

INSIGHT

Three steps to prepare for your system's future staffing needs

Changes in management and staff are inevitable in any organization or company. Yet, retirements and turnover of staff in key positions often can be extended and costly for rural water or utility systems. The following are three important steps to help prepare a system for staff transitions.

Develop a Strategic Plan

When planning for a trip, you need to know where you're going to know what to pack. The same can be said for succession planning; a system can't know what it needs for future roles and skillsets without having a vision of its future. For example, knowing if a system might be tackling growth, looking at consolidation, or dealing with funding challenges, affects the future skills needed for a variety of positions. A long-term vision and strategic plan also are important during staffing changes because they ensure continuity and protect the culture of the system.

To develop a strategic plan, assess the current strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the system. Next, establish achievable stretch goals and develop strategic initiatives, actions and timelines to achieve those goals. Those components of the strategic plan should lay out a map to help guide a system for the next three to five years.

Document System Knowledge

Another important step to help a system through staff transitions is to capture, document and transfer system knowledge. Many rural water and local utility systems are fortunate to have several long-term staff members. Those employees often hold a wealth of information about the system infrastructure, operations and users in their heads. However, what happens when those

employees leave?

Documenting information and having a centralized database to store that information are critical to the continuity of staff and service in these situations. A great place to start is to consider the quality of information in the system's geographic information system (GIS). For systems without the staff time to tackle updating and/or improving their GIS, consultants can often fill that gap in data collection and verification.

Prepare a Succession Plan

Succession planning is the process of looking ahead to future and potential staffing needs in key positions throughout the system, not necessarily just the top leader's spot. It is an integral part of connecting staffing to a system's long-term goals, mitigating risks associated with turnover and developing existing staff to match future system needs.

To begin the process, systems should identify key staffing areas and positions. From there, it is helpful to leverage strategic plans to understand what competencies and skills will be needed for those roles now and in the future. Next, systems should consider whether internal staff members could potentially fit the roles with mentorship and training or will there be a need to recruit external candidates.

A system can be much better prepared for planned and emergency staffing needs by taking these three steps. The South Dakota Association of Rural Water Systems also has developed a guide with its "Succession Planning & Recruitment Handbook" which contains worksheets, assessments and examples that you may find useful to help with the succession planning process.