

How to Deal With the Single Most Critical Resource Any Rural Utility Has – PEOPLE



The folks in Hayti Heights, Missouri, located about an hour and a half from Memphis, in the Missouri Bootheel, had a discouraging start to the New Year 2010. Their 2003 state of the art water treatment plant, paid for by a grant that included money for operations and maintenance, wasn't operating at all. Not only did the 780 residents of one of Missouri's poorest communities have no water, many of them had raw sewage bubbling up in their bathtubs, because the lift station pumps on the wastewater collection system were broken. With the town in financial shambles and no salaries paid, there was no one to run the water plant. And rumors were that the check to the repair service company had bounced, so no one would fix the lift station pumps. Luckily, the Missouri Rural Water Association (MRWA) responded to a request for help from

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the Missouri Department of Revenue, and sent two Circuit Riders to the rescue. With additional help from surrounding cities, including Caruthersville and Kennett, they were able to get the water back on within five days and the sewage cleaned up. MRWA will continue to operate the water/wastewater system until the Missouri Attorney General's office can file a petition for a receivership. The most likely outcome is that a neighboring town or rural water system

will step up to the plate and agree to operate the system, but it seems unlikely that Hayti Heights will ever have control of its own water/wastewater system again.

For those of us who work in rural utilities, this scenario seems puzzling. Natural disasters like tornados, freezing temperatures or even earthquakes are all scenarios that we plan for and are the "normal" reasons for service interruption. Operating a fully paid for, state of the art water treatment plant seems like a no-brainer. But this wasn't a natural disaster – this was "people" disaster – a complete failure of management to keep qualified people running the system. Even the best infrastructure in the world is only as good as the people running it. Never forget that people are the most precious resource any utility system has, and the smaller the system, the more scarce that resource is.

In Part 1 of this article in the March 2009 *Kansas Lifeline*, I described some “people disaster” scenarios that occurred at apparently well run, financially stable utilities when they lost a key person. In this article, I am going to discuss some steps for evaluating possible emergency management weaknesses and then discuss some possible solutions. For small utilities, where one or two key people virtually run the entire system, losing one person can be the biggest catastrophic failure the utility ever faces and it is possible that, like Hayti Heights, the utility may NOT be able to recover. There are some innovative and practical ideas that boards can implement in order to avoid these problems but first the boards have to realize that there is a problem.

And this is largely a silent problem for most rural utilities. If you asked a typical RWD board or city council what they needed most for emergency planning, they would easily be able to list things like back-up generators, off-site computer storage, communications systems or long-term items like emergency water interconnects or more storage. But few boards would ever identify personnel as a key short- or long-term component of emergency planning, even though they are aware that they need trained people to operate the utilities. Small utilities have never been able to afford to hire backup personnel and train understudies for every job, so they get out of the habit of thinking of people as an asset. Losing that key person is a problem for any utility, but it can be catastrophic for a small utility with only one person who can do a specific job. Larger utilities have assistant managers and emergency calling trees and at least two people who can do any given job. Small utilities do not. Small utilities must look in the mirror and analyze themselves in order to avoid “people disasters”.

Remember, the “disaster” we are planning for is the sudden absence of the key person who handles these tasks, not an actual natural disaster. So identifying what that person does is the

So how does a small water system plan for a people emergency when it is not economically feasible for it to keep “extra” employees on the payroll? A great place to start is by approaching it the same way that a small city or RWD would approach other emergency planning and using a task-based approach:

- **Identify the core tasks for immediate operations for 30 days.**
- **Identify a short-term solution for completion of the tasks, while you work on replacing the key person.**

first step in developing a plan. Asking the key employees (and this includes board managers!) to write down the steps of daily functions and the location of essential documents is a great place to start. This may never have been done before and it also has the advantage of helping the board/council prepare good job descriptions for overall employee management. It will also allow the governing body to take that list of core

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tasks and figure out who can perform them during the initial 30-day window. Another approach is to examine the existing informal practices that the employees themselves may have for vacations. Usually when employees are on vacation or out sick, the core tasks are the tasks that are performed by default. For example, how did the office manager handle daily deposits and phone answering when she was on vacation? She probably didn’t worry about getting the CCR prepared but she certainly had to make sure that the phones were covered. If the field operations employee had to have back surgery, how was his job handled while he was on sick leave? He didn’t worry about running a new water line extension, but he had to make sure that new meters were installed in his absence.



Graphic by Linda Winder

This may seem overwhelming and it is tempting to include every task from water shut-offs to the annual audit as a core task. Keep the focus narrow and think about triaging the tasks. Core tasks are those that must be performed day in and day out in order to keep the taps flowing or the toilets flushing. In the short term, repairing a leak or getting a blown pump motor replaced would be more important than shutting off service. Taking the call for that leak or making the daily bank deposit would be more important than preparing the annual audit.

