

HIRING THE RIGHT OPERATOR OR A CONTRACT OPERATOR?



In Kansas as well as across the U.S., water and wastewater systems are experiencing increased difficulty in keeping full-time, certified operators. The issue is acute for small systems. Some small cities or RWDs where there is only one employee, may see two or three new operators in just one year. Some leave for higher wages, and others depart due to the overwhelming responsibilities of operating and managing water and wastewater systems.

In addition, many older water operators are retiring; many others with more experience are finding jobs with better benefits. I have been working with an operator who has operated three water systems for many years. He is about to retire, and actually wanted to do so six months ago, but the systems are having a difficult time training a new operator. Unfortunately, when he is finally able to retire, he will be taking decades of experience with him that his replacement will never know.

I know of another operator in Kansas who is a contract operator for five water systems. This is mainly because the systems cannot get somebody local willing to become certified by taking the operator exam. The exam can be intimidating to a new operator. This only discourages him or her from doing it. Many people make excellent employees but they may not be good test-takers.

In my opinion, a lot of water and wastewater operators in Kansas are low-paid, especially with the responsibilities that

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come with water treatment. This includes daily chlorine monitoring, monthly bacteriological testing and maintaining of a bacteriological site plan, routine flushing of the distribution system, locating and exercising valves so that in case of a main break a small portion of the system can be shut down rather than the whole system, maintaining and updating maps,

Guidelines from KDHE Concerning Contract Operators . . .

To begin with, a contract operator should inspect the system on a regular basis. Depending on how complicated the system may be, full inspections could take place daily or may only be needed once a week.

A regular maintenance routine is important as well, and should be logged in detail.

Although the contract operator will not be on site full-time, they should always be available in case of an emergency. It may be imperative that they direct the steps needed to fix a critical situation.

A contract operator is going to need to be given authorization to run the plant, including the ability to implement any changes they feel may be necessary. Their authority will need to extend to any staff who may work with the operator so they can carry out necessary duties.

Lastly, an operator should always review information submitted in report form to KDHE.

preparing an emergency water supply plan, and taking meter readings to help control water loss. That's on top of dealing with the daily operators – and repairs and maintenance. Since when was it popular for the street department to asphalt right over the water line valves and manhole lids? So, now the water or wastewater operator needs find a metal detector and pic ax to regain access to critical infrastructure. With the shortage of workers in Kansas, in the future, it will continue to become even more difficult for cities and rural water districts to maintain a certified operator.

Because of how hard it is to find a certified operator, the solution for some smaller systems has been to use a contract operator. A contract operator is an individual who is a certified operator and works or has worked for another water or wastewater system. This individual doesn't have to be on site full-time but can still oversee their water treatment operation. As more systems have turned to this option, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment set up guidelines for what a water treatment facility needs to expect from a contract operator for water and wastewater treatment facilities.

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