

Water & Wastewater Recruiting Approaches

by Lonnie Kevin Clark, Project Manager/ Technical Assistance Provider

Water and wastewater utilities have a growing need for qualified operators to maintain our communities' safe drinking water and help to protect our environment and resources for the future. With the growing number of retiring operators from the baby boomer era, the utility profession is struggling to keep up.

Every day people in the United States rely on drinking water and wastewater plant operators. They depend on turning on their faucet and getting a glass of safe drinking water or watering their gardens or crops that go into the nation's food chain. Operators keep the public and environment safe by ensuring raw sewage does not contaminate waterways and aquifers. The importance of the service these operators provide is enormous.

According to the USDA Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) signed in February 2020, "More than 97% of the nation's 153,000 public water systems serve fewer than 10,000 persons, and 78% of the nation's 15,000 wastewater treatment plants treat less than 1 million gallons per day." The communities that fall into these categories suffer a considerable challenge of keeping the water and wastewater services affordable while maintaining a sustainable utility. Out of these systems, it has been estimated by the U.S. Department of Labor "that a projected 8.2% of existing water operators will need to be replaced annually between 2016 and 2026."

WORKINGHAND-IN-HAND

Midwest Assistance Program, Inc. (MAP) works hand-in-hand with small communities on administrative functions and tackling tough questions such as how to fill the vital role of an operator or clerk. MAP can assist the utility by reviewing job descriptions and evaluating compensation considerations for employees requiring certifications or working in hazardous conditions. MAP evaluates budget constraints and compares different recruiting approaches. MAP can facilitate conversations with local organizations such as the chamber of commerce, regional planning commissions, veterans associations, or vocational schools to seek candidates who reside within or near the community. They system can consider discussing contract agreements with neighboring communities to share a certified operator. MAP offers continuing education training to operators to retain their certifications and can provide preparatory materials for studying for certification exams. MAP can also work closely with newly hired operators or clerks to train them on job duties.

