

RECIPROcity FOR MILITARY VETERANS PURSUING WATER AND WASTEWATER SYSTEM OPERATOR CERTIFICATIONS

In 1971, laws and regulations governing the certification of potable water treatment facility operations were enacted. The regulations establish at what level water treatment facilities should be staffed, the minimum qualifications for testing at each of the five grade levels of water treatment system operator, and the criteria for the renewal and revocation of operator certificates. The Drinking Water Operator Certification Program, under the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB), is responsible for the testing and certification of approximately 35,000 water treatment and water distribution operators throughout the state of California. The SWRCB also administers the **Wastewater Operator Certification program** which provides for Wastewater Treatment Plant Certification examinations, certifications, and certification renewals. There are approximately 6,000 active certified wastewater treatment plant operators in California.

Water and wastewater treatment is an essential and well-established industry with an aging infrastructure and workforce. Replacement of critical infrastructure components, like 100-year-old pipes and pumps, while maintaining service to customers, is one of the greatest challenges in the industry today. In addition, the high-level of retirements, new technologies, and increased demand for safe drinking water also contribute to the pressure on the industry to adapt.

At the same time that the water and wastewater industries are experiencing an aging and retiring workforce, more than 250,000 U.S. military members leave military service each year, according to the Department of Defense. Dozens of offices and agencies and thousands of private organizations are focused on assisting service members, veterans, and their families to successfully reintegrate after military service. Despite the abundance of available resources, there continue to be missed opportunities – particularly within the water and wastewater treatment operator field – to find, educate, certify, and employ veterans transitioning to civilian employment.

Projections of demand for water operators are fueled by a high level of expected retirements among the experienced workforce and the continued increase in demand for water by both residential and commercial customers. According to recent industry reports, thousands of water workers are aging and expected to retire from their positions in coming years, leading to a huge gap to fill for utilities and other water employers. New entrants to the industry need education and training to obtain state certification and incumbent workers need additional credits when they seek a higher level of state certification.

Several states – including Washington, Texas, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania – provide paths for military veterans to navigate the civilian water system operator certification process and allow the application of equivalency standards to credit military experiences toward state or industry certifications in the water and wastewater treatment and distribution fields. However, there is no

similar pathway or equivalency standard process for military veterans in California. The California water industry and other similar skilled trade industries would have a much larger pool of highly skilled, motivated, and talented individuals eager to continue their service to the public and the community at large if military veterans were offered experience credit toward state or industry certifications.

LEGISLATIVE PROPOSAL

Legislation should be advanced in 2019 to:

- Provide a path of reciprocity to military veterans to apply their advanced skills and experience toward state and industry-supplied certifications, or positions within the public or private sectors that specify certifications, within the water and wastewater treatment and distribution operator fields.
- Ensure that advanced water treatment operators of potable reuse and recycled water facilities have a career advancement path as certified water and/or wastewater treatment plant operators.
- Ensure that recycled water distribution system operators have a career advancement path as certified water distribution system operators.

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