a result of the program, new operators gain confidence; they appreciate the helping hand that KRWA provides.

One requirement of a water system is to notify KDHE if the

system loses their only certified operator. KDHE will need to know the name, address and phone numbers of the new operator before issuing an OIT license. Contact Vickie Wessel at 785/296-5511 with KDHE.

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