

Operators In Training – all across Kansas

There have been a number of articles in past issues of *The Kansas Lifeline* explaining the benefits of the “Emergency Technical Assistance for Operators-in-Training (OIT) Program funded by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) and operated by KRWA. KRWA staff member Lonnie Boller refers to it also in this issue. I want to revisit the topic because many boards and councils are concerned what to do if they should find that they have no one with certification to operate their water system. Here’s where the OIT program steps in.

The OIT Program is intended for public water supply systems that serve a population of 3,300 or less and lose their sole certified

operator. If a system qualifies, emergency technical assistance is provided by Kansas Rural Water Association through a contract with KDHE. The assistance includes testing procedures, training, advice

and on-site help operating the system if needed. KRWA visits each operator monthly and provides assistance or information to help the new operator. The contract requires that KRWA personnel be certified at the level needed to operate the system. That means that a system classified as a Class II must have someone from KRWA who holds at least a Class

II certification or higher to provide the assistance.

Every water system is unique. Operator skill and experience vary greatly. A surface water system is much more complex than a system

benefit of working for a rural water district is that operators only have one area to focus on – water! That is the operation of the water system. Working for a city also means potentially operating a

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that purchases water and does not re-chlorinate. The amount of labor involved is different for each system. This is especially true when comparing an OIT for a city versus a rural water district. The

wastewater system, gas system and for some the electrical distribution system.

Since September 2004 to October 1, 2008, KDHE has referred 119 OITs to KRWA for



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Derek Parthemer, OIT operator at Pottawatomie RWD 4 in northeast Kansas, shows two fingers indicating two feet of clearance as a construction crew works to replace a water line. The site is a county bridge that is scheduled to be replaced and the county requested the district move the water line. Workers found the old line surprisingly only two feet below the new pipeline as they worked to locate the original line and connect the new line. The photos were taken in rural Pottawatomie County, about seven miles northeast of Westmoreland.

Emergency Technical Assistance. There are 25 operators involved in the OIT program as of October 1, 2008. The count changes nearly every week. Each OIT receives a minimum of a monthly visit by KRWA staff; they also have ready access to KRWA staff when needed.

Interestingly, there have been nine people who were listed as an OIT who either resigned or were terminated from local employment. The reasons for leaving vary from not being able to get along with the citizens and/or co-workers to having to do more than was expected when they were hired. In one case the person thought he only had to work on the water system but actually was required to maintain the wastewater system, streets, parks and occasionally be the dogcatcher. Obviously there was no job description available. Still, that small city simply cannot afford to pay for three different

people to operate the city. Being upfront with the duties of new employees and the required duties is essential.

Two operators did not meet the necessary requirements to become

fabricate an item to make the equipment more efficient. Knowing where the records were kept was one thing, but having to deal with a Site Sampling Plan, Water Conservation Plan, Cross

When a person who is listed as an OIT quits or cannot pass the certification exam, KDHE then requires the system to contract with a person who is already certified.

certified, as neither had a high school diploma or GED equivalent. Both kept their employers unaware of this for nearly a year.

Another person resigned because he did not want to deal with reports associated with the water utility. He did an excellent job on the distribution system and was the type of person who could fix nearly anything; he could

Connection Control Policy, recording chlorine residuals, TTHM and HAA5 sampling, and lead and copper sampling was more than he was willing to do.

Two other systems are no longer eligible for the OIT program because they are no longer public water systems. Another OIT has been deployed overseas with his military unit. His OIT status will almost certainly be

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re-instated when he returns from his tour of duty.

When a person who is listed as an OIT quits or cannot pass the certification exam, KDHE then requires the system to contract with a person who is already certified. This places the water system under the direction of someone who has demonstrated capability.

Other operators have difficulty taking the certification exam. Several have commented to me that the exam was a great anxiety for them. They understand the subject when visiting with them but when it comes time to actually take the certification exam, they seem to not be able to recall the information.

Another impact of having operators quit, either already certified or as an OIT, is that some of these systems are not large enough to afford a full-time operator.

But the positives far outweigh the negatives. There have been 82

of the 119 OITs who passed the certification exam; they are now listed as certified water operators. They have invested in the effort to operate the system, studied materials before taking the

receive the Emergency Technical Assistance for OITs. Contact Teresa Schuyler at 785/296-5511 or Vickie Wessel at 785/296-2976 to find out if your system qualifies.

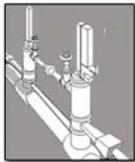
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certification exam and have attended training sessions. Proactive boards or councils helped many of these OITs achieve the goal of becoming certified by supporting their attending training sessions or seeking technical assistance when necessary.

It is a requirement to notify KDHE if a system loses its only certified operator. The city or RWD may then be eligible to

Water and wastewater operators who would like to take a certification exam will have the opportunity to do so at the 2009 KRWA conference, Thursday, March 26. An average of 125 operators take the exam at the conference. Mark your calendars now for the 2009 conference. The theme is "Helping today for a better tomorrow."

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