



REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS (RFP)

Recognizing Institutional and Organizational Capacity for Effective Workforce Development Programs (5300)

Date Posted

Friday, September 20, 2024

Due Date

Proposals must be received by 3:00 pm Mountain Time on Thursday, November 21, 2024

WRF Project Contact

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Project Sponsors

This project is funded by The Water Research Foundation (WRF) as part of WRF's Research Priority Program.

Project Objectives

- Understand existing ways workforce development is incorporated into the organizational and strategic structure of water and wastewater utilities across varying geographies and scales.
- Identify institutional and organizational barriers for implementing workforce development programs.
- Identify opportunities for growth in supporting workforce development programs through capacity building.

Budget

Applicants may request up to \$200,000 in WRF funds for this project.

Background and Project Rationale

The water workforce is persistently top of mind for the sector. Since 2019, *Aging Workforce* has consistently been identified in the State of the Water Industry report as one of the top 10 challenges (AWWA 2024). Utilities are having to adjust to a number of factors that impact the water workforce, including digital transformation requiring new skillsets, increased competition for hiring new employees, lack of awareness of water sector jobs, and changing cultural trends in how individuals value and engage with their work. As a result, water and wastewater utilities are looking to understand how to attract, train, and retain the water workforce.

To support these goals, utilities are looking to workforce development programs, which are initiatives within (or across) organization(s) designed to support the attraction, training, or professional development of water professionals. These programs are different across the sector, with some organizations formalizing its workforce development in its strategic planning process and organizational structure. In other cases, workforce programs operate through an ad-hoc arrangement. It is unclear where workforce efforts live within the organizational structure of a utility. While hiring processes are the primary responsibility of a Human Resources department, many organizations rely on other internal staff to interact with their existing network to attract promising candidates. Previous WRF work identified that *“workforce planning is not yet viewed as ‘strategic’ within most organizations and is not given the same attention as regulatory and infrastructure issues”* (Manning et al. 2008). Communication between managers and departments does not always exist when it comes to workforce challenges. Such efforts extend beyond conventional responsibilities within human resources, introducing the need for additional capacity development at an organizational level.

For utilities to meet the pressing workforce needs, research is needed to inform how utilities currently approach their workforce programs, and to identify best practices for supporting agency-wide investment. This proposed work offers an analysis of staff- and institutional-level efforts related to workforce development programs in utilities and aims to show other utilities how these efforts scale across size and geography. Currently, individuals are having to justify decision-making for workforce programs. Proposed outcomes help support professionals in demonstrating the effectiveness of activities and providing a use-case based on sector-wide data.

Research Approach

This RFP is intentionally flexible in the research approach to encourage creativity and originality from proposers. Proposers should describe how they will conduct the research to meet the objectives listed above. The following approach is intended as a starting point. Please note that proposers are expected to demonstrate some level of partnership in their work, however, WRF is also available as a resource to help support the project team identify case studies, or project participants.

Task 1: Evaluate existing workforce programs across utilities.

Proposers should identify the eligibility requirements for what is in (or out of) scope for including workforce programs in this project. To make the findings beneficial to a variety of utilities and organizations, proposals should clarify how the research approach will achieve diversity across the following dimensions:

Type of utility governance (e.g., investor-owned, publicly-owned, etc.)

Size of organization

Different utility types (e.g., water, wastewater, water reuse, stormwater, etc.)

Presence of a recently implemented strategic planning process (optional)

Geographic location

Information that may be helpful to consider for further analysis within workforce programs might include:

- Major goals and activities
- Identifying where these programs exist in the organizational structure
- Motivation for the program, whether formal (e.g., embedded in utility guiding documents) or informal (e.g., through utility champions)
- Funding source and personnel capacity that is dedicated to the implementation of the program
- Existing external resources, training, and certification that are used in developing and implementing these programs

Please note that other workforce-related projects through WRF are focusing on similar, yet different, topic areas. Proposers are recommended to review the References and Resources section of this RFP to ensure work is complementary to other ongoing efforts. WRF staff will also help ensure duplication of effort is avoided.

