



FOURTH IN A SERIES

INTERN PROGRAM STEERS STUDENTS INTO UTILITY CAREERS

Editor's Note: This is the fourth installment in our ongoing series examining the skilled workforce shortage in many areas of the underground construction and rehabilitation industry. Previous articles, beginning with the July 2008 issue of Underground Construction, are available in the editorial archives at www.ucononline.com.

One of the best ways to minimize the effects of a shortage of qualified workers is to plan ahead.

The city of Akron Public Utilities Bureau (APUB) has 320 dedicated employees serving nearly 330,000 people throughout their 110-square-mile service area containing approximately 92,000 residential accounts and 2,500 commercial/industrial accounts.

Two years ago, the bureau analyzed its workforce and identified that 40 percent of its employees either were already eligible for retirement or would be within the next five years. Knowing this data and anticipating future employment needs provided an opportunity to hire new workers over a period of time, rather than facing multiple vacancies.

Ongoing succession planning is a critical process, wrote Michael L. McGlinchy, P.E., public utilities bureau manager, in his preface letter for the bureau's 2006 annual report.

The same year, APUB initiated a utilities intern program with the Akron Public School System with the goal of attracting high school seniors to enable them to gain work experience and become permanent city employees after graduation. Under the program, students take appropriate vocational education courses for four hours a day and work at various entry-level jobs for the utility bureau for an additional four hours each work day.

The program is structured so that the experience gained will help to qualify interns for the opportunity to fill entry level positions in the operating divisions of the Public Utilities Bureau and help qualify them for certification through the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (OEPA).

Entry level positions do not require operator certification, but career advancement depends on having OEPA operator certification.

Ohio requirements

In Ohio, there are four levels of certification for water and wastewater plant operators and two levels for water distribution and sewer maintenance operators. Each level requires a minimum amount of experience, and intern time counts toward minimum experience necessary for a Class 1 license. Additional training is provided to assist employees in obtaining necessary levels of certification.

"We recognized that a lot of kids don't necessarily want to pursue a four-year degree but want to learn a trade that will provide good wages and benefits," said Jim Hewitt, Sewer Maintenance superintendent. "And we also realized that utility work is not a consideration of many students when they are choosing careers."

The first year, Hewitt said, five students applied for the program, and three were

accepted. All three were hired full time after completing the program and graduating from high school.

In 2007, there were 11 applicants, and four entered the program. Hewitt said the city is working on creating positions for students in the 2008 class and that they are being retained on a temporary basis while the next class of interns begin work.

"In May 2008," said Hewitt, "12 students expressed interest in the program, and submitted applications. Three interns have been hired with plans to add a fourth."

"We are very pleased with the program," he continued. "We have not had a lot of success recruiting employees through regular channels, and the intern program is providing new employees. We expect these employees to be the future of our utility and look forward to helping them advance their careers within the bureau."



(Photo by John Boykin, Boykin Photography, Garland, TX, www.comimage.com)

Intern qualifying

To qualify for the intern program, applicants must have completed their junior year of high school, have a valid Ohio driver's license, and a knowledge of basic plumbing, electrical and mechanical drive maintenance and safety procedures. The students in the intern program come from plumbing or carpentry programs provided by the Akron Public Schools. Once they have been selected, the city provides all of the specialized training to make a seamless transition into the workforce. They must be able to perform strenuous and repetitive physical tasks, are expected to work outside in inclement weather, follow verbal and written instructions and work well with other personnel.

"An Akron Water Supply's intern reports directly to the plant engineer and obtains unique exposure with drinking water supply engineering related activities," Hewitt explained. "This includes completing tasks related to equipment evaluation/diagnosis, organization of plant engineering records and plan preparation assistance. An intern also periodically assists maintenance staff

with preventative and reactive maintenance activities including cleaning, lubrication, equipment adjustments and repairs. The intern is also available to assist with landscaping activities including mowing, weed whipping and snow removal."

Interns at Water Distribution have worked in a crew environment maintaining and upgrading the system, i.e., water main repairs and adjustments; service line renewals, transfers and new installations; valve repairs, replacements and new cut-ins; hydrant repairs, relocations, and new installations.

Water Pollution interns assist equipment mechanics on installation and alignment of pumps and motors, equipment lubrication and piping system assembly, said Hewitt. They also help with grounds maintenance including landscaping, snow removal and chain link fence repair. General maintenance tasks include door and window repairs, "household" plumbing repairs, small engine maintenance and tank/channel hosing and cleaning.

"Interns at Sewer Maintenance predominantly work in a crew environment,"

Hewitt said. "They are responsible for assisting crews repair and/or replace deteriorated sewer lines, sewer laterals, brick manholes, brick inlets and cleaning drainage structures."

Win-win

"With the success of this program, we are starting to replenish our aging workforce with young enthusiastic employees eager to specialize in a utility career," Hewitt said.

"Ultimately, this program has been a win-win-win situation for the city of Akron, Akron Public Schools and the students. Interns are the future of the utility and ease the loss of institutional knowledge due to retirees.

"The program has spurred interest in the Akron Public School System and the students have gained valuable training to pursue a career in the utility field," Hewitt concluded.

The intern program was developed by Brian Gresser, water pollution control administrator; Jim Hewitt, sewer maintenance superintendent; and Randall Monteith, who has retired from the city of Akron. ■