

Assessing the Environmental and Capacity Development Outcomes of Small Water System Board and Management Training

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This project assesses the outcomes of community water system board and management training (BMT) in enhancing community technical, financial, and managerial capacity and in achieving or protecting environmental quality and public health. The assessment will recognize and compare the diversity of types of board training, and the context in which these trainings are conducted. The outputs of this initiative will include: 1) a manual on outcome measurement of BMT; and 2) an assessment of BMT as implemented in Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Ohio. The outcome of this initiative will be greater knowledge by EPA and partners about how to measure the environmental and capacity development impacts of BMT.

The research involved a comparative case study framework (Ragin and Becker 2002) to assess the likeness and differences between board and management training programs and make preliminary assessment of impacts. This involved, first, a compilation of the literature on community capacity development in the area of water. Using this framework, this assessment investigated five state programs to understand how small community water system board and management training was implemented and what the impacts of these trainings were. Our analysis involved five phases. First, we compiled demographic and community water system statistics on each state using the United States Census and EPA data sources, specifically the Safe Drinking Water Information System (SDWIS). Second, we compiled background data on community water board and management trainings in each of the states. This involved discussions with key stakeholders and compilation of available background information. Third, we analyzed board and management training curricula sent to us by those responsible for trainings in the states where they conducted organized trainings. Fourth, we conducted participant observations of trainings to understand how they were carried out, who attended and what sorts of interactions occurred during the trainings. Fifth, we assessed documents provided by key informants in each state to assess the preliminary impacts of community water board training.

Through surveying different state programs, it is possible to piece together the similarities and differences in the context and implementation of BMT. These strategies produce particular outcomes, in terms of who gets trained, how in depth their training is, what kinds of skills are gained from the training and ultimately what impacts result from the training?

Mandating that all elected or appointed community water board members receive training, as is done in Mississippi, does the best job of ensuring that all board members receive

some training. This state initiative may be an artifact of political action at the end of the 1990s, when state resources were better. The Mississippi program involves a multi-organizational partnership, and is backed by an activist capacity development evaluation initiative, administered through the Mississippi Department of Health (MsDH). Every small community water system board member in the state at least has exposure to the critical issues facing a community water system—and this may account for Mississippi’s consistently high compliance rate with SDWA rules and regulation. Yet, this program is not well replicated in other states. The appetite for new mandates on communities and new allocations of state resources to improve water system capacity is probably weak right now. Further, the data on compliance probably only tells one small part of the community water system story. There are many reasons that community water systems may or may not be in compliance with rules and regulations.

Other strategies seem to have strengths and weaknesses as well. A critical issue is whether training is reaching a critical mass of board members. Ohio and Kentucky, using very different methods have developed ongoing BMT programs that reach good numbers of community water system officials. But in both cases, a good number of the attendees are not board members, but operators seeking continuing education credits to maintain their operators’ license.

What is not known in any of these cases is the extent to which board operators internalize training in their planning and decision making about the water systems. Four, six or even 12 hours of lectures and PowerPoint slides could result in the internalization of significant knowledge and water system issues. It could also result in overload. It is possible that the on-site trainings, as conducted in by Kentucky RCAP and Illinois RCAP, could do a better job of delivering the needed information and practices to decision makers. Further, the theories of governance training (Robbins 2008) emphasize the importance of building networks and relationships among multiple decision-makers, allowing them to share experiences across geographic contexts and jointly solve problems. Currently, such networking and sharing of experiences is informal among those who attend BMT. Additionally, the forums for such interaction are being eliminated to save costs. More research is needed to really understand the impacts of BMT.