FALL 2020

MIDWEST ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

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Midwest Assistance Program

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GSA Contract Holder
Contract GS-10F-0025T

Midwest Assistance Program, Inc. (MAP) is an approved vendor by the General Services Administration:

- MAP is already a GSA-approved contract holder
- Agencies can bypass the full request-for-proposal process and come directly to MAP
- Less delay getting projects underway

MAP is the first member of the RCAP network to receive this designation.

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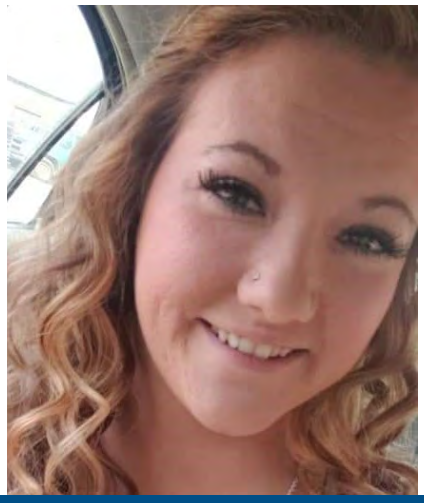

SHAYNA FISHER

Shayna Fisher, Program Assistant joined Midwest Assistance Program, Inc. (MAP) in 2020. She is excited to be with MAP and learn new things as well as build new relationships with a fantastic organization. Shayna has over three years of administrative management experience, as well as three years in manufacturing. Shayna enjoys learning new things and taking on new challenges, and is currently enrolled in school to obtain a degree in Business Administration. Shayna was born in Shenandoah, Iowa, and later moved to Hopkins, Missouri, where she graduated high school. Shayna enjoys weekends with family and friends, spending time on the family farm, riding UTVs, and taking on new projects. Small town communities are Shayna's favorite environment.

JASON TOWNE

Jason Towne, Project Manager/Technical Assistance Provider in Iowa has 12 years of experience in the Water, Distribution and Wastewater industry in the State of Iowa. During his tenure, he has worked as an operator and director of distribution for large and small communities in Iowa. His experience in working with engineers and contractors, along with budgets and proposals will be an asset to any small community facing these challenges. He possesses licensing in Grade 4 Water Distribution, Grade 3 Water Treatment, Grade 2 Wastewater Treatment with the Iowa DNR and a Grade 1 Wastewater Collection System Operator from IAWEA. He also completed NIMS 700 training while a volunteer firefighter. Jason's education includes a diploma in carpentry from Western Iowa Technical College in Sioux City as well as classes in Water and Wastewater from California State University, Sacramento.

LYNORA ROGSTAD

Lynora Rogstad, Project Manager/Technical Assistance Provider in Montana worked for the City of Helena until she retired in December 2018. Lynora is fully certified in Water Treatment, Water Distribution and Wastewater Treatment in the State of Montana. (Class 1A, 1B and 1C). Lynora was the Pretreatment Coordinator for 15 years as well as assisting the Superintendent of water/wastewater treatment facilities and solid waste with developing and administering the operation & maintenance and capital improvement budgets. She has experience in writing ordinances, policies and setting rate structures. Lynora spent 30 years involved in local government and working with State and Federal Regulatory Agencies, consulting/engineering firms and the public. Lynora is a native of Montana. She and her husband have raised five children and have seven grandchildren. She enjoys time at the lake and playing in the mountains. Lynora is dedicated to public health and safety and believes she brings experience and hands on knowledge to serve others.

FEATURE ARTICLE

Communicating with Customers During Shutdown

Different Approaches for Different Times

By Jeffrey Kormann, Project Manager/Technical Assistance Provider

The term "novel Coronavirus" implies something new or previously unknown, for which there is no guidebook or operations manual to follow. Cole County PWSD #1 (based just outside of Jefferson City), Kahoka-based Clark County CPWSD #1, and the City of Iberia in Miller County were just three of the thousands of water systems in Missouri which found themselves faced with decisions on how to manage this situation and still maintain service as the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic swept over the United States in early March 2020.

