

System Assessments by Barney Whatley Capacity Development Specialist

In the 1996 amendment to the Safe Drinking Water Act, Capacity Development was added to assist public water systems in improving their financial, managerial and technical conditions. This basically boils down to a system's ability to function as an independent business. A system needs to have the finances to maintain and repair the infrastructure that of which it is composed, management that understands the needs and requirements of the system and an operator who can keep the system running smoothly and consistently deliver safe drinking water to its customers. Keeping this in mind, how can system owners and operators accurately determine if they are doing a good job in these areas?

One way to assist in this determination is to complete an assessment of the system. Scott Sprague, the Environmental Assistance Coordinator for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health, is currently working on a self-assessment tool for Nebraska's Public Water Supply Systems to use. This assessment asks many questions concerning the technical, managerial and financial ability of the system to operate as a business, and in completing it, the operator or owner of the system will become more familiar with the system's capabilities and shortcomings. Questions that either require a "no" answer, or the answer is not known, should encourage the system to investigate this aspect of the system and determine the actions it must take to be able to properly answer the question.

There is also another assessment tool that is available to systems. A comprehensive system assessment has been developed as a gauge of the effectiveness of State Revolving Fund (SRF) loans in improving or maintaining a systems capacity to operate. There are three ways a system is likely to have this assessment completed. A system that is financed through the SRF fund will undergo an assessment prior to receiving the funds. Two to four years after the project is completed, the system will undergo a reassessment. The comparison of these two assessments will help to determine whether the funding aided in increasing or maintaining the capacity of the system. This is an important step in the funding process, as the results of these assessments will help demonstrate to EPA that the funding the state receives is accomplishing the task for which it was intended.

Systems can also request the extensive assessment on their own. Any system wishing to have an assessment completed can call the NeRWA office and schedule a time for this to be accomplished. The assessment will take approximately 3 hours, depending on the availability of the information that is asked for. It can also be split into sections that would only take an hour or so, if this is the system's desire. When the assessment is completed, the system will receive a copy of the completed assessment, along with a list of goals for the system and the necessary actions for the goals to be achieved.

It is important for all water systems to be operated in the best manner possible, and an assessment of the systems current operations can act as a guide for needed improvement. I strongly urge all systems to be assessed, either by a self-assessment or a comprehensive assessment, so they know what needs to be done to optimize their service to their customers.