



THE S P I G O T

from the NORTH DAKOTA RURAL WATER SYSTEMS ASSOCIATION

Celebrating the Next Generation of Water Professionals

By Elizabeth Heinz, NDRWSA
Apprenticeship Program Coordinator

Behind every glass of safe drinking water and every reliable community water system are dedicated professionals whose work often happens quietly, behind the scenes. Their work is essential, their responsibilities are significant, and their commitment to serving their communities makes a lasting difference every day. In the last year, the North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association Apprenticeship Program celebrated the first two graduates who completed the program and are beginning the next chapter of their careers in the water industry.

Through a combination of hands-on experience, technical training, and mentorship, these graduates spent the past several years building the knowledge and skills required to succeed in one of the most important professions serving rural communities today. Their completion of the apprenticeship program represents more than a credential — it reflects hard work, perseverance, and a commitment to serving the people and communities that rely on safe, dependable water systems every day.

Learning Beyond the Classroom

One of the most valuable aspects of the apprenticeship experience is the opportunity to learn directly from those already working in the field. Throughout the program, apprentices gain practical, real-world experience while working alongside experienced operators, mentors, and industry professionals. From troubleshooting equipment and responding to day-to-day operational challenges to learning the science and regulations behind water treatment and distribution, apprentices develop skills that simply cannot be learned through classroom instruction alone.

The program also creates opportunities for apprentices to build confidence in themselves and in their ability to take on meaningful responsibility within their communities. Along the way, they form relationships with mentors and coworkers who help shape not only their technical knowledge, but also their understanding of service, professionalism, and leadership within the industry.

For many graduates, the apprenticeship experience becomes more than career training — it becomes the foundation for a long-term career dedicated to protecting public health and supporting rural communities.

DAVID O'KELLEY

David completed the North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association Apprenticeship Program in June of 2025, marking an important milestone in a career dedicated to serving rural communities through the water industry.

The apprenticeship program combines hands-on training, technical coursework, and mentorship to help prepare water professionals for the challenges and responsibilities of the industry. Through dedication and hard work, David was the first apprentice in North Dakota to successfully complete the rigorous combination of classroom instruction and on-the-job training required by the program.

As part of the next generation of water professionals, David set the tone across the industry, working to help ensure rural communities continue to have access to safe, dependable water service for years to come.



City of Harvey Mayor Dean Klier; apprenticeship graduate David O'Kelley; Apprenticeship Program Coordinator Elizabeth Heinz.

TIM BRITTON

For Tim, completing the Apprenticeship Program represented both a professional and personal accomplishment. One of the most rewarding aspects of the experience was reaching the finish line and earning a credential equivalent to an associate degree — something he had not previously pursued through a traditional college path.

“Completion. I never completed any college, and finishing the apprenticeship gave me the equivalent of an associate degree.”

Like many adult learners returning to coursework later in life, the journey was not without challenges. Balancing work responsibilities with coursework required dedication and persistence, particularly in subjects that pushed him outside of his comfort zone.

“I was in my 40s when I joined the program, and it had been more than 20 years since I’d done any schooling. I was never very good at math, so some of the courses challenged my brain and gave me new skills to be able to finish the courses.”

Throughout the apprenticeship, Tim gained a deeper appreciation for the impact water professionals have on the communities they serve every day.

“We are providing clean water to people who might not otherwise have access to it. That alone makes it worthwhile.”

Now that the program has been completed, Tim hopes to give back to the industry by supporting future apprentices entering the field.

“To become a mentor to anyone who wishes to join the Apprenticeship Program and help them succeed in this industry.”



McLean-Sheridan RWD Board President, Gerard Goven; Apprenticeship Graduate, Tim Britton; Apprenticeship Program Coordinator, Elizabeth Heinz

Investing in the Future of Rural Water

The success of apprenticeship programs is ultimately measured in people — the individuals willing to learn, grow, and take on the responsibility of serving their communities through careers in the water industry.

For these newest graduates, completing the Apprenticeship Program represents years of dedication, hands-on learning, and a commitment to developing the skills needed to support safe and reliable water systems. Their accomplishments reflect not only personal growth, but also the strength of an industry built on mentorship, service, and shared knowledge.

Programs like this help ensure that valuable experience continues to be passed from one generation of water professionals to the next. Just as importantly, they create opportunities for new professionals to discover meaningful careers where the work they do has a direct impact on the health and well-being of their communities.

As these graduates continue forward in their careers, they join a long tradition of water professionals whose work keeps rural communities strong every day — often quietly, but always importantly. The North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association congratulates these graduates on their achievement and looks forward to the contributions they will continue to make within the industry for years to come.

