Board members serve a valuable but often unappreciated role with small community water systems. Whether they are elected, appointed, or chosen, small community water system board members come from all walks of life and form a colorful montage that represents the true picture of rural America.

Unlike larger systems where board members’ roles are limited to typical governance functions, small system board members often have additional management responsibilities, because limited budgets prevent hiring utility management professionals. Granted, many small community water systems delegate some management tasks to operational staff and even grant management titles, but rarely are employees of small systems hired with existing management experience or training. All too often, the management function of small water systems is the weak link between governance (board) and operations (staff).

The consequences of a weak management structure can lead to customer complaints, employee turnover, financial problems, regulatory compliance problems, and ultimately can spiral out of hand. Customers rarely take an interest in their water system nor thank board members for their dedication and service. But when serious issues arise, customers are quick to show their concern and will eventually take action to replace board members if these issues are not resolved. Providing management training to water board members is a proven way to minimize problems and help small community water systems run more efficiently.

**The Mississippi Experience**

Small community water systems in Mississippi are similar to small systems in other states. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in 2000 there were more than 45,000 community water systems (85 percent of all community water systems) in the U.S. that served populations of 3,300 or less (classified as small or very small community water systems). Currently in Mississippi, there are nearly 1,000 small community water systems (84 percent of all community water systems in the state). Board members in Mississippi are no different from those in Massachusetts or Montana—except that those in Mississippi may possess that distinctive Southern drawl.

Similarly, employees of small community water systems in Mississippi are typical of those from other areas. Many of these employees work part-time. Most have previous experience working in other vocations, and few will admit to having any childhood ambitions of working with a water system. Like the board members they serve under, employees of small community water systems are dedicated to the customers they serve. Most are willing to work nights and weekends to solve operational problems. They strive to ensure that the quality of water that is distributed to their neighbors and friends meets or exceeds federal drinking water standards.

**The Training Concept**

Mississippi did not develop the concept of offering management training to small community water systems personnel. The state has, however, aggressively...
pursued the implementation of several innovative training initiatives to address common management problems. In 1994, Governor Kirk Fordice commissioned a task force to study drinking water and wastewater needs in Mississippi. The task force identified the need for basic management training for water system board members.

David Mitchell serves as the director for the Division of Water Supply with the Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH). "Over the last 30 years or so, many community water systems were constructed to serve rural Mississippians with safe drinking water," he says. "While this noble endeavor improved public health and promoted economic development, unfortunately instruction manuals were not given to the boards of these water systems when they were presented with the keys and the deeds."

After the governor's task force training recommendation, MSDH fielded a number of calls from concerned board members and employees of Mississippi community water systems. Mitchell recalled one of the more memorable conversations that further underscored the need for management training.

"A board member called to express his opinion that board management training was not necessary," he says. "After listening to him for several minutes and thanking him for his opinion, this gentleman told me that he had proof that his water system definitely did not need any training."

"At this point in the conversation, I became very curious about what type of proof would negate the need for board management training," Mitchell continues. "The board member then told me that his water system had been doing such a good job that they had not had to raise rates in thirty years. After I asked several questions to determine more about the financial health of this water system, it was apparent that this system was nearly bankrupt."

Within a year and after some grumbling, compromising, and political maneuvering, water system board management training became state law. As of July 1, 1998, board members of all rural (non-municipal) community water systems and those from municipal community water systems serving fewer than 2,500 must attend eight hours of management training within two years of being elected (or reelected) to the board. The law further stipulates the subjects to be covered (see below) and granted supervision authority to the Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH). Shortly after the bill was signed, Community Resource Group /Rural Community Assistance Program (CRG/RCAP), Mississippi Rural Water Association, and the Mississippi Water and Pollution Control Operators Association began conducting the mandatory board management training sessions throughout the state.

The Mississippi State University Extension Service (MSUES) was awarded a contract to develop a curriculum to be used by all organizations conducting board management training. The law mandates that the training “shall include information on water system management and financing, rate setting and structures, operations and maintenance, applicable laws and regulations, ethics, the duties and responsibilities of a board member and other information deemed necessary by the department after consultation with the association and other organizations.”

Paige Manning, MSUES extension associate, serves as the program coordinator for the board management training program. She reports that, since 1998, 4,023 board members have completed Mississippi’s board training.

"We are in the process of comparing annual MSDH capacity development assessment ratings of those systems which have had all of their board members complete the training and those which have not," Manning says. "While this analysis has not been completed, preliminary results indicate that the training has indeed had a positive impact."

"When people are elected to serve on community water system boards, most do not fully understand their responsibilities and duties," she says. "This training not only addresses these issues but also enhances their knowledge of basic management practices.”
Training sessions have been conducted in nearly every county of the state and delivered in all-day (eight-hour) sessions, split-night sessions, and even on weekends. The MSDH requires that these training sessions be limited to 30 participants and that all participants complete an entrance and exit assessment, as well as an evaluation of the training. MSDH also requires that the MSUES and the training organizations participate periodically as members of the Curriculum Review/Board Management Training Advisory Committee to discuss necessary revisions, participant comments, and other training issues to improve the quality of board management training.

