

Operators Wanted (and Needed!) ...

Be a part of the



Over the past several years, finding people willing to work has become increasingly difficult. You can't drive down any street without seeing multiple signs saying "Help Wanted". I often hear about and see it firsthand in the KRWA training sessions I have attended: the nation's workforce is aging. I've learned that the water and wastewater industry will lose close to 50 percent of its operators in the next 10 years. It is not just those two industries. The nation as a whole will lose that many people from the workforce. The baby boom generation is nearing the age of retirement and it seems like the following generations aren't as willing to be a dependable workforce. Smaller communities struggle to find anyone willing to become a water or wastewater operator, which adds to the many challenges of being a small community. I have met active operators in their 70's and 80's and their exact words were, "If I don't take care of it, who will?" That is the mentality of many operators across the state. Many feel an obligation to the town they represent and for which they care very deeply. I believe that the majority of the people in

this industry are cut from a different cloth. Many of them volunteer as firefighters, coaches and many other ways to fill gaps in their communities.

Teamwork vs. micromanagement

It has become increasingly important that when the right person is found for the job, they feel as though they are a part of a team. I believe strongly in teamwork, working to achieve goals for the utility and community and keeping open communication between the mayor, the RWD board, and other staff in every town or small city. One thing I hear quite often when I am working with operators and clerks around the state is that they do not feel that they matter – or that their opinions matter. There is no rule saying that the

governing body has to heap praise on operators or others on a daily basis, but it's the little things that matter. In meetings, or in general, make a deliberate effort to be involved with your employees and encourage them to be involved as well. It is just as important for the employee to keep management up-to-date on issues and day-to-day workings. Strive for that delicate balance between good communication and micromanaging.

Numerous factors play into attracting good employees. More and more people want a work-life balance. There is the wage factor, the benefits, and paid time off (PTO). Many operators are unable to leave for vacation or take sick days because they are the only ones who know the system. The mayor, the RWD board, or even the clerk should be able to and be willing to fill in. In my situation as a small-town city superintendent, the mayor worked with an operator from a neighboring town to provide coverage while I was away. Knowing I didn't have to worry while I was away made a real difference in my confidence and added appreciation of the job.

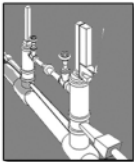
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Small things can mean a lot

When I was a supervisor, I would routinely check on the employees and simply ask how they were feeling or if there was anything they needed or had concerns about. On a hot day, I would grab water or Gatorade and take them one. It was something simple to let them know their hard work was appreciated.

Ulterior motives should not be the reason for someone to be on a city council or RWD board. I hear on a regular basis that systems have that one council person who oversteps their responsibility and has an axe to grind. Operators and staff need to try to find a way to incorporate even those council or board members into the team. All who are involved in the utility need to work to improve their rural water system, and town, and not have operator turnover every few months. This is especially true for small towns.

It is hard enough to find employees without a governing body being impossible to work for. There is no secret key to making all employees satisfied. The main objective is to be a team.

Operators in demand . . .

Another change I see coming is the increased use of contract operators in small systems, due to more and more young people leaving rural Kansas for larger cities. The salary survey that the Kansas League of Municipalities compiled is a good way to help determine the starting salary for new employees. It may also be useful in showing potential candidates the amount that benefits and PTO add to one's salary. KRWA will be conducting a salary survey of rural water districts soon. I hope there is a good response.

Let me repeat myself: I believe 110 percent in TEAMWORK! If you repeat the mistakes of the past, you

will never succeed as a team. Times have changed. People have changed. Open and honest communication is the foremost key to forming a team. Sometimes, the brutal truth is the best way to move things forward, uncomfortable as it can be for some.

KRWA staff are ready, willing and able to be of help, regardless of the issue. Feel free to contact me by email at terry@krwa.net or by phone at 785-735-4031.

Terry Hobbs began work at KRWA as a Source Water Protection Specialist in March 2023.

He holds Class I water and wastewater operator certification. He completed Airborne and Air Assault training and served tours in Korea and Desert Storm and has EMT certification through Barton Co. Comm. College. Terry and his family live in Victoria, Kan.



You Might Be a Rural Water District Bookkeeper If . . .

If you should ever have an identity crisis, and you are not sure exactly who you are if the answer to the following ten questions is "yes", you may be a bookkeeper for a rural water department.

1. Your employer told you your duties would be entering payments into a computer and balancing a checkbook each month, ten hours a week. However, you find that you have memorized the phone numbers of utility software tech support, the meter company tech support, accounting software tech support, KDHE, the water district auditor, KRWA... and so on. And, burning the midnight oil to get everything done is not just an expression for you.

2. You have gotten to know a bevy of water district customers who seem to think you are their personal secretary.

3. You are asked on a pretty regular basis to hold a check until the day before late fees are to be applied.

4. Sometimes you are mistaken for a bill payment reminder service as there are those who think you should call them personally each month to remind them that the utility late date is approaching.

5. You find yourself wondering if the one and only operator for the water district is as irritated with you for calling him at all hours of the day and night with reminders and messages as you are with the people calling you at home at all hours of the day and night.

6. All too often you find yourself plodding your way across a field (as many board members are farmers) to catch up to a board member to have him/her add their signature to a check.

7. You've learned you must turn your cell phone off before going to bed Saturday night so you will be able to get

to go to church Sunday. And, when you are at church, hymnal in hand, turning to the next song, you feel someone tapping on your back to say "I'm so glad I ran into you, I've got my utility payment with me".

