

Standardize Your Operations With SOPs

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The New York State Department of Health (DOH) works closely with the New York Rural Water Association on all manners of drinking water issues. Rural Water is a strong voice for small system operators and provides valuable input to many decisions that the DOH needs to make. Rural Water Circuit Riders are an essential part of our statewide effort to provide technical assistance where and when it is needed most, and the circuit riders are not bashful about speaking up. So when the DOH wanted to promote the use of Standard Operating Procedures by small water systems to help them better prepare for emergencies, such as a H1N1 (swine) flu pandemic, it was no surprise that Rural Water was immediately on board to help.

As part of our collaboration, DOH and Rural Water developed a template that small and very small water systems can use to prepare their own Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Good SOPs should document the information about a water system that will help a qualified, but unfamiliar operator step in and operate that system. Good SOPs should have step by step instructions for key tasks that are clear, concise, and easy to follow. Good SOPs should also have schedules so that essential tasks get done when needed.

SOPs are not a regulatory mandate, but well written SOPs can go a long way to help small system operators do their jobs better, faster, and more reliably. Even more importantly, SOPs could be critical for ensuring uninterrupted operation during an emergency, such as a flu pandemic. If that isn't reason enough, SOPs could also free you up for vacation by giving an assistant or visiting operator the information needed to run your system.

The DOH encourages all drinking water systems to develop SOPs. A template that will help you do this is available in two formats from Rural Water's website at: <http://www.nyruralwater.org/downloads/downloads-reports-templates-fact-sheets.cfm>

Rural Water's website includes a PDF file for

anyone who wants to print a blank template and hand write their SOPs. There is also a Microsoft Word file that will allow you to customize the SOPs template to meet your own needs. With the MS Word format you can add what you need, delete tables that don't apply, and revise whatever else helps to create SOPs that work best for you.

Don't be surprised if you hear SOP encouragement from your local health official. The SOPs template was provided to County and District Health Offices across the state. If you do not have internet access, you can get the SOPs template from your local health office, or from a Rural Water Circuit Rider. Where staffing allows, your local health office may also be able to help you complete your SOPs and we encourage you to seek their assistance. We also encourage you to give a copy of completed SOPs to your local health office and to your Rural Water Circuit Rider. This way, if they are called on to help your water system with an unexpected problem, they can do so with your own words to guide them.

The value of Standard Operating Procedures might be best summarized by the following "Top Ten" list. Any one of these reasons should be enough to get you started on your own SOPs, but in the end, don't be surprised if your SOPs work for all ten reasons.

The Top Ten Great Reasons to Use SOPs


1. Better serve your customers
2. Provide consistent, more reliable water quality
3. Provide a handy aid for your day to day tasks
4. Can be a great training aid for new employees
5. Help another qualified operator run your system
6. Free you up for that long delayed vacation
7. Reduce the calls for help that interrupt your vacation
8. Prepare the next generation for your well deserved retirement
9. Help Rural Water Circuit Riders help you
10. Prepare for a flu pandemic... H1N1 (swine) flu this winter.

Though operators may not hear it often enough, the DOH does appreciate all the effort it takes to run a successful water system. Providing enough clean potable water to meet customer demands and regulatory obligations, uninterrupted for 365 days a year, is a very big challenge. This high level of performance is expected of all public water suppliers, no matter how many customers are served, and is usually accomplished with little recognition. Having well written SOPs may not win a round of applause, but they will help achieve the performance that is expected.

Helpful Resources:

Another great tool to help water systems prepare for emergencies, including a possible H1N1 flu pandemic, is the NYWARN Mutual Aid system. This is available free to all NY State water suppliers. You can find out more and join this utility run effort online at: <http://www.nywarn.org/>.

Want to know more about H1N1 (swine) flu and how to protect yourself, your family, and your water system staff? Check out the DOH website at: <http://www.nyhealth.gov/diseases/communicable/influenza/index.htm>

Would you like to know more about water borne diseases such as Giardiasis, Cryptosporidiosis, or even cholera? Check out the DOH website at: <http://www.nyhealth.gov/diseases/> 

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