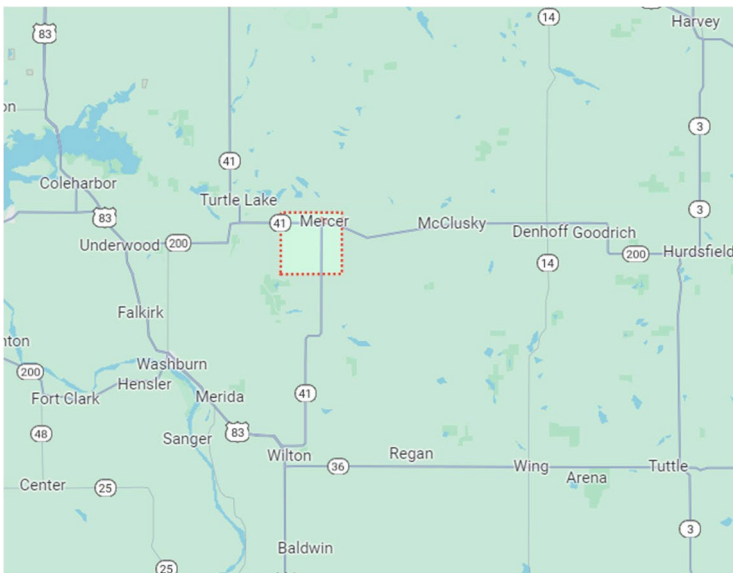


Case Study:



Location: Central North Dakota
Total Population: 94
Minority Population: 02
Household Income: \$33,750
Region and Funder: 178 HHS/OCS
Congressional District: At-large
Author: Brian Day
Date: November 2023

Services:
Emergency Response Planning, Vulnerability Assessment, Staff Training, Budgeting and Financial Reporting, ADA Assessment, Billing Assistance

BACKGROUND

The city of Mercer is centrally located in North Dakota, less than one hour's drive north of Bismarck, in McLean County. Mercer has 94 residents that are served by city-owned and operated drinking water and wastewater treatment systems. Over the last several years, Mercer has experienced turnover in leadership and administrative roles. At the same time, the city has had a difficult time recruiting and retaining a certified

water operator. Turnover brings challenges to sustainable and compliant operations of city business and water and wastewater utilities.

THE CHALLENGE

The roles of a city mayor and auditor were two of the leadership positions that experienced turnover. Both roles cover a wide breadth of responsibility, and it takes time and training for new individuals to fully understand and execute in addition to knowing and being able to meet all applicable state law requirements and best practices for safe and compliant management and operation of drinking water and wastewater utilities. The lack of a certified water operators was of concern as North Dakota Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) requires that public water systems either employ a certified water operator or contract services with one. Without a certified operator, utility operations could be out of compliance and could put the public's health at risk. In addition to potential compliance concerns, proper operation, maintenance, and planning is necessary to protect public health. The community lacked an Emergency Response Plan and utility vulnerabilities had not been assessed. Failure to assess vulnerabilities and have a plan of action puts a community at risk of both health and infrastructure damage.

Not only were the lack of knowledge of drinking water and wastewater rules a problem, but the new city administration also lacked familiarity with financial reports and bookkeeping. Without knowledge of financial reports and bookkeeping, the city was susceptible to financial insolvency which could result in further risks to safe and compliant utility operations. The importance of these concerns led the city to seek assistance from Midwest Assistance Program, Inc (MAP).

THE APPROACH & SOLUTION

To ensure compliance and maintain financial stability, it was crucial for MAP Staff to comprehensively address all aspects of municipal governance, including water operations, bookkeeping, and regulations. MAP Staff played a vital role in assisting the city with various tasks such as water sampling techniques, measuring total chlorine levels, and handling paperwork. This assistance has greatly impacted the city by ensuring its compliance with DEQ regulations. Furthermore, MAP Staff has continued to support the city in bookkeeping matters by providing guidance on accounting software usage, bank reconciliation, and generating financial

reports. The information provided by MAP Staff is instrumental in enabling the city council to make informed decisions and maintain financial solvency. Additionally, MAP Staff has assisted the city in preparing the annual budget and fulfilling the required financial reporting for USDA Rural Development (RD). These financial reports are crucial for the city to levy taxes and meet the requirements set by USDA RD. However, it is important to note that this assistance was not provided expeditiously, as MAP Staff had to conduct multiple site visits and engage in correspondence to properly train the city administration. One of the notable assistances provided by MAP Staff was an ADA assessment, as the city aimed to ensure that city hall is accessible to everyone. The ADA assessment identified a few issues that the city will address accordingly. The city is committed to inclusivity and strives to ensure that everyone can actively participate in city government.

THE IMPACT

Since the initiation of MAP Staff's assistance to Mercer, the city has experienced only a few violations from DEQ, most of which occurred during the initial stages of MAP Staff's assistance. This is particularly noteworthy as it coincided with the city administration's learning process regarding the rules and regulations. Although the city recently lost its certified water operator and is currently searching for a replacement, MAP Staff has provided the necessary training to other city officials to ensure compliance with the system while the search continues. By implementing an Emergency Response Plan and Vulnerability Assessment, the city will be well-prepared to promptly address any potential threats to the water system. Furthermore, the city administration possesses the capability to generate financial reports and reconcile bank accounts, with these documents playing a crucial role in maintaining the city's financial stability as utilized by the city council. Despite the progress made, the city remains committed to advancing and enhancing its resilience, a goal that can only be achieved through the ongoing assistance provided by MAP Staff. The mayor and city administration take pride in their collaboration with MAP, an organization that has consistently fulfilled its responsibility toward the long-term prosperity of its partners since 1979.