A typical one-day session starts with an “Introduction to Board Training” video then moves through laws and regulations; duties, responsibilities, and ethics; operation and maintenance; basic management practices; rate setting; long-range planning; customer service; and community relations. The session ends with the assessment and evaluation.

One concern expressed during the governor’s task force meetings—and one that I’ve heard frequently when discussing this training requirement with my colleagues in other parts of the country—was that there might be an unacceptably large number of board members resigning from community water system boards rather than comply with the mandatory management training law. Fortunately, this hasn’t been the case. Although most Mississippi community water system board members were less than enthusiastic and some have even been openly hostile, very few have actually resigned.

**Success Leads to Advanced Training**

One surprising revelation has been the high percentage of board members who have actually expressed a desire for additional training (although there is no requirement for training beyond the eight-hour basic board management training). More than 56 percent of participants indicated on their board management training evaluations that they would like to have additional training. Based on this information, CRG/RCAP began planning for advanced management training. Rather than exclusively focusing on continuing management training just for board members, the concept included staff members of small community water systems who often share management responsibilities.

In September 2001, CRG/RCAP partnered with the National Environmental Services Center and the MSDH to present the workshop “A Business Approach to Managing Small Water Systems.” A total of 54 small water system board members, operators, and other non-certified staff members attended two separate training sessions. Additionally, representatives of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development, USDA Rural Utilities Services, the MSDH, as well as a professional utility manager and a consulting engineer facilitated a luncheon discussion on water system infrastructure improve-
ments for the workshop participants. This initial pilot training confirmed the basic board training evaluation results that there was indeed an interest by board members and also by employees of small community water systems to further enhance their knowledge of best management practices.

Because of the previous success with the initial advanced management pilot training, MSDH contracted with CRG/RCAP to conduct six additional advanced management training pilot workshops throughout the state between January 2002 and June 2002. MSDH wanted to further gauge participant interest and determine if future advanced management training workshops were viable. CRG/RCAP worked to develop three management training modules (general management, personnel management, financial management) and presented each of these topics over the six-month pilot training contract term. A total of 365 participants, including board members, certified operators, and other non-certified staff, attended 11 voluntary advanced management training sessions at the six workshops. The large number of participants and the positive participant responses helped MSDH determine that voluntary advanced management training was indeed a worthwhile concept. In April 2003, MSDH issued a request for proposals for a four-year contract to conduct 24 advanced management training workshops annually.

Certified, Advanced Management Training

In June 2003, CRG/RCAP was awarded the four-year MSDH advanced management training contract to deliver six independent training modules at eight training sites over two years. (The cycle repeats itself during the third and fourth years.) Six training workshops will be conducted every quarter and concurrent training sessions are limited to 30 participants (maximum of 60 participants per workshop).

At the conclusion of each training session, certificates of attendance are presented to all participants who complete the training, and certified operators are granted six CEU hours (which can be counted toward recertification requirements for certified water operator licenses).

One unique feature of this program is that participants may elect to take a voluntary assessment at the conclusion of each training session. These tests are proctored by MSDH officials and upon getting 70 percent correct on all six tests, MSDH will issue certificates denoting competency as "Certified Waterworks Managers."

CRG/RCAP has conducted 12 Mississippi Public Water System Management Training Program workshops with 18 certified advanced management training sessions during the first six months of this contract. A total of 316 participants have attended the certified advanced management training. Of this number, 221 participants elected to take the voluntary MSDH Certified Waterworks Manager assessments, with 82.4 percent passing these tests.

The three training modules used in the advanced management pilot sessions between January 2002 and June 2002 are being presented this first contract year. (These three modules include general management, personnel management, and financial management.) Curriculum development is underway for the remaining three modules that will include risk management, customer service management, and emergency management.

Part of the Solution

Is management training for board members (and employees) a solution to the problems challenging small community water systems? While this type of training certainly will not solve all problems, it should be considered as a viable approach to empowering the decision makers of small water systems with the knowledge of best management practices necessary for preventing, eliminating, or reducing the impact of significant problems.

If you are a board member or employee of a small community water system, ask yourself if your utility could benefit by you attending management training. During my former job as a water system manager, I wish that I could have been afforded the management training opportunities that are now available in Mississippi. I am sure that many of the mistakes that I made and other problems that arose could have been mitigated if I had completed this type of management training.

Tommy Ricks serves as the state coordinator for the Community Resource Group/Rural Community Assistance Program in Mississippi. Before becoming a technical assistance provider and environmental trainer, Ricks worked as a certified water system operator and manager.