



## Out of Sight – Out of Mind. Is That Really Good Policy for Utilities?

I spent hours leading up to the publication of the last issue of *The Kansas Lifeline* researching wages, job postings and the qualifications needed for each of the water and wastewater operator jobs referenced in the article I prepared. My data found that many water and wastewater operators are making wages comparable to other industries, but usually not at an enviable level. “Turd Herder”, “The water guy”, “City Man”. These are not the professions many people likely dreamed of as children. Based solely on average wages earned, one would assume that most people do not place very much importance on the water and wastewater operators in Kansas and many other states – and in particular in smaller systems.

Most of us would be surprised to read a recent Gallup poll<sup>1</sup> that finds 56 percent of respondents “worry a great deal” about drinking water pollution. Out of all the environmental concerns Americans have, drinking water pollution causes the most sleepless nights. Not the rain forest or panda bears or rising sea levels – but drinking water. A close second was the pollution of rivers, lakes and reservoirs (i.e., wastewater quality)

with 53 percent of respondents greatly worried. In terms we all can understand, a higher percentage of people worry about the quality of water and wastewater treatment than voted for the last five U.S. Presidents, none of whom won more than 53 percent of the popular vote.

Surely the reason behind the worry is not the actual cleanliness of the drinking water or the stream. Extensive testing takes place to ensure the safety and quality of both water and wastewater. Every public water supplier in the state is required to analyze water quality daily in the form of a chlorine residual test. How many utility customers know the amount of testing that is involved in operating that

utility, let alone the cost of those analyses?

I wager that a normal customer only has negative experiences with the utility, meaning when they pay the bill or when they are inconvenienced by a service interruption. After writing a check for what many rate-payers consider an unreasonable amount of money, they may go for a drive. What do they

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/347735/water-pollution-remains-top-environmental-concern.aspx>

## Speaking of costs . . .

According to KRWA's online database of water rates, (see <https://krwa.net/ONLINE-RESOURCES/City-Rates> for city rates and <https://krwa.net/ONLINE-RESOURCES/RWD-Rates> for the water district rates), the average city water rate-payer spends \$33.51 for 5,000 gallons of treated water, delivered to the tap on demand. An average rural water district customer spends \$46.82 for 5,000 gallons. It was difficult to find an average cost of bottled water on the worldwide web. The bottled water industry posts the average wholesale cost per gallon of bottled water all over the web, but average retail was not readily available. So, I went down to my local grocery store where a gallon jug of water costs \$0.89. I found 5,000 gallons of bottled water will cost me \$4,450, and I have to go pick up 5000 one-gallon jugs of water and haul them home. That seemed high, so I looked at bulk water delivery. I simply couldn't believe that someone would pay that much for drinking water. I got a shock when my research found the average cost was \$7 to have a five-gallon jug of water delivered. That is even more expensive than gallon jugs from the grocery store, coming to \$7,000 for 5,000 gallons. Many people do not know what a bargain public water systems provide.

inevitably see? A city crew working a permit-required confined space, which means at least two employees should be outside of the confined space for safety reasons. But, an average rate-payer does not know about permit-required confined spaces and the safety measures put in place to prevent injury and death. They see a bunch of city employees standing around while one is at work.

I wanted to find a comparison for the wastewater utility. It too is unappreciated and undervalued. The data is not as available, but I was able to piece together that an average sewer bill in America is \$43 per month. That's \$43 to have all the wastewater from baths, dishes, handwashing and of course, the toilet, go away, never thought of again. The closest comparison I could think of is a portable restroom. Johnny-on-the-Spot rental is \$85 per week, which includes a "maintenance visit". That amounts to \$340 per month to have a Porta Potty to use at your convenience. It will also get cleaned once per week, similar to only flushing the toilet once per week. And it will be much more inconvenient on a February midnight than tonight. I think the point is clear – public utilities are a major bargain for their customers.

It takes a certain amount of technical proficiency to effectively operate a utility. As I once heard Carl Brown of [GettingGreatRates.com](http://GettingGreatRates.com) say, "Water and sewer systems have become advanced. They're technical. They've become Public Health and Environmental Control Systems." Most of us agree with that statement, but we have a public relations problem. Other than a

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monthly bill, the only time the general public concern themselves with the water or wastewater utility is when something is wrong. A line break or backup that interrupts their day or a letter in the mail for a violation is a terrible way to be remembered. Some utilities are very good at maintaining a presence on social media, through a website or by attending local events. Electrical utilities are VERY good at this.

My local electric co-op hosts a large annual meeting complete with a catered meal and activities for kids and adults both. That is the kind of PR that water and wastewater utilities need.

Wastewater operators handle the diseases of the entire town. All pathogens end up in the wastewater. How many wastewater utilities have invited the local media to feature the plant? It's time to tell a story about cleaning up the sewage and making clean water to put back into nature, the way Mother intended. Explain the dangers involved and why the city needs three employees to safely enter a confined space. That's how we get rate-payers to form a positive opinion of the utility – one that they will hopefully remember when it comes time to raise rates.

Drinking water operators produce a product that everyone in their town literally drinks, and 56 percent of them spend considerable time worrying about its quality. A water plant

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open house will allow rate-payers to see what their money is paying for, and perhaps what a few more dollars from each could do to improve things. Show how much testing goes into every gallon of water they spend pennies on, and what an insane bargain it is compared to the bottled water that is substantially more expensive. Any time public awareness of the utility is framed in a positive manner, it's a win.

The people who keep the water flowing are important in our everyday

lives, whether the masses are conscious of the fact or not. Utilities must actively promote themselves in a positive light. Resources to help even very small utilities are available from the EPA, which has a free Water Utility Public Awareness Kit on its website. The kit includes activity ideas and mailers designed to promote utilities. If the utility bill is the only communication the customer sees, it will be impossible for them to fully appreciate how important public utilities are to their lives.

*Daryn Martin began work with KRWA in August 2019. He previously was a Water Program Inspector and Environmental Program Administrator at KDHE's Wichita office. Prior to joining KDHE, he worked as an operator in the El Dorado Water Treatment Plant. He holds a Class IV water operator certification.*



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