Also, do not confuse these core tasks with capturing historical information about the system that may be located in the head of one of the key employees. If you have that proverbial field operations guy, the one who has been with the city or RWD for 20 or 40 years, the only one who knows every foot of pipe in the ground and where every connection is located, the only one who knows where the actual boundaries are, then you MUST work long-term to capture that knowledge before you lose it. The time has come to invest in a system map and spend the

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money to have professionals work with that employee to map the system. The same goes for office functions. If a system has one clerk who is the only one who knows where all the original incorporation or other important documents are located and is the only person who keeps track of employee vacation days or customer lists, then the entity needs to capture that knowledge as well. This is part of proper human resource management, but it is not the same thing as planning for a people disaster by identifying the core tasks. This should all be accomplished on a different track and ideally before you develop the list of core tasks.

A broad outline of core tasks could be:

Office

- answering phones in order to handle requests for service or reports of leaks
- billing
- making deposits and accepting payments

Field

- maintaining pump operations/storage levels
- detecting/repairing leaks
- maintaining disinfection operations
- meter reading

This is intended to be a starting place. The end result would be a short list of core tasks, with a separate sheet for each task. That “cheat sheet” would reference to the location of the materials or documents necessary to complete each task, as well as a list of the steps required to complete the task, plus any outside reference sources. For example, if the core task is running monthly bills, then the cheat sheet would list steps needed to generate the bills using the billing system and have the phone number of the billing software tech support listed. Or it might outline the steps needed to post a payment to a customer account.

After fleshing out this list of tasks the next step is to figure out a way to get those tasks performed for the next 30 days if the employee who does them is suddenly GONE. This is where it pays to be creative and also start thinking about “human backup systems.” This approach applies to managers as well. If the manager signs the paychecks, or submits the timesheets, then that is a core task, but there is also a need to identify who may be legally allowed to perform that task in his/her absence. Most core tasks that a manager performs will need to be handled or at a minimum, supervised by the board or council. The reality is that if a manager disappears, the governing body will have no choice but to go back to taking over those management functions themselves.

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When it comes to planning for performance of the core tasks, look in-house and also, be ready to outsource. The underlying assumption is that in rural communities there may not be a readily available source of specialized labor to cover these tasks and the small city or RWD may not have a readily available source of cash to throw at the problem. Trust me on this one: you are not going to be able to call the local employment agency and ask for a utility clerk or a licensed operator. I have tried! So get creative and cooperative. In small systems, it is common for the field staff to have a pretty good idea of how to answer the phones or handle requests for new service. Or even how to make bank deposits. Are there board/council members or staff who could be cross-trained to handle some of the core office tasks? Could the system make an arrangement with the accountant, who should be familiar with the books, to cover some of the bookkeeping tasks?

Reaching out to surrounding cities and districts is also going to be a key part of this plan. What if you offered to work with another district or city and cross train your employees to handle some of the core tasks? The billing clerk for a nearby town could probably figure out how to generate bills with some simple advance training once or twice a year. Likewise, reach out to other systems with certified operators and offer to send your operator over to become familiar with their system, if they will do the same for you. I have always gotten the blessing from regulators when I needed to “borrow” a licensed operator for short-term operations.

Emergency repairs that occur during this period as well as meter installation could be handled cooperatively as well with nearby communities. If you had a standing agreement to provide assistance and you became mutually familiar with one another’s systems and meters, then you have the beginnings of a solid mutual aid

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relationship that could address short-term system repairs. Rural fire departments do this all the time. In fact, as I am sure you know, they have formal mutual aid agreements that allow them to provide extra personnel and equipment to one another on a fire-by-fire basis. This model is the basis for a solid plan to covers the core tasks in the event you lose a key employee.

I am fully aware that state rural water associations provide all sorts of emergency technical help. But even KRWA may not have the folks available all the time, or they may need additional warm bodies to do the job. Remember, that is what happened in Hayti Heights. MRWA stepped in with licensed Circuit Riders, but they needed help themselves from nearby towns. Also, as you are planning for a 30-day window, it is not realistic to expect the Association to provide staff for that long.

The same planning process can work with managers as well. If two managers of nearby cities or RWDs had a plan in place to cover for each other on core tasks, and their staff and boards were up to date on this plan, then a small system could buy itself enough time to conduct a job search for a replacement manager. I worked with a RWD once that was able to do this when we knew the manager was going to have back surgery and be unavailable for six weeks. The manager from the next district actually

came to a board meeting, met the employees and the board and got a crash course in the core tasks before the manager left. It worked really well, and the system was able to return the favor when that manager’s daughter was in a car accident.

Another avenue to explore is setting up a back-up plan with a for-profit utility management company. Some utility management companies will provide a manager or other key staff on a short-term contract basis.

However, most of them will want at least a 6-month commitment and that costs premium. And if they do provide this service, they do so in the hopes that the city or RWD will turn over all the system operations to them under a contract. So go into that scenario with your eyes wide open and work closely with your manager, if you have one, to come up with a way to cover his core tasks in the event of his unexpected absence.

The reality is that many small utilities may have already figured out ways to cover some of the core tasks without even realizing it. It may be natural to call the clerk in the nearby city or RWD if you use the same software and can’t get your bills to print. Or to forward the office line to the field operator’s cell phone if you are on vacation. Or for the assistant operator to call the certified operator in the next town for help with a frozen check valve. All these arrangements may be in place but just not codified in a formal written plan. Those of us who live in rural communities have always helped out neighbors in times of need. Rural utility systems just need to take that approach one step further!

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