

Each issue, we ask members of the *On Tap* Editorial Advisory Board to answer a drinking water-related question. We then print as many responses as space permits. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of NESCA.



Having a good water board is important for water systems, particularly small ones, and a board is only as effective as the people on it. Several states now require mandatory board training for water board members.

Q: Should these mandatory training programs be adopted more widely?

Editorial Advisory Board

Jerry Biberstine

Senior Environmental Engineer
National Rural Water Association

Jenny Bielanski

Drinking Water Utilities Team Leader
EPA Office of Ground Water and
Drinking Water

Rodney Coker

Tribal Utility Consultant (Retired)
Indian Health Service

Mark Coyne

Associate Professor
University of Kentucky

Frank DeOrio

Director of Municipal Utilities
Auburn, NY

Kevin Kundert

Interactive Training Developer
Montana Water Resources Center

Z. Michael Lahlou, Ph.D.

Civil and Environmental Engineer
Huntington Beach, CA

Lori B. Libby

Senior Project Manager
Center for Public Management
and Regional Affairs
Miami University of Ohio

Babu Madabhushi, Ph.D.

Project Engineer
URS Corporation
Miami Springs, FL

Dale Ralston

President
Ralston Hydrologic Services
Moscow, ID

Lisa Raysby

Water Department Manager
Peninsula Light Company, WA

Jay Rutherford, P.E.

Water Supply Division Director
Vermont Department of
Environmental Conservation

Amy Vickers

Engineer and Water Conservation
Specialist
Amy Vickers and Associates, Inc.
Amherst, MA



Don't Forget the Funding

Fundamentally, the idea of having training for water board members is a good one. But let's not forget the individuals in question. Because these people are often volunteers, we must make it as easy as possible to get training and not impose financial burdens on them. Therefore, some funding mechanism would have to be established to support the implementation of mandatory training. Over the last couple years, federal support for training has dwindled, meaning that states will have to bear most of the cost. Make the training mandatory but make it as easy as possible for people to be trained.



Rod Coker

Tribal Utility
Consultant (Retired)

Indian Health
Service



Lisa Raysby, P.E.

Water Engineer
Peninsula Light
Company

Spend Money on Other Training

Our company is headed by a chief executive officer (CEO) and has a board that oversees our water business. I would say our board is well trained and knowledgeable for carrying out their board functions and legal responsibilities. The board does not micromanage the daily functions of the company, nor does the CEO for that matter. Additionally, our operators participate in regularly scheduled company and mandatory state training.

Where I see a bigger need is in terms of service and rate setting training for our board. We could provide this training with resources and tools we have within our own company. My understanding is that our board is set on not raising water rates and fees despite the fact the cost of doing business is increasing.

I believe the most important functions of a board (more important than attending mandatory training) is to review the budget and budget projections, listen to recommendations from staff (or consultants), and determine the course of action for meeting realistic expectations. The cost of doing business can not continue to rise without financial implications taken into consideration, including whether or not raising rates is justifiable or what expenses can be legitimately reduced to offset other increases. Do board members really want to defer annual cost increases for potential future double digit increases? I think training in these areas would be more helpful than mandatory board training.



Jerry Biberstine

Senior Environmental
Engineer
National Rural Water
Association

No Excuses!

Water board training is vital to keep a water system running smoothly, especially in this period of rapid regulatory change. Because it is the water board that has to decide what changes need to be made, when to make them, and how they are going to be funded, the board needs to understand every aspect of operations and management that the system has to face. They need to understand their water quality, existing and upcoming regulations, budgeting, fundraising, public relations, and more. The only way that new and old board members can keep up on all of this is through regular training. Effective board training programs presently exist and are administered through state government, state rural water programs, as well as other associations, and private trainers. The important thing is that boards get frequent training and updates on related issues.

The biggest problem is that most boards cannot be bothered going to training. They don't wish to waste time sitting through classes, and especially do not want to waste precious resources by paying a trainer to come out and spend time with them. They are working people that have far too much to do to spend time sitting in class. What a crock! If, indeed, board members are too busy, too cost conscious, or too important to learn how to be proper guardians of their water system, then they shouldn't be on the board in the first place. Their role as board members is to make important decisions about the future of the water system based on their knowledge of pertinent issues, and that means learning all they can about water systems and everything that goes into providing safe drinking water to their customers.

Because so many boards make unwise decisions about their water systems based on poor knowledge, many states have felt forced to require board member training. The states feel that this is the only way that the public health can be protected from well meaning but ignorant decision makers.

It is neither expensive nor too time consuming to get enough training to board members to insure that wise, intelligent decisions are made. But unless these boards make the decision to get adequate training, they will surely be required to do it, whether they want to or not, in the near future.



Kevin Kundert

President and Chief
Instructional Systems
Mechanic
eTRAIN ONLINE, Inc.

The Time Has Come

There's a reason many states require mandatory water board training. If a board is unable to maintain the water system properly, then the responsibility could eventually be shouldered by state or federal entities. Of course it's also a big risk to public health for a water system to be managed by people who don't know the basics.

Many times operators are presented with insurmountable problems when they don't have adequate resources to run the system. Educating water board members helps bring people up to speed so that they can make competent decisions when it comes to funding necessary expenses for the proper operation of a public water system. If training is made mandatory, it is actually a benefit to board members because then the water system is required to fund that training. I know of many cases where volunteer board members paid for education out of their own pocket.

Some training organizations are at work on this issue now—to provide the right training for these folks and to do it cheaply (or for free). Yes, it's time to make basic water system capacity training mandatory for water board members.