

# Operator-In-Training Program Appreciated by New Operators in Kansas

**A**mong all the programs that are aimed at helping water systems, I think that the Operator-In-Training program has to rank very high. It's not because KRWA operates it; it's not because KDHE funds it; it's because the program ensures that new operators can obtain help. They sign on with a smaller town or rural water system, often with no experience. How are they to ensure that the system operates satisfactorily and maintains all the necessary regulatory compliances? Thanks to the funding through KDHE, KRWA has been able to meet with the new operators and help them with issues from daily chlorine residuals to replacing

inoperable mainline valves. I want to provide several cases involving the operation of the OIT program.

**Case 1:** Water Superintendent Clem was assigned the position of the lead operator after his predecessor Joe retired and moved to another state. Clem was expecting to receive a salary increase and looked forward to advertising for a helper. During the monthly meeting of the governing

body, Clem discovered that instead of receiving the increase he was expecting, he instead was informed there would be none and that he would also assume additional duties because a new operator would not be hired to replace Joe.



**Aaron Leach, City of Highland, monitors water quality from the city's ground water supply.**

*"Reviewing books and taking online quizzes helps prepare a person for taking a certification examination, but they are not a good substitute for meeting face-to-face with a KRWA staff member each month."*



**Christal Mann, City of St. George, watches as a contractor begins to cut through a street for a line repair.**

*"The Operator-In-Training program, along with the study handbooks and the staff with the Kansas Rural Water Association are very helpful. The classes that the KRWA put on are very beneficial for operators and OITs. The speakers at these classes are very knowledgeable and are willing to help. The OIT program is a great way to help people that want to go into the field of water and wastewater. Thank You, for all of the help with everything."*



**Adrienne Fenney, Dickinson RWD 1, checks chlorine residuals.**

*"The 'OIT' program through KRWA is very beneficial for me. I have a peace of mind knowing that if I call Bert Zerr, he will answer all my questions and if needed, point me in the right direction. In the time I have been under the 'OIT' program I have met some extraordinary individuals who are always willing to go out of their way to help me with whatever issues or questions I have. I have very high respect for the KRWA team and sincerely appreciate what they have done for Dickinson RWD 1. It is truly a pleasure and honor working with KRWA; without the 'OIT' program I would be lost."*

Want to guess what Clem is going to think about after the meeting is over? The next day the governing body received a surprise. Clem walked in the office, dropped his keys on the desk, and announced that he is quitting work, turned around and walked out the door.

**Case 2:** Harry has been working for the city for 27 years. He rarely took time off for vacation. Most of the information he had about the system was stored in his head. He needed no maps; he had the system memorized. All members of the governing body thought everything was going fine and would continue that way. But there's a problem. Harry was diagnosed with cancer; he was no longer able to continue as the operator. He had trouble remembering and explaining the system layout to others.

The problem with each of the above cases is the same. Neither the city nor RWD has a certified water operator to operate the system and continue to provide safe potable water. This leaves a governing body scrambling to find a replacement operator. Finding a replacement in small cities and rural water districts can be very difficult.

But there are people who will work – but they may not be certified as operators. No one started work knowing everything about utility systems. It takes experience which is only gained through work, training and effort. The new Operator-In-Training program provides access to those with that experience. The program gives new operators a chance to learn while receiving oversight by KRWA staff who have been operators or who have many years of utility or regulatory experience.

### The Operator-In-Training Program shows these results from 2004 to September 2011

195	Total candidates
99	Passed certification
3	Remove from program because system no longer exists
6	Declined emergency technical assistance
26	In process of obtaining certification as of September 27, 2011
61	Either quit, or were terminated; system had to hire or contract with a certified operator

If a public water system in Kansas loses its only certified operator, help is only a phone call or email away.

The new Operator-In-Training program dates back to 2004 when KDHE awarded a contract to KRWA to help new operators ensure safe, reliable potable water was being maintained for all customers and to work to obtain certification. This requires KRWA to contact each new Operator-In-Training every month. Each system is unique; it takes time to provide the new OIT with all the information needed; it's important to not overwhelm the new person. KRWA provides assistance on many topics, including:

- ◆ Chlorine residual sampling
- ◆ Recording chlorine residuals and maintaining daily logs
- ◆ Bacteriological sampling procedures
- ◆ Reviewing the Site Sampling Plan
- ◆ Provide training materials and study guides
- ◆ Record retention
- ◆ Review of system operations

In many cases, KRWA staff pitch in and lend a hand to the new operator.

That's the situation when the operator is the only person at the utility.

#### Tips for operators

Attend training sessions whenever possible. Pay attention to what is being discussed; visit with other attendees. Presenters are willing to visit during a break or after the session about specific questions. Ask questions.

#### A tip for board / council members

Allow new operators to attend training sessions. Doing so not only increases the person's knowledge but also shows the new operator that the city council or RWD board understands the need for training. Be supportive.

*Greg Duryea has worked for KRWA since 1993 as Technical Assistant. He presently manages the Emergency Operator Program, with a variety of other responsibilities. He holds a Class I water certification and is the*



*certified operator for Sycamore Springs Resort in Brown County.*



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