

Our Aging Workforce

By Jim Heyen

How many of you have thought about who will take your place when you retire? Do you have qualified prospects within your village/community? Will your town be able to offer a wage to encourage potential employees?

On a break, in one of my past classes, a list of numbers was written on the blackboard, while I was getting a cup of coffee. When I returned, I was asked if I knew what the numbers represented. It was the ages of the operators at the class. This led to a discussion on how the Wastewater workforce is growing older. Like wine we are just getting better, but we are still getting older! If you were wondering, the average age of the operators was 62 years old!!

Just when I started to feel better about my age, my wife brings home a list of the top 10 most needed jobs in the workforce in the next five to ten years, and #2 on that list was the need for water/wastewater professionals. Then on top of every thing else, our National Rural Water Association wrote an article on the aging workforce.

Kinda Scary!

Many cities and villages are facing challenges in the efforts to find and hire professional water and wastewater professionals.

“It’s estimated that more than 50 percent of the nation’s water/wastewater system operators will leave their jobs in the next five to ten years. System owners need to start recruiting now.” In my opinion train your replacement. Look within your own community. Too many of the young people are forced to move away to find work. Begin looking for those interested in staying with the community and start training them for a career in water/wastewater management - maybe as early as a part-time summer job.

If training your replacement doesn’t seem to be an option, the community may have to look at raising the salary to attract qualified operators. When an individual has to make a move, the costs are higher than hiring someone already established in the community.

This financial increase may force you to educate the public about the costs to maintain and operate water/wastewater systems in smaller communities. Many communities have been blessed with an operator who has serviced their community for many years and has just taken care of the day-to-day responsibilities without notice. It is much easier for residents to pay more for services if they understand what they are paying for.

The bottom line is, when will the time come for your community to hire a new operator? Will you be ready?