"We continued to charge late fees on bills to customers throughout this period of time," explained Cole County PWSD #1 Office Manager Ruth Winters, "but did suspend shutoffs for about three months to make sure customers had access to water." As the local economy seemed to stabilize and businesses, including the district office, re-opened following expiration of the Governor's Stay-At-Home order, the policy allowing disconnects for non-payment resumed on July 8, 2020. At the same time, the Board decided to better protect its employees by permanently discontinuing the practice of hanging tags on the front doors of delinquent accounts as a form of final notice prior to service termination. "We will work with customers to extend terms and develop repayment plans if necessary," Ms. Winters stated, "but feel some responsibility has to be placed at their end to call and work with us."

Clark County CPWSD #1 took a slightly different approach to customer communication and revised operations during the pandemic. Speaking from his office in Kahoka, District Manager Dan Dover explained decisions made at a special Board meeting in March 2020 resulted in a moratorium on both disconnects and late fees for an indefinite period of time. While shutoff and payment policies have since been allowed to revert back to the previous procedures on the books, district staff continue to work with customers on what Dover describes as a "case-by-case basis." He adds the district revenues coming from its relatively large rural customer base have not experienced a significant downturn, despite the fact their office is still on lockdown until physical modifications can be made

to better protect the staff taking customer payments. "We are also now requiring everyone in attendance at our monthly Board meetings to wear masks," Dover concluded.

Midwest Assistance Program, Inc. (MAP) has been working with the City of Iberia since 2014 assisting their efforts to access public financing for major improvements to their wastewater collection and treatment system. Like so many communities throughout Missouri and across the nation, the city recently found itself also being faced with the need to develop specific payment plans for customers struggling to keep current with their combined water, wastewater, and trash service bills. The Board of Aldermen agreed in March 2020 to suspend late fees and shutoffs, working with citizens as necessary to negotiate payment plans, while continuing to use door tags as final notice before imposing shutoffs and suspending service. One additional outreach effort worth noting, according to City Clerk Edith (Edye) Long, was the coordination between city government and the local Ministerial Alliance known as "The Well" in helping low-income and unemployed Iberians with their water and wastewater payments. This ecumenical outreach, which also includes a local food pantry, clothing giveaways, and help each year with school supplies, is led by Rev. Chip Sanders of the Iberia Assembly of God Church and his wife, Rebecca. Pastor Sanders notes although assistance through "The Well" is more likely to be requested to help pay residential electric bills (which tend to be larger), the goal is similar in trying to avoid the spiral of unpaid bills with late fees and interest that often places people in such a financial bind shutoff becomes the only viable option.

Three water systems, three slightly different methods and approaches, one common theme of service to customers. MAP continues to seek new and innovative ways to help communities in the nine-state region as we face the unknowns and "new normal" associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cole County Public Water Supply District #1 Office and Water Tower

The City of Iberia Board of Aldermen

FEATURE ARTICLE

The Hidden Financial Costs of COVID-19

By Aubrey Neussendorfer, Project Manager/Technical Assistance Provider

Crisis affects our local economies. The COVID-19 pandemic is no different. In addition to all of the health guidelines, local governments are facing financial hardships. There are steps to take to ensure community leaders are able to face the issues head-on and reduce the effects of the crisis on their community and citizens.

Typically, when one goes through changes they will spend time in three phases; Reaction, Adaptation, and New Normal.

Reaction Phase – This can also be called crisis management. Focus is on immediate concerns such as keeping water and wastewater services as safe as possible.

Adaptation Phase – Once you have processed the initial crisis, you begin to focus efforts on how to maintain management practices and begin to prepare ways in which to achieve goals within operational and budgetary means.

New Normal Phase – Begin to fully implement changes to accommodate your system in which those services are delivered. It may be small or large changes that will need to occur.

Each municipality will move through the phases at their own pace, determine where their losses are and whether they need more revenues to make up the difference.

