

# JobOpening

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## Keeping or Hiring the Right, and Hopefully, Long-time Operator

**M**any cities and rural water districts face challenges of maintaining a qualified, certified operator. At the recent 2015 Kansas Rural Water Association conference, nearly 230 operators took the certification exam. There seems to be a high turnover rate in Kansas for water and wastewater operators. It is more of a problem for the smaller water systems. I have worked with systems that have had two or three new operators in one year. Some of this is due to low wage rate. Other times it is due to the overwhelming responsibilities of the water and wastewater system operators. As you may be aware, KRWA provides help to Operators in Training (OITs), but a public water supply can only have one operator recognized under that program per year. This means if the system has had an operator who remains for a couple months on the OIT program, then the Kansas Department of Health & Environment will not allow another OIT until the year is over.

I recently worked with a small water system operator in northeast Kansas. He is listed as an OIT but he only works as an operator part time. During his first week on the job, the water system experienced a major water leak on the transmission lines from the wells into town. I was contacted for assistance. We could not find accurate maps of the distribution system. It required four days to locate the leak. When the repairs had to be made, we literally had to have a bulldozer come out to remove some

trees in order to get a backhoe in to make the repairs. Where the pipeline was installed had overgrown with timber.

The next challenge for this new operator was that the system failed its bacteriological sampling. This resulted in the operator needing to collect repeat samples. KRWA assisted in training the operator in the collection procedures. Another problem in this community was that a tank maintenance company convinced the city it would be satisfactory to repaint the interior of the city's elevated tank. The completion date was to be February 17. Yes, that's winter time and not an appropriate time to expect paint to properly cure. After refilling the tank, several customers complained of taste and odor in the water. They claimed the water tasted like paint thinner. That was hardly a surprise to me. The tank had to be taken back offline. As of May 30, that tank is still out of service, waiting for the tower company to come and resolve the problem. With the tank out of service, the system has very little to no fire protection. The city's well only produces 25 gallons per minute. As you might suspect, this operator is very overwhelmed and he is not sure he wants to keep this job.

Small systems have a very difficult time in being able to afford to keep an operator on staff full time and it is very difficult to find a good, qualified part-time operator. It's my opinion that members of the governing body should consider either rate increases or

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**Boards and councils need to understand that there is more to operating a water system than just turning the wells on. Here is a list of the duties that an operator has to deal with on a regular basis.**

- It is required by Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) that systems do daily chlorine residual monitoring and they maintain at least a .2mg/l of free chlorine residual in the distribution system or a 1.0 mg/l of combined chlorine residual
- Monthly bacteriological testing and maintain a bacteriological site plan
- Routinely flush the distribution system to help maintain or improve water quality
- Locate and exercise valves so that in case of a main break a small portion of the system can be shut down rather than the entire system
- Update maps – every system needs to have maps that are accurate; when repairs are made to a line, it should be updated on the maps
- Prepare an emergency water supply plan; all public water supplies are required to prepare and adopt an emergency water supply plan
- Take meter readings to help control water loss

some way to keep a good operator and be able to pay that person with wages adequate to sustain a family. When communities do not do that, any experienced operator is likely to take a job with another system that pays a better salary.

I know of one operator in Kansas who is a contract operator for five water systems. This is mainly because those five systems cannot afford to have an employee who is willing to become certified by taking the test. The certification exams are intimidating to a new operator. This further discourages some from taking the exam. I encourage any operator interested in taking the exam to contact KRWA. KRWA can provide study guides so that operators are better prepared to take the exam. There are also online quizzes that can be viewed on the KRWA Web site at this link: [www.krwa.net/onlineactivities/index.shtml](http://www.krwa.net/onlineactivities/index.shtml). The quizzes randomize each time they are called up and score upon completion. Also, KRWA staff are more than willing to assist any operator. There are also many training opportunities throughout the year. KRWA-sponsored training is listed on the Web site at this link: [www.krwa.net/cst/calendar.asp?cat=15](http://www.krwa.net/cst/calendar.asp?cat=15). Members of the governing body or operators should contact Kansas Rural Water Association if there are any questions about the OIT program, operator certification, or to ask for assistance for a system.

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