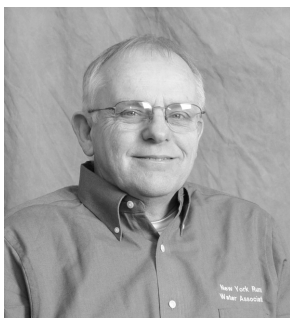


Filling The Void?

By Mike Dill
Wastewater Trainer



We have a problem and if it is not addressed and quickly, it will create a disaster. The aging workforce, and a lack of young people to replace and carry on. Our business, or service, is 24/7 regardless. Nights, weekends, holidays are not on the calendar.

Taking care of business happens.

One reason is we are good at what we do. Perhaps too good, we make it look easy. Thus people think “how hard can it be”? Water comes to the home and is flushed away. How simple. It comes, it goes.

Those of us on the inside know it is not that simple. Some of the technical skills required to make it come and go are: Chemistry, Biology, Math, and people skills come to mind. Start at the beginning, before certification. Must have on the job training. EXPERIENCE. No way around experience. Time on the job. Using the example of a Grade 2 wastewater operator, he must have a minimum of three years experience, prior to certification. Education may be substituted for one half or eighteen months to meet this requirement. However, the minimum for education is a high school diploma or GED. First requirement covered. Second, must be employed at a Grade 2 or higher treatment facility for at least six months prior to enrolling in the required wastewater training courses. Why six months prior, try explaining wastewater treatment to someone who has no knowledge or basic understanding of the process. Blank stares and confusion come to mind. If you are in the plant, you can see, hear, and ask questions of what is happening. A picture, or hands on experience, is worth a thousand words. Learning the various pieces of equipment and their role in the process is vital. Wastewater treatment is done by microorganisms, and if the right environment is not provided for the bugs, little or no treatment happens. The operator's job is to create and maintain that environment. Looks easy on paper. However, the operator must take it off the paper and make it happen.

Six months on the job, now the required training of basic operations and laboratory proficiency. If you have to ask about proficiency, find your dictionary. So far, we need a diploma, six months in plant and complete the required training. If you do the math, this is only two years and the regulations require three years. Math is never easy. What this means is another year of approved plant operating experience. Approved means, under the supervision of a certified Grade 2 or higher, operator. Fast forward to all the requirements have been satisfied. Now the paperwork. You

must submit proof of all these requirements to DEC to apply for the certification examination. Remember, the exam is only given twice a year, so it could be months from time of completed requirements to taking the exam. Memory retention.

Message to operators: get your elected officials involved. Invite them (once is not enough), to the plant. Show them the community's multi-million dollar investment. They do not have to understand how it works, that's your job.

Message to elected officials: get involved with your facility. You are there to oversee, not operate, that multi-million dollar facility.

I encourage all operators to give this article to your elected officials. I have a simple question for elected officials, did you know it takes up to three years to become a certified operator, and once certification has been obtained, there is a continuing education requirement of forty hours of approved instruction to maintain that certification? So if your present operator is closing in on retirement, what are your thoughts on his replacement? If you are thinking about hiring a Contract Operator, what makes you think they will have enough qualified operators? We are facing a people shortage. Not enough bodies to do the job.

First thing is visit the plant and see what your investment is. The treatment facilities of today are not a pond that discharges to a receiving stream. The facility of today requires technical knowledge in Chemistry, Biology, Math and good hands-on experience. There are not people lining up at the Village Office waiting for these jobs. Right now there are treatment plants in need of certified operators and those vacancies are open. Can't be filled. People shortage.

As an elected official, your primary responsibility is the proper funding of these treatment facilities so they can operate at peak efficiency. I know money is tight, a dollar only goes so far. I am going to mention a four letter word: rates. Is your rate right, think about it? When budget review time comes, give it the attention it deserves. Don't look at the bottom line and say reduce it. Perhaps a revenue adjustment is necessary. These facilities are mechanical, things wear out or break. That's the reason for preventive maintenance. Please don't slash the training funds. A well trained and educated operator can save you dollars. A one day training event can supply your operator with information to run the plant more efficiently, thus saving dollars.

Mr. Elected Official, you have the ability to make changes that will affect the future workforce for your community. This is not going to be easy, never is, but changes are needed. We are dealing with the public health and nothing is more important. Nuff said: see ya. 💧