

## Water Industry Targets Veterans, Jobs Statewide



**Statewide, Texas-** The need for water and wastewater operators is predicted to increase by 12 percent by 2020, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. At the same time, the water and wastewater industry will lose 40 percent of its current workforce within the next 10 years. The Veteran Employment Program (VEP or the Program), a unique project of the Texas Rural Water Foundation (TRWF), aims to fill that employment gap by offering training and licensure to qualified veterans.

The Program's goals of assisting veterans to find success through training, licensure, and entry into the rural water and wastewater career field while providing utilities with qualified employees can only be met by the participation of others who would like to share in that mission.

Rural utilities are encouraged to apply to the Program in order to prequalify to help fill their employment needs more quickly with a veteran in need of a career. Veterans also can pre-apply to further the process of finding employment with a rural utility.

At this time, the Program has admitted two veterans who were hired by utilities prior to their application. As participants in the Program, these veterans receive the added benefit of free training from the Texas Rural Water Association (TRWA) and reimbursement for the exam fee to take the class 'D' water operator license. The Program also developed a study guide to aide veterans in passing the water operator license exam. The program also helps maximize the veteran's military benefits for the year of on-the-job training.

"Our goal is to admit five to 10 veterans in the year of 2013-2014, and after that we hope for 15 to 20 total at the end of our third year," said Rashedah Mohammed, a Veteran Employment Program Development Specialist and AmeriCorps VISTA at TRWF. Mohammed serves along with Jessica Noelke at TRWF, and both are specifically assigned to the Veteran Employment Program.

TRWF is working in partnership with AmeriCorps VISTA, a national service program designed specifically to combat poverty in America.

The Program hopes to bring job opportunities to rural utilities across Texas and create a professional workforce, as well as give veterans the tools they need to succeed in the water and wastewater industry.

“Our mission behind the VEP was to provide long term careers to veterans who didn’t want to have a desk job, and who maybe wanted to move back to their home town,” Larry Bell, Program supervisor and Technical Assistance Director at TRWA said. “A lot of times people seeking employment overlook opportunities that are available in their communities, when nearly every town has a water treatment plant of some kind.”

The water and wastewater industry is crucial to maintaining good health within communities all over the world. A water operator may be the one thing standing between the population and a water-borne disease. Their primary job is to ensure that fresh, clean drinking water comes out of the faucet every time a consumer needs it. A wastewater operator deals with collecting and treating wastewater, ensuring the water going back into the rivers and streams is free of as many contaminants as possible and meets state and federal regulations.

“As a water or wastewater operator you have to wear many hats,” Michael Vollmar, Professional Development and Training Director at TRWA said. “You get to use mechanical, technical, chemical and design skills as well as work outside and serve your community.”

With the drought still producing major headlines in many papers nationwide, the water and wastewater industry plays a key role in providing safe, affordable drinking water and wastewater operations. This role helps create a sustainable and growing job market despite the current drought conditions.

“The state has started to implement tighter regulations, forcing people to hire more operators to fix leaks, install new pipes, and read meters,” Vollmar said. “Despite the drought, these actions being taken against water loss could help expand communities, giving utilities the ability to add more lines with better conservation practices. Operators also help educate people on conservation of water by producing educational materials and talking with people about ways they can save our resources.”

The Texas Rural Water Foundation was founded three years ago, and with the help of AmeriCorps VISTA developed the Veteran Employment Program in 2013 along with new courses and manuals for water operators. The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) supporting organization to the Texas Rural Water Association and opens up new opportunities to serve more communities in rural Texas.

Applications for utilities and veterans who would like to participate in the Veteran Employment Program can be found at [www.texasrwf.org](http://www.texasrwf.org). Please contact the Texas Rural Water Foundation directly at [foundation@trwa.org](mailto:foundation@trwa.org) or call 512-472-8591 with comments or questions.