Here are common revenue types and how they may be affected:

General Taxes – Includes taxes such as hotel/motel tax, fuel tax, gambling tax, etc. Losses from sales tax will be felt immediately and will continue well beyond the end of the crisis.

Income Tax and Business Tax – The shutdown of the economy has far reaching consequences. The loss of these funds will be felt for many years to come. Some business will never reopen and that will have a permanent effect on local economies.

Licenses and Permits – If businesses cannot open, they will not need business permits and licenses. It can add to the burden of community budgets.

Property Taxes – Property taxes are collected annually, but many pay them with their monthly mortgages. The crisis has caused many to lose their jobs and likely has a dynamic effect on their ability to pay their mortgages. Many people could fall behind and find their tax burden impossible to manage. Cities and counties could potentially lose a lot of revenue.

User Fees – These include the water, wastewater, solid waste, etc. services provided to users. It is difficult to determine the net effect on user fees. They may be waived in many cases to assist residents who lost their jobs.

Other Items – Other potential losses of revenue include things such as not being able to host fundraising events, allow the rental of community halls/ parks or the closing of swimming pools and libraries.

Once governing body members have a clearer understanding of how your community's revenue stream will be affected, they can begin to prepare and make plans for how the city will operate moving forward. The following steps should be considered in this process:

Review your revenue streams. Determine risks and put them into categories of short or long term, and temporary or permanent. Midwest Assistance Program, Inc. (MAP) provides one-on-one financial management training to communities, based on their individualized needs.

Determine and prepare financial estimates. While you determine revenue streams, also provide a range of predicted losses and different scenarios. One suggestion is to Google search for a Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) which can help with determining ranges.

Have external sources review your completed plan. This helps to ensure all necessary details have been included and all alternative funding options have been utilized. MAP provides training on various funding options as well as assists water/ wastewater districts in completing applications for funding.

Incorporate estimates into budgets and asset management plans. MAP works with utility staff and governing boards to create and develop plans such as Asset Management and Multiple Year Budgets, along with many other useful financial tools.

No community is alone in this process, as each and every community has or will be affected in some way by the pandemic. Once all involved have a clear understanding of the utility's final goal, estimated revenues, and associated costs, a plan and process can be developed for advancing a utility's financial success. If you would like additional help with this process, please do not hesitate to email map@map-inc.org to get in touch with a Technical Assistance Provider in your region.

FEATURE ARTICLE

Finding a Silver Lining During the Pandemic

By Michelle Pond, Project Manager/Technical Assistance Provider

The COVID-19 pandemic has swept through the world in the past several months, disrupting normal procedures. In some ways, communities have taken this as an opportunity to get creative, re-evaluate old procedures and adapt.

Midwest Assistance Program, Inc. (MAP) has guided many communities through the transition to remote public meetings in order to help protect public health. This is certainly not ideal. A lot of nuances of human interaction are lost over phone and video calls. Additionally, access to reliable phone and internet service (or the ability to use it) may limit participation. Video conferencing is still new to many and may require a lot of time of already-busy utility staff to organize. However, restructuring monthly operations has helped utilities pause and critically think through those procedures that had become all but reflex.

MAP helped communities check and actively pay attention to all applicable open meeting laws while making sure virtual meetings were legal and accessible to all constituents. Many communities realized, even under normal meeting procedures, they hadn't been properly transparent or inclusive. Many towns are putting additional effort into announcing meetings, posting agendas in more locations, or using multiple modes of communication. Community and board members realized they can participate even when they are out of town, allowing them to be more involved. This active, conscious effort to garner public participation should be continued after the pandemic.

Increased availability, awareness, and acceptance of remote communications is opening up opportunities to save money on travel time and expenses. Utility boards can have engineers, bond counsel, and others present effectively through video calls. Communities will prioritize when to have professionals meet in person versus remotely.

Virtual trainings are also becoming more common. This shift allows utilities to reduce travel time and improve the accessibility of specialized knowledge. Rather than attending the closest trainings to fulfill continuing education requirements, operators are now actively searching for training on specific subjects. In response to the pandemic, MAP added virtual interactive online trainings and plans to continue offering these along with in-person trainings, which allow for networking and collaboration.

