

KRWA Supports Online Training as Supplemental to the Classroom

With the advent of the Internet and increased access by smaller cities and rural water districts, KRWA became very enthused about the prospect that online training could be provided as a supplement to the 100-plus days of classroom training that KRWA provides annually. We hoped for the approval of online training by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) for operator certification credits also. KRWA invested significant resources in developing a relationship with a national training provider and format that would track attendance and provide very detailed reports. That was more than ten years ago. KDHE was not supportive of the concept at that time.

And now, with the COVID-19 pandemic, most will agree that situations of all sorts need to be evaluated, or re-evaluated. Life may never feel the same after this pandemic. There have been dramatic effects because of social distancing. As COVID-19 caused the cancellation of events, jeopardized industries, altered work environments and disrupted everyday lives, it has become more obvious how unprepared many are technologically to continue to meet

obligations and other requirements.

The COVID-19 virus has also made it impossible to provide the necessary classroom training to all those who are required by their operator licensing to gain the hours necessary for recertification. In 2019, there were 2,143 operators who attended KRWA-sponsored training sessions. Of those, 1,052 attended more than one session. Operators attended from 744 water or wastewater systems. The credits (training hours) awarded totaled 16,632. In addition, there were 403 operators who did not request credit when attending a training session.

Let's try it!

KRWA staff recently decided to pursue online operator training to demonstrate to KDHE that the effort could be accomplished with credibility and verification. Staff members Monica Wurtz and Greg Metz scheduled the first session for Tuesday, May 12. I am writing this on Sunday evening, May 10. Okay, backup now to Friday, May 8. KRWA was pleased to



receive an email on that Friday afternoon from KDHE inviting organizations to submit an online training session as a pilot program. That was fairly easy to do because KRWA had decided on a virtual learning portal (software) to use and already had 12 people registered to take part in the trial.

So, now to regress a bit. This discussion about online training will continue – but it is inevitable that it's going to happen. Whether KDHE awards training credits or not is not the only reason to be providing or for anyone to be attending training.

Here are some advantages that online training can provide as “supplemental” to onsite or classroom training.

The first reason that comes to mind is flexibility. Certainly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many people are not able to travel to attend training sessions. KRWA is concerned of not being able to provide enough sessions, given adherence to social distancing, to meet the demand. Online training can be made available anywhere, anytime.

Second, it's more affordable. Traditional training sessions cost KRWA an average of \$2,500 each for a one-day event – and that doesn't include the cost of coffee, rolls or other break snacks. Travel is also costly for those attending. Online training allows

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for reference videos or other course materials to be saved and viewed numerous times.

Online training should REQUIRE training organizations to tailor training to specific needs of systems and staff members at those systems. People with the same interests or with the same learning goals can become a community that interacts effectively -- exchanging questions, doubts, and ideas. Participating in such groups may offer a more detailed insight on the issues being discussed and how problems can be addressed. KRWA tried that years ago with list-serv's with little avail; most people were reluctant to ask questions that would go to numerous other participants.

Good online training programs allow for those attending to ask questions. Course trainers can be contacted and interacted with and some portals allow for chat support.

Obviously, a big concern to any certification organization is if George or Mary remained attentive and online during the session. Well, that's taken care of because the portal that KRWA selected tracks each participant and provides a summary in spreadsheet format at the end of the session.

Retention of information presented

With online training, as notes are downloadable, there can be online interaction between the trainers and the attendees. Quizzes can be injected at any time during the presentation to help ensure that those online are understanding the information that's being presented.

There is no doubt that some people prefer face-to-face training, while others may prefer online training. There needs to be a mix of both – but face-to-face can't happen when the country is fending off a virus pandemic. Do system operators, governing body members, administrators and managers need to learn about water and wastewater regulations, changes in operation, etc. regardless of a pandemic? They sure

do. KRWA applauds KDHE for also recognizing the need to adapt to the situation. Many other state regulatory agencies have provided operator credit for online training for many years. Adapting to online training will require extra effort by KRWA staff. The attendance must be limited. But there are ways to allow anyone to log in to see the presentations on their own, and have their attendance verified.

An update . . .

It's Monday, May 11. Among many other things that happened at KRWA today, KDHE agreed this afternoon to provide operator credit for the first online training for water operators. KRWA is excited to demonstrate the "GoToWebinar" portal in what will be a trial "pilot" session tomorrow. It's 2.5 hours on drinking water regulations and also water loss and leak detection. A second 2.5-hour session will be held May 20. This is in demonstration mode, so to speak. It's pleasing to know that KDHE will have three staff persons attending to monitor the training and the function of the portal.

Tuesday, May 12: The first 2.5-hour online training session was conducted. Aside from only several minor technical issues, the presentations and delivery were acceptable. A report was

generated showing the total time each attendee was online. KDHE staff who participated commented that they thought the webinar went well for a first time. KDHE advised also that they were evaluating options on providing certification exams. There were approximately 230 operators who were committed to taking the exam at the KRWA conference in March, which had to be cancelled.

Monday, May 18: Today KRWA has decided to schedule the first onsite training since the COVID-19 shutdown began. This training will be on June 16 and 17 at Newton. The topic will be basic electrical maintenance and troubleshooting.

KRWA will continue to post updates to training on its website at www.krwa.net. Or if anyone has a particular question, give a call or send an email. KRWA is not going anywhere and we're here to help.

Elmer Ronnebaum is KRWA General Manager; he has been employed by KRWA since 1983. He served seven years on the KRWA board of directors prior to that. He also helped develop a large RWD and served for fourteen years on a water district board of directors.



Graphic by Linda Windler.