8. You must always check your personal mailbox on your front porch and check with the neighbors on either side to see how many of your customers left payments in those places instead of posting to the water district or leaving payment in the water district drop box.

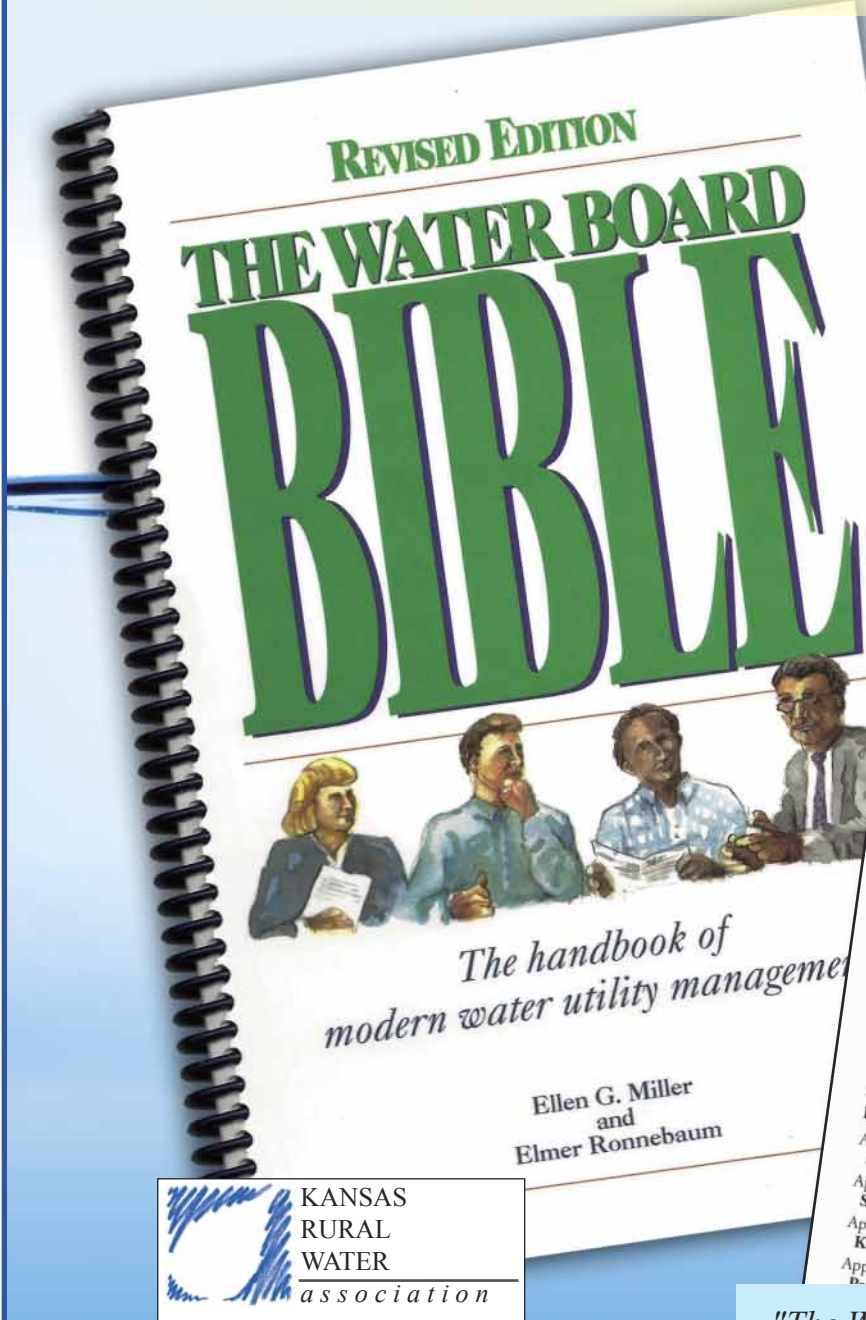
9. You hear people talking about having sick days, and you can't remember exactly what that means.

10. You have to complain to your spouse and a small circle of friends, but, truth be known, you really don't want to work anywhere else because you love your community and are glad to be making a contribution to this little piece of the world.



Graphic by Linda Windler.

A newly updated *Water Board Bible* is now available from Kansas Rural Water Association



Building on the strong foundation document authored in 1993 by Ellen Miller and Elmer Ronnebaum, the "Bible", was reprinted in 1995 and again in 2010 with minor revisions. A much more extensive review and updates in the 2016 printing were provided by Gary Hanson, Stumbo Hanson, LLP (ret.).

THE WATER BOARD BIBLE

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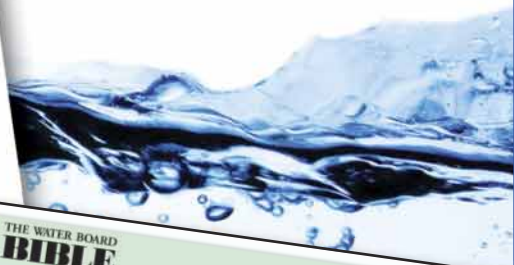
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KRWA also continues to make its handbooks available to other state and national organizations. More than 49,000 copies have been provided. To obtain copies, contact KRWA, 785.336.3760.

"The Water Board Bible strikes the right tone with respect to current trends including diversity in the workforce, open government and post-Flint regulatory climate as well as the relationship with the consuming public and their water supply expectations."

– Gary Hanson

Funding for the 2016 printing is courtesy of the Kansas Rural Water Finance Authority. The Authority has offered to donate copies to every rural water district in Kansas, upon such request. The handbook will also be used for board training provided by KRWA.

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