



APPRENTICESHIP: A POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO SUCCESSION PLANNING

Jamie Herman | CEO

Since 2017, the New York Rural Water Association has been hard at work under the direction of the National Rural Water Association on an Apprenticeship Program for our industry. The NRWA established a national guideline by developing a program with the US Department of Labor. At that point, our staff began working with the New York State Department of Labor on the creation of two Apprenticeship Programs...Water Systems Operation Specialist and Wastewater Systems Operation Specialist. Personnel from the NYS Department of Labor have been an enormous help, especially our assigned Apprenticeship Training Representative. This has been a long process, but with the help of the NYSDOL we have been able to meet or exceed all criteria and expectations to this point.

Let me first state clearly that our proposed Apprenticeship Program is not registered (state approved) as of the writing of this article. However, we have successfully achieved two of the three approvals required, and anticipate final approval and receipt of (2) Registered Apprenticeship Titles in the near future.

People have asked why we devoted so much time and effort into this process. First, water and wastewater Operation Specialists are retiring at a rapid rate, and this trend is set to continue for some time. There are not enough new candidates entering our industry, which a registered Apprenticeship Program may help provide a degree of relief. Once registered, information will be provided in schools, educating students on this industry. Second, the Apprenticeship Program will ensure a mechanism for adequate on-the-job training, as well as classroom training, to ensure new personnel entering the field are trained appropriately. Third, this program will establish an industry process standard, providing the new hire (apprentice) a better chance of success both for initial certification and for the operational career. Last, the NYRWA was established to provide classroom and onsite training. It is our mission. We have a proven track record as a leader in the industry and are committed to this program on a long term basis.

This program does not replace the initial certification process, but is intended to enhance and provide for more well educated, competent, and effective Operation Specialists once completed. Further, we feel strongly that employees who complete the apprenticeship requirements will have a higher success rate in the initial certification process.

What are the requirements of the Apprenticeship

Program? Both job titles are (2) year programs, which may be extended if necessary to fulfill certain requirements. Each year the apprentice is required to complete 2000 hours of on-the-job learning (OJL) and 144 hours of related instruction. The NYRWA will serve as the Program Sponsor, and will oversee all apprentices. Water and wastewater systems will employ the apprentices and work with the NYRWA to ensure all standards are followed and achieved. The NYRWA will provide the majority of the related instruction (classroom training), and will meet with apprentices and signatories (employers) to manage the paperwork requirements.

You may ask, why would we enroll as a signatory in this program? In New York State, and nationwide, certified Operation Specialists are in short supply, and even greater demand. For many water and wastewater systems, the Apprenticeship Program may offer a valuable alternative to the normal hiring process. Most importantly, the benefit of the Apprenticeship Program is in providing a well rounded, well educated, and well trained Operation Specialist for the system at the end of the process. Apprentices under this program MAY be hired at a lower wage...\$15/hour for the first year and \$16/hour for the second year under NYSDOL requirements. However, this is merely an option, all signatories we have enrolled to date have stated they will pay their current labor rate which is higher than the hourly amounts listed. There are also potential funding opportunities linked to this program. For privately owned systems, there is a NYS Tax Credit Program to provide a degree of financial relief. Further, there are grant opportunities available to help all apprentices, public and private, to defray the costs of the related instruction and potentially a small portion of the labor wage. As the Program Sponsor, the NYRWA will apply for these opportunities on behalf of the apprentices.

This is a very condensed overview of the Apprenticeship Program. If you would be interested in learning more, or if you believe this would be a possible alternative for your system, please reach out to Kevin Maine at Maine@nyruralwater.org or Jamie Herman at Herman@nyruralwater.org. We are confident this program will be successful, but only if our valued water and wastewater systems here in NYS see the potential, engage in the process, and enroll as signatories. Together we can achieve great success, provide for succession planning and replacement of our aging workforce, and continue to provide...Quality on Tap! 💧💧