The pandemic has highlighted how important planning and emergency preparedness is and how often that step is neglected. In a survey of rural utilities, conducted by the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) in May 2020, 43% indicated they have one or less full-time operators. Many communities are realizing, if the clerk or operator falls sick, no one else is prepared to fill in.

MAP recommends having up-to-date documentation; this step is often put on the backburner for a busy utility. Our staff works with communities to draft or update operation and maintenance manuals, create essential operations checklists, document billing procedures, review emergency response plans, etc. MAP is facilitating collaborations as more communities are reaching out to neighboring systems or contractors to make sure back-up personnel are available and prepared enough to help. These mutual aid agreements are happening at the local level and statewide, with many state Water and Wastewater Agency Response Networks (WARNs) taking on new activities or being revived after years of inactivity. Communities are coming together to collectively secure necessary chemicals and equipment, and emergency preparedness expertise. Maintaining these relationships, keeping documentation up-to-date, and clear planning will allow for quicker and more effective response in the future.

These are a few positive changes from communities following the pandemic. Has your community found make-shift solutions? Have you noticed aspects of your operations or management which could be more efficient or resilient? Reach out to Technical Assistance Providers in your region. Trade tips and collaborate with neighboring systems and colleagues. When the pandemic subsides, think about what you want to put back into "normal" operation. Take this as an opportunity to consciously define a new normal that better serves your utility and community.

Photo by Mike Brownfield near Kalispell, MT

FEATURE ARTICLE

Operator Certification: Virtual Training in 2020 and Beyond

By Jerry Popp, PE Program Development Coordinator

Midwest water tower in early morning.

The close of another year is rapidly approaching, along with the inevitable reflection on the impact made by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly every aspect of our lives is being impacted in some way. Some of these changes will be permanent, others may turn out to be temporary disruptions. However, everyone is still working toward the same goals. Like running a steeplechase, the goal is not to remove the hurdles, the focus is on clearing those hurdles and charging ahead to reach the finish line.

For all of the water and wastewater system operators out there, the main goal of your jobs is still the same. Provide an adequate and safe supply of water for your community, and safely dispose of wastewater. Safe water for cleaning and washing is a main line of defense against this new virus. Essentially you are there to protect the health of the citizens. You are certified by a state agency to perform those duties and with that certification comes the responsibility/requirement to continue to improve your skills and abilities through training. Some states have relaxed certification deadlines for completing continuing education requirements.

COVID-19 presents additional hurdles in the training process such as fewer available continuing education hours, personal protective equipment recommendations, local ordinances, social distancing, smaller group numbers, travel restrictions, limited access to some venues, essential-only workers, quarantine guidelines, and budget cuts. There will likely continue to be a reduced number of in-person trainings available for operators. Those available will likely limit enrollment numbers. Many gatherings, conferences, classes, and training events have been canceled either due to direct health department orders or broader general health/safety concerns and restrictions. This affects not only operators, but also the individuals who present the training classes. Everyone in the chain needs continuing education to stay current. How does this get done safely and effectively?

Virtual training is rapidly gaining in popularity. It is both convenient and effective. States across the US are finding ways to ensure water and wastewater operators stay up-to-date and certified in our current social distancing environment. Virtual training has always had a presence, but now there is the realization we are able to do it effectively and there is great potential in its use. Online trainings may be the solution for cutting down on travel costs and allow the operator to 'mind the shop' while slipping in a 2-hour training right from their desk. Additional presenters or co-hosts can be brought in on a training from almost anywhere in the world. Many online software applications allow multiple ways for trainees and trainers to communicate such as chat functions, interactive feedback through polls and surveys, and break-out rooms for discussion. An operator may be able to find a larger variety of courses available, and curriculum can be saved and reviewed following the event.

Attendees need to have access to suitable equipment for virtual training. Essentially all online training presentations will state the attendee should have the following:

1. Internet: Reliable internet access of sufficient bandwidth (Speed). There are quick online tools to conduct a speed test to ensure your internet connection is performing well. If you are experiencing interference using a wireless router (Wi-Fi), you may consider an ethernet connection

(wired), especially if the computer is used in the same place all the time.

