

## Checking Your System – For Free

Wouldn't it be great if you could get a full assessment of your water system, training for your employees and financial advice to help you prepare for the future? Wouldn't it be even better if you could get it for free?

All of that is possible, thanks to state and federal programs and third-party agencies, such as the Rural Community Assistance Partnership affiliates. These services and more are available through the state and federal capacity development programs.

### Capacity Development 101

The EPA defines capacity development as “a State effort to help drinking water systems improve their finances, management, infrastructure and operations so they can provide safe drinking water consistently, reliably and cost-effectively.” It says capacity development offers an “exceptionally flexible framework within which States and water systems can work together to ensure that systems acquire and maintain the technical, financial and managerial [capacity] to consistently achieve the health objectives of the 1996 Safe Drinking Water Act.”

In English, the program is designed to let state and third-party agencies help figure out the good and the not-so-good of a water system; determine the needs, the wants and which can be afforded; provide rate assessments and board and employee training and plan for the future.

Capacity development covers three main categories: technical, financial and managerial, referred to as “TFM assistance” by the EPA and state agencies. The idea is to ensure that water systems not only have the right equipment to provide safe drinking water to their customers, but they also have trained employees who can run and maintain the equipment in top form, as well as money for upkeep and future upgrades. It also ensures that water systems have a better shot of keeping in compliance with state and federal water regulations, a goal stated by the EPA in its explanation of capacity development.

These programs are funded through the federal EPA's Drinking Water State Revolving Fund. They pay for the capacity development, but actual improvements often must be funded elsewhere. However, some agencies also provide help to systems to find funding through state and federal grants.

### To the Rescue

Capacity development entails a lot, so much that water systems may feel overwhelmed by all the factors, requirements and paperwork. Luckily, there is help. Free help.

The Rural Community Assistance Partnership (RCAP) provides free assistance for financial and managerial capacity development.

RCAP and its affiliates provide technical assistance and training, rate studies and aid in applying for and receiving funding for improvement projects.

Consider the village of Exeland, Wisconsin, population 212. The town first contacted WISCAP, the state RCAP affiliate, to help create an emergency response plan, said Katherine Cartwright, rural development specialist/engineer for WISCAP. The staff helped Exeland officials develop an emergency response plan and mutual aid agreements with three nearby communities.

WISCAP then got calls from the state Department of Natural Resources and the Public Service Commission, both of which encouraged the affiliate to work with Exeland on its water rates. The town had not raised its collection amount in years, Cartwright said. She called the village's president and explained what WISCAP did. The agency did a rate study for the water system, outlined a rate system and helped Exeland get a thumbs-up from the Public Service Commission so it could enact its new rates.

WISCAP workers also helped Exeland inform its residents about the increase through news articles and fliers in the water bills, Cartwright said. They even helped the town find and hire a water operator. The town's current operator attended a training class put on by WISCAP to help him obtain certification.

It's a little early to see the full results of WISCAP's efforts, said Susan Kopras, president of the village. The water rates didn't take effect until January, and residents are only billed every three months. Still, Kopras was optimistic that the plans and programs put in place through the capacity development work will help the water system. The new rates, the first in 25 years, will be used to cover the well-based water system's costs.

"It worked out fine," Kopras said of their work with WISCAP. "They always do a good job for us."