Introduction

We all recognize the threat the impending shortage of qualified drinking water operators poses to our profession and society at large. If we do not act, the projected 50 percent loss of our current national workforce in the next 8 years could have dire consequences. Our ability to maintain and operate our public drinking water systems could be compromised, endangering public health, public safety, and the environment. This workforce issue has three separate but interrelated components:

- Who will take the place of our retiring operators?
- How can we best train and qualify operators?
- How can we preserve and pass along needed institutional knowledge?

This document addresses only the first question. It focuses on identifying the next generation of drinking water professionals and the methods and means of attracting them to our profession. The inability to successfully address this first question leaves the remaining two questions moot.

Many of us have participated in workshops and discussions on this issue. Numerous studies have been conducted to better define the scope and scale of this problem. Yet, a key consensus derived from these efforts points to the fact there is no “magic” bullet, but rather a broad-based, stakeholder approach will best work towards meeting and resolving this challenge. In short, the workforce crisis can only be addressed if each of us “does our part.”

The New England Water Works Association Operator Certification Committee has developed this list of key stakeholders and a series of concrete actions each can take. Everyone’s time and resources are limited, but if each of us “does our part” in our professional spheres of influence, we can recruit, develop, and retain a competent, motivated, professional workforce to insure a bright future for the drinking water profession.

Stakeholder Groups and What Each Can Do to Meet the Drinking Water Workforce Crisis

Utilities ♦ States ♦ Associations
Public Officials and Community Water System Owners ♦ U.S. EPA
What Can Utilities Do as Stakeholders?

- Develop a straightforward document/checklist on how to become an operator:
  - post "How to Become an Operator" information on state certification Web sites
  - distribute "How to Become an Operator" information to community colleges
  - keep ABC Web site information up to date, clear, and concise
  - develop and maintain demographic statistics which target operator employment opportunities

Partner with organizations dealing with workforce issues to provide drinking water career path information:
- partner with EPA to utilize funding for paid internships
- partner with educational organizations/associations to offer and promote operator training opportunities
- partner with state programs offering displaced worker retraining
- partner with organizations to offer career fairs to promote the drinking water profession
- promote/encourage operator internships, co-ops, placements, and work studies
- promote succession planning (e.g., during sanitary surveys)

What Can States Do as Stakeholders?

- Advocate the importance of drinking water in public health, public safety, economic development, and quality of life:
  - develop/place news releases
  - write op-ed responses
  - serve as an "expert" contact for information on drinking water
- Educate key groups on the importance of drinking water and the role of the professional operator in providing a safe and adequate supply:
  - address current drinking water issues as they develop
  - identify key public outreach grounds
  - provide outreach information and strategies
- Provide tools to assist utilities in recruiting, developing, and retaining professional operators:
  - identify, develop, and provide training to keep pace with technology and regulations
  - provide "advance" regulatory information
  - provide guidance/best practice information, including:
    - Operator Certification Committee best practice documents
    - position-description templates
    - publications
    - public outreach tools
- Collaborate with state, regulatory, and national agencies to raise the drinking water profession’s visibility.

What Can Public Officials and Community Water System Owners Do as Stakeholders?

- Advocate the importance of drinking water in public health, public safety, economic development, and quality of life:
  - raise public awareness
- Promote recognition of the importance of certified operators as professionals in the protection of public health:
  - continue to mark the path forward to enter the profession
  - identify new sectors for recruitment
- Promote effective utility management:
  - encourage adoption of best management practices
  - encourage coordination across programs
  - promote sustainability
- Funding:
  - develop grant funding which supports workforce succession
  - identify and coordinate other sources of funding

What Can Associations Do as Stakeholders?

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