Task 2: In-depth investigation to barriers and opportunities for workforce programs

Findings from Task 1 should undergo evaluation to understand general trends and to address the barriers and opportunities for broader workforce development goals at the organizational level. For example, identifying if there is a return-on-investment for workforce programs or how utilities navigate competing interests between physical and human infrastructure. Outcomes should support the data and provide key recommendations for water professionals involved with workforce development activities and programs.

Expected Deliverables

The deliverables for this proposal are intentionally flexible to encourage creativity and originality from proposers. However, proposals should be clear on how deliverables are relevant and the appropriate mechanism for communicating research findings to the target audience. Potential deliverables may include (but are not limited to):

Research report (must use WRF's [Research Report Template](#))

Literature review

Guidance manual

Peer-reviewed journal article

Infographic

Fact sheet, case study, white paper, etc.

Technology Deliverables (must follow the [Technology Deliverables Guidance](#))

Please note that conference presentations, workshops, and webcasts may be included as part of the Communication Plan but are not necessarily considered sufficient as stand-alone deliverables for this work.

Communication Plan

Please review WRF's [Project Deliverable Guidelines](#) for information on preparing a communication plan. Conference presentations, webcasts, peer-reviewed publication submissions, and other forms of project information dissemination are typically encouraged.

Project Duration

The anticipated period of performance for this project is 18-24 months from the contract start date.

References and Resources

The following list includes examples of research reports, tools, and other resources that may be helpful to proposers. It is not intended to be comprehensive, nor is it a required list for consideration.

- AWWA. *2024 State of the Water Industry Report*. <https://www.awwa.org/Professional-Development/Utility-Managers/State-of-the-Water-Industry>
- Kane, J. and A. Tomer. 2018. *Renewing the Water Workforce*. Project 4751. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/water-workforce/>
- Manning, A., T. Brueck, M. Isbell, and P. Brink. 2008. *Workforce Planning for Water Utilities – Successful Recruiting, Training, and Retaining of Operators and Engineers*. Denver, CO: The Water Research Foundation. <https://www.waterrf.org/research/projects/workforce-planning-water-utilities-successful-recruiting-training-and-retaining>
- Olstein, M.A., D.L. Marden, J.G. Voeller, J.D. Jennings, P.M. Hannan, and D. Brinkman. 2005. *Succession Planning for a Vital Workforce in the Information Age*. Denver, CO: The Water Research Foundation. <https://www.waterrf.org/research/projects/succession-planning-vital-workforce-information-age>
- PA Consulting Group, Inc. and Demarche Consulting Group, Inc. 2003. *Workforce Planning for Successful Organization Change*. Project 2517. Denver, CO: The Water Research Foundation. <https://www.waterrf.org/research/projects/workforce-planning-successful-organization-change>

Proposal Evaluation Criteria

The following criteria will be used to evaluate proposals:

- Understanding the Problem and Responsiveness to RFP (maximum 20 points)
- Technical and Scientific Merit (maximum 30 points)
- Qualifications, Capabilities, and Management (maximum 15 points)
- Communication Plan, Deliverables, and Applicability (maximum 20 points)
- Budget and Schedule (maximum 15 points)

PROPOSAL PREPARATION INSTRUCTIONS

Proposals submitted in response to this RFP must be prepared in accordance with WRF's [Guidelines for Research Priority Program Proposals](#) and [Instructions for Budget Preparation](#). These guidelines contain instructions for the technical aspects, financial statements, indirect costs, and administrative requirements that the applicant must follow when preparing a proposal.

Proposals that include the production of web- or software-based tools, such as websites, Excel spreadsheets, Access databases, etc., must follow the criteria outlined for web tools presented in the [Technology Deliverables Guidance](#).

