Creating the Water Workforce of the Future

On October 23, EPA hosted a webinar focusing on water utilities’ most important asset – their people. MCWRS participated in the session. Various staff members from the Hampton Road Sanitary District (HRSD) in Virginia outlined their apprenticeship and cadet programs, which they credited as the reason for their workforce longevity. Attracting new talent as current staff retire has been an ongoing challenge for water utilities, so this topic was particularly timely. There is great value in learning what utilities are doing around the country and how the initiatives and concepts could be transferred to Massachusetts. MCWRS is pleased to be following this topic that is crucial to water and wastewater utilities’ ability to attract and keep talented staff.

Paula Hogg, Director of Talent Management at HRSD, introduced the apprenticeship program for high school graduates. When it was created in 1979, it was the first program of its kind in the water industry. Students choose between a three or four-year program, where they gain skills based on their chosen trade (options include plant operation, maintenance operation, Interceptor Technician, etc.). Currently, 30% of all HRSD leaders are apprenticeship graduates. The program is a mix of on-the-job training and classroom instruction.

Dorissa Pitts-Paige, Human Resources Specialist with HRSD, explained that the cadet program is a partnership between HRSD and the Hampton Roads Public Works Academy (HRPWA). The cadet program enrolls between 15-20 students each year, who over two years take 32 courses and complete one eight-week summer internship. Of all interns, 98% graduated the program, 21% became full-time HRSD employees and 7% became part-time employees.

Presenters framed the discussion around the ability to transfer this model to other water utilities. Ms. Pitts-Paige outlined some of the challenges of hiring high school students, which included following child labor laws, maintaining full engagement and support from supervisors and some students’ lack of reliable transportation.
Despite these challenges, HRSD staff credited the apprenticeship and cadet programs as sustainable solutions for recruitment and workforce development that also offers unique, fresh perspectives from the younger generation. Additionally, the program fosters the development of leadership skills in current employees who teach and mentor the student interns.

The HRSD apprenticeship and cadet programs are just one of many potential solutions water utilities can utilize to combat the problems that come with an aging workforce. Other innovations include a focus on green infrastructure and other sustainability strategies that have grown in importance and emphasis, and more outreach and collaboration with high schools and colleges. Some Massachusetts communities already have resources for interested students, like Minuteman High School in Lexington, which offers an Environmental Science program where students can graduate with a Grade 1 drinking water & Grade II wastewater operator licenses and OSHA training.

Ms. Pitts-Paige prefaced her presentation by asking the audience to imagine themselves as high school juniors or seniors, wondering if they would have found more success if they were offered an internship potentially leading to a related job. This question is especially relevant in today’s world, where college prep classes are the norm and trade schools are less common. The ability for professionals to hand down knowledge to interested members of the younger generation is invaluable.

You can watch a recording of the webinar here, and download the PowerPoint presentation here.