

Don't Keep It to Yourself!

Although I'm not much of a storyteller, please indulge me. There may be a point to it after all. Disclaimer: These stories are not at all typical of most water systems in Kansas. I've been all across the state talking with water and wastewater operators. Generally, operators in Kansas have high levels of integrity and strive to provide good customer service. Most do not fit the descriptions of the operators in the stories that follow. I just want to go on record with that.

Once, I was contacted by a very small water system way out near the western state line. This system had recently been contacted by their local friendly KDHE office to see why the inspection letter from eight months ago was never answered. When the governing body asked about the inspection, the operator responded by quitting. A local hero I'll call Joe, who is also a member of the governing body, stepped up to the challenge. Joe called and asked me to come to visit and see if we could figure out what the state folks wanted. I walked into quite a mess. The system's operator had not submitted a sample to KDHE in SIX MONTHS!!! The system was originally set up for gas chlorination but the operator had

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switched it over to sodium hypochlorite. That in itself is not too much of an issue. However, the solution pump was plumbed into the top of the gas chlorine injector. The high pressure from the chlorine gas system's booster pump was too much for the hypochlorinator to overcome. I honestly don't think the system had chlorine injected into it since the switch. I attended a meeting of the governing body and asked the members about the water system, some separately and others in a group. Each one said the same thing, "He said things were going well and we never asked any questions."

That story reminds me of another instance when a different, local friendly KDHE office called me. This time it was due to a longtime operator suddenly passing away. This groundwater system was large enough that there were plenty of other employees to operate the plant, so manpower was not the concern. When the other employees went to the softening plant, it was in such a state of disrepair that major treatment units were not in operation. Other than chlorination, no other treatment was occurring. The plant was very unkempt and there were piles of trash throughout the building. The system had only one well in service and the others were not operational. This system was on the brink of major failure! Luckily, another local "Joe" took responsibility and got things back on track. Again, I asked the obvious question, "How did it get this bad? Was no one overseeing the operator?"

"We thought he had it under control. He never gave any indication that there were problems."

Another short story, please. This is the last one, I promise... This was another small system by a different state line. They had their own water plant that was supplemented by water purchased from a neighboring system. The system was in compliance in this story, samples were taken as required and the operator was doing what was needed day-to-day. However, he did not share any of this knowledge with the new hire. He didn't even give the new guy a tour of the water system! Then one day, the operator passed away and took all of his knowledge of the system with him. This time, the call was "What do we do to operate this system? How do we keep the water flowing?" The water plant had no procedures manual so we began to investigate how to control the plant. Major system



A water system operator should maintain logs to meet daily, weekly, monthly, and annual recordkeeping requirements.

Share the information!!!

The common thread in the cases in this article is an unwillingness to share important information. Board and council members should have clear expectations about what information is needed from the operator. If there is a problem with the system, the board has the checkbook to get things fixed. It doesn't do anybody a single bit of good to keep issues with the system a secret!

Even if the governing body isn't asking for details, operators should share them! A logbook is one of the most important tools an operator has. Take a ton of notes, then bring the logbook to the monthly meeting and share the month's highlights with the board. A longtime operator I'm friends with keeps an extremely detailed logbook. He keeps daily weather information, storage tank trends, production meter reads and chlorine residual readings in addition to any work orders and time spent on each. You could call Ole' Joe up and ask what the weather was like in town on March 28, 2019 (the last time we attended a KRWA Annual Conference!) and he could tell you. Any time he hears a strange whine in a pump, he notes it on the log. He can look back and see definitively when that whine started and can intimate to his governing body the need to have a pump guy out to take a look. There is no reason to withhold that information and let the pump worsen until it fails at 2 AM!

components were past their useful life span but left in service. The "Joe" in this system was a new, part-time employee who worked tirelessly for the community and was able to keep the water flowing, despite no training from the previous operator. I asked the governing body members about the situation and they had the same explanation, "He said things were fine. We never heard from the state, so we figured it must be ok".

A common topic of discussion with operators is about the liability of doing the work. It is a serious occupation; public health is at stake. My advice is always the same, "Do the right thing and document all of it." Documenting everything and sharing that information is the ultimate CYA for the operator! CYA means Cover Your Assistant's backside for those of you who are unfamiliar with the acronym! But seriously, being a water and/or wastewater operator is a public service with the very highest ideals, and the profession requires the utmost integrity. The operator knows things about the system that no other person in the utility knows about. Operators must share that vital information so the water will flow, whether the operator can be there or not.

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