Eligibility to Submit Proposals

Proposals will be accepted from both U.S.-based and non-U.S.-based entities, including educational institutions, research organizations, governmental agencies, and consultants or other for-profit entities.

WRF's Board of Directors has established a [Timeliness Policy](#) that addresses researcher adherence to the project schedule. Researchers who are late on any ongoing WRF-sponsored studies without approved no-cost extensions are not eligible to be named participants in any proposals. Direct any questions about eligibility to the WRF project contact listed at the top of this RFP.

Administrative, Cost, and Audit Standards

WRF's research program standards for administrative, cost, and audit compliance are based upon, and comply with, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Uniform Grants Guidance (UGG), 2 CFR Part 200 Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards, and 48 CFR 31.2 Contracts with Commercial Organizations. These standards are referenced in WRF's [Guidelines for Research Priority Program Proposals](#) and include specific guidelines outlining the requirements for indirect cost negotiation agreements, financial statements, and the Statement of Direct Labor, Fringe Benefits, and General Overhead. Inclusion of indirect costs must be substantiated by a negotiated agreement or appropriate Statement of Direct Labor, Fringe Benefits, and General Overhead. Well in advance of preparing the proposal, your research and financial staff should review the detailed instructions included in WRF's [Guidelines for Research Priority Program Proposals](#) and consult the [Instructions for Budget Preparation](#).

Budget and Funding Information

The maximum funding available from WRF for this project is \$200,000. The applicant must contribute additional resources equivalent to at least 33% of the project award. For example, if an applicant requests \$100,000 from WRF, an additional \$33,000 or more must be contributed by the applicant. Acceptable forms of applicant contribution include cost share, applicant in-kind, or third-party in-kind that comply with 2 CFR Part 200.306 cost sharing or matching. The applicant may elect to contribute more than 33% to the project, but the maximum WRF funding

available remains fixed at \$200,000. Proposals that do not meet the minimum 33% of the project award will not be accepted. Consult the [Instructions for Budget Preparation](#) for more information and definitions of terms.

Period of Performance

It is WRF's policy to negotiate a reasonable schedule for each research project. Once this schedule is established, WRF and its sub-recipients have a contractual obligation to adhere to the agreed-upon schedule. Under WRF's [No-Cost Extension Policy](#), a project schedule cannot be extended more than nine months beyond the original contracted schedule, regardless of the number of extensions granted.

Utility and Organization Participation

WRF encourages participation from water utilities and other organizations in WRF research. Participation can occur in a variety of ways, including direct participation, in-kind contributions, or in-kind services. To facilitate their participation, WRF has provided contact information, on the last page of this RFP, of utilities and other organizations that have indicated an interest in this research. Proposers are responsible for negotiating utility and organization participation in their particular proposals. The listed utilities and organizations are under no obligation to participate, and the proposer is not obligated to include them in their particular proposal.

Application Procedure and Deadline

Proposals are accepted exclusively online in PDF format, and they must be fully submitted before 3:00 pm Mountain Time on Thursday, November 21, 2024.

The online proposal system allows submission of your documents until the date and time stated in this RFP. To avoid the risk of the system closing before you press the submit button, do not wait until the last minute to complete your submission. Submit your proposal at <https://forms.waterrf.org/cbruck/rfp-5300>.

Questions to clarify the intent of this RFP and WRF's administrative, cost, and financial requirements may be addressed to the WRF project contact, Miriam Hacker at 571.384.2116 or mhacker@waterrf.org. Questions related to proposal submittal through the online system may be addressed to Caroline Bruck at 303.347.6118 or cbruck@waterrf.org.

Utility and Organization Participants

The following utilities have indicated interest in possible participation in this research. This information is updated within 24 business hours after a utility or an interested organization submits a volunteer form, and this RFP will be re-posted with the new information. **(Depending on your settings, you may need to click refresh on your browser to load the latest file.)**

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