2. Computer: A reasonably recent-model computer with enough available memory (RAM), an up-to-date operating system (i.e. Windows, iOS, Android), a browser (i.e. Chrome, Microsoft Edge, Firefox), a quality screen (Monitor), and of course the keyboard/mouse or touch screen to interact with.

3. Audio: A headset with a microphone is preferred, and will generally be required to enable two-way communication. The computer's built-in speaker and microphone system (if available) will work well if the attendee can locate a quiet location. Identify at least one backup connection to the audio of the event, usually a phone call-in option. Video of the attendee could be required for attendance verification, but is generally not necessary.

4. Software Application: Some courses may also require downloading a specific software application (app) or a browser plug-in specific to the presentation method, and these will generally be available free of charge for attendees.

5. Try it out & Practice: Prior to the event, take time to make a test run of each of the components listed 1-4. All of them. Connect early to the session. Attend a trial class or practice session within your organization. Practice manipulating the computer controls, window locations/sizes, try adjusting the volume levels of both speaker and microphone. Attempt reconnecting to the event login page after an unexpected interruption. Test the phone call-in option. Make sure your phone is available and either plugged in or fully charged. Testing the system and connection PRIOR to the live event will greatly reduce the technical issues that may occur.

For any virtual training to be effective, it must be easily interactive. The tools must become very familiar to the attendee (i.e. computer/internet/audio/video). We use pencils and notebooks our entire lives, and learned early to raise our hand and ask questions. In an interactive classroom setting, trainers assume the attendees are proficient in those skills, and a simple invitation for the students to 'feel free to interrupt if you have a question!' opens the door to positive interaction in that classroom. Someone raises a hand, or someone speaks out "Excuse me, what about …?" Then a dialog starts, between teacher and student, or between students. In the virtual learning environment, the goal is to replicate this type of exchange by allowing trainees to interact and ask questions of the trainer throughout the presentation.

As of September 2020, Midwest Assistance Program, Inc. (MAP) has completed thirteen virtual trainings for operators and clerks with positive feedback from attendees and trainers alike. According to MAP Training Coordinator Jim Jones, "I believe this form of training will continue to grow and MAP will provide online content in the years to come. TAP's [Technical Assistance Providers] that were first apprehensive about providing online training have later said their trainings went well and they look forward to using the online content again to train others in the future." MAP trainings are often offered at no cost and are updated regularly on the website: www.map-inc.org under "Training."

There are some tall hurdles on our track and it looks like they will be with us a while, therefore we must practice. All of us. The software and hardware tools used by trainers and trainees alike are continually under development, being revised and updated. So, log on and begin training!

FEATURE ARTICLE

Photo by Jeffrey Kormann: Pre-schoolers filling their water bottles in a Missouri school just fitted with a water bottle filling station from the Agua4All Grant.

Grant for School Water Bottle Filling Stations

By Erin Miller, Accounting/Human Resources Assistant

Schools are facing many challenges, including utilizing safe, clean drinking fountains and keeping students well hydrated during the school day. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance updated May 19, 2020 recommends cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces including drinking fountains or minimizing their use and touch to reduce the spread of COVID-19. School administrations face the concern of how to properly sanitize frequently touched buttons on the drinking fountain and the social distancing requirements of students waiting in line for a drink.

Drinking fountains can also become broken, lose water quality, become dirty or unappealing in taste and look due to their age. Students need to have access to safe drinking water throughout the day to stay well hydrated. Easily accessible, quality water can reduce the consumption of soda and sugar-sweetened beverages promoting not just oral health but overall health.

> ***The Chris Long Foundation: "The Agua4All program is addressing a critical need in ensuring that students have access to safe drinking water, leading to academic success and healthier lifestyles."***

Water Bottle Filling Stations

There is a need to find a solution that is safe, effective and long term. Water bottle filling stations can retrofit or replace existing drinking water fountains and allow users to fill their water bottles hands free. High performance filters significantly reduce unpleasant chlorine taste. Crisp, chilled water from the bottle filling stations may promote healthy habits and encourage students to drink water more often. Stations are energy efficient and help reduce the amount of plastic water bottle consumption and waste.

