

The Drinking Water Workforce Crisis on the Horizon: What Can be Done to Recruit and Develop Future Operators and Who Can Do It?



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?

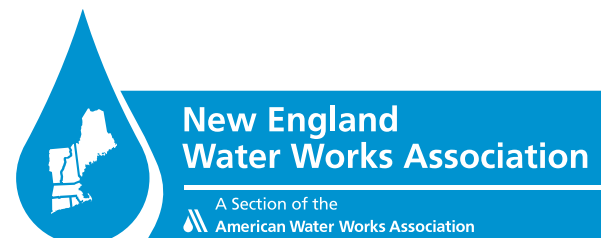
This document addresses only the first question. It focuses on identifying the next generation of drinking water professionals and the methods and means of attracting them to our profession. The inability to successfully address this first question leaves the remaining two questions moot.

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**



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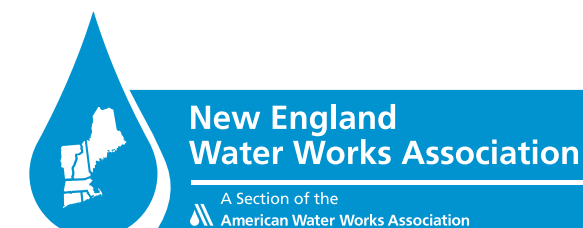
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Operator Certification Committee

“Encourage recruitment and development of future operators to ensure succession”

What Can Utilities Do as Stakeholders?

Review job descriptions to include more definition; make job descriptions more representative of professional status. Include such key items as:

- certification/educational requirements
- job title/level (inclusive/complete)
- job functions
- identify and define decision-making responsibilities

Conduct an organizational analysis to promote a high level of professionalism:

- create an internal career ladder
- create an internal professional development program
- consider developing internship programs for professional succession
- consider the following, as public perception is based on appearances:

- ◊ establishing a dress code/uniforms for utility personnel
- ◊ establishing a code of conduct for utility personnel
- ◊ maintaining the appearance of personnel and facilities

Promote organization-wide professional development/training:

- identify training needs in your organization for operations, management, and administrative staff
- identify resources to meet training needs
- evaluate the benefits of cross training within your organization
- consider individual professional development plans for all employees

Develop a public relations program which targets the utility's role in public health and safety and economic development. Target audiences should include:

- rate payers
- public officials
- the media
- youth
- other key stakeholders



What Can States 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 Associations 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.

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

Identify and understand the requirements to operate a public water system.

Work with water supply professionals in the development of an asset management plan.

Adopt a rate structure that adequately funds:

- personnel
- operation and maintenance, security, and emergency response
- capital improvement—short and long term
- potential growth

Promote professional development/training and succession planning.

Educate the public about the importance of the public water system in providing:

- public health
- public safety
- economic development
- quality of life
- conservation and resource protection



What Can the U.S. EPA Do as a Stakeholder?

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