Drinking stations provide touchless use by placing the bottle near a sensor to begin filling and automatically stop when the bottle is taken away. Various filters are certified to NSF 42 and 53 for lead, Class 1 particulate, chlorine, taste and odor reduction. The drinking stations reduce line waiting as the average time to fill the bottle is 5 seconds. Some models are built with anti-microbial protection that inhibits the growth of mold and mildew. To clean the outside, simply wipe down with soapy water. A built-in water bottle counter tracks the number of plastic water bottles the station has saved.

Water filling stations are becoming a very popular option not only for schools but health clubs, offices, airports, and parks. The State of Kentucky became the first state to require water bottle filling stations for all newly constructed schools and school remodel projects in April 2019.

One-Year Grant Agua4All

The Chris Long Foundation and CoBank provided funding for a one-year grant entitled Agua4All to the Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) to help schools replace or retrofit their water fountains with filtered water filling stations. Through this funding, Midwest Assistance Program, Inc. (MAP), a partner of RCAP, is currently assisting two schools in Missouri and three schools in Montana.

MAP first performs an assessment, at no cost to the school, to determine

water quality and to identify whether a replacement or retrofit of the current water fountains are appropriate. Schools are responsible for the installation of the water filling

Cheryl Mack, Superintendent of Community R-VI School District: "[This] assistance enabled the district to replace additional water fountains with water bottle filling stations. The hands-free function of these refill stations provides a sanitary option for students and staff to stay hydrated throughout the day."

stations and the costs associated with the installation. MAP will purchase the water filling stations and one set of additional filters. Each filling station unit has an estimated cost of $800-$1,500, while filter costs vary. After installation is complete, MAP will perform tests on the water quality at the water stations. MAP will also make a one-time purchase of water bottles to give to the students.

For more information on the Agua4All grant, please email map@map-inc.org.

Photo by Jeffrey Kormann: Fifth graders filling water bottles from recently installed station from the Aqua4All Grant.

Midwest Assistance Program

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WATER AND WASTEWATER RESOURCES

Visit WWW.MAP-INC.ORG for a variety of resources that are very useful to small, rural drinking water and wastewater systems.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESOURCES & LINKS

Visit our website for a list of links and resources, compiled by Kristina Hartley, Project Manager/ Technical Assistance Provider, including the nine state health departments in our coverage area, which can help you navigate the continuously updated chain of information.

TRAINING OFFERED AT A VARIETY OF LEVELS

MAP will provide expert training focused on meeting the needs of your community. Thought provoking interactive courses utilizing most modern techniques to address current issues are offered at a variety of levels for board members, council members, city clerks and operators.

TRAINING AVAILABLE IN YOUR REGION

To check out in-person and virtual trainings already being offered in your area visit our website or to request specific types of training, email us at map@map-inc.org.

MIDWEST ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

SOURCE

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Source Mission:
To provide information for the clients of the Midwest Assistance Program so they better understand the programs and services MAP offers to help them improve their communities and tribal associations; and to showcase the expertise of MAP employees.

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Printed with inks containing soy and/or vegetable oils

Midwest Assistance Program, Inc. (MAP) is a member of The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP network). RCAP is made up of a total of six regional partners including MAP.

MAP has been helping communities, water and wastewater districts, home owners' associations, lake associations and tribal nations find solutions to their infrastructure, financial, managerial, operational and development needs through drinking water, wastewater and solid waste technical assistance since 1979.

MAP provides drinking water, wastewater and solid waste solutions to more than 400 communities and tribal nations each year in Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming.

Through individualized support from staff, communities and systems find the solutions that will help revitalize their communities and sustain their infrastructure. MAP consists of a highly professional and competent staff that has a deep commitment to the strength, future and vitality of rural America.