

Teaching skills to a hungry workforce: EBMUD partners with community colleges to increase local job opportunities

By Elaine Lew-Smith and Andrea Pook, East Bay Municipal Utility District



They called it a “silver tsunami” of retirements. In 2005, Baby Boomers made up 65 percent of the total East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) workforce. By 2008, nearly half of the water and wastewater district’s operations and maintenance workforce was eligible for retirement.

At the same time, it was becoming challenging for EBMUD to hire skilled candidates to operate and maintain its pipelines and treatment infrastructure. The district was facing a decrease in the number of candidates with the skills to do these jobs due to local military base closures and two generations of high school students without access to vocational training programs.

To best maintain a qualified and diverse workforce, in 2010 EBMUD turned these challenges into an opportunity to broaden local job opportunities by partnering with Laney College, an Oakland community college in EBMUD’s service area. Over the next five years, EBMUD planned to hire

20 Water Distribution Plumbers annually. These trainee jobs presented excellent entry-level job opportunities. District and Laney College staff worked together to design a nine-week program that included refresher math, English, physical fitness, and an orientation to plumbing maintenance. Laney College recruited and enrolled diverse students from local communities, and the EBMUD plumber exam was scheduled at the end of the training program. After two plumber training programs were complete, graduates were excited and positive, saying that the classes prepared them well for job opportunities with EBMUD and other employers. But only one graduate successfully gained employment as an entry-level EBMUD plumber.

EBMUD realized that more in-depth training, including relevant hands-on work experience, would increase the students’ job preparedness. EBMUD joined with other Bay Area utilities to develop a Treatment Operator training program with Solano College. The sponsoring utilities also offered internships at their treatment plants so students could become eligible for state-mandated Operator certificates. This partnership has increased the number of certified operator job candidates in the Bay Area, and

increased public awareness of water and wastewater job opportunities.

EBMUD decided to duplicate the operator intern model for hard-to-fill skilled trades jobs such as electrician, instrument technician, machinist and plant mechanic. EBMUD identified local community colleges with one to two-year certificate training programs with curriculum focused on skills development for these jobs. EBMUD staff partnered with the colleges to strengthen the training programs by donating surplus equipment, developing curriculum, writing letters of support for grants, recruiting other industry employers and participating on college industry advisory committees.

One of EBMUD’s partnerships was with Laney College. In fall 2012, five students in the Laney College Industrial Maintenance Certificate Training Program interned at EBMUD and impressed EBMUD supervisors with their willingness to apply what they learned and their eagerness to develop their skills. All of the interns showed strong commitment and initiative, with one intern riding his bicycle several miles to arrive at work on time, even in the rain.

EBMUD machinists and plant mechanics enjoyed sharing their expertise with the interns and gained new enthusiasm for their work. When you watch a veteran utility worker teaching a skill he or she has learned over many years to an interested student, the exchange can quickly become inspirational for

both. By passing on their talents to the next generation, these employees are preparing the utility to serve its future customers.

These five student interns will graduate from Laney College’s four-semester training program this spring with knowledge and skills that will make them highly sought candidates for well-paid machinist and mechanic trainee jobs. These interns and other students enrolled in the training program have benefited from the EBMUD and Laney College partnership. They will have opportunities to compete for plant mechanic and machinist trainee jobs in 2013, with pay ranging from \$29.56 - \$34.22 per hour (plus excellent benefits, and on-the-job training for journey-level status).

EBMUD has plans to partner with more community colleges in 2014 and 2015 to increase economic opportunities in our diverse service communities, and to strengthen the qualifications of local job candidates. These partnerships help the district to cultivate skills and continue its service-oriented work ethic.

These partnerships are working because local colleges are dedicated to improving student skills but may be



SHARE YOUR COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Is your district interacting with the community in a new and original way? *California Special District* wants to know about it! Contact Nicole Dunn at nicoled@csda.net or (877) 924-2732.

unaware of what job opportunities are being offered by local utilities, or how to train students to compete for them. Hard-working students with a desire to learn new skills and gain a better paying job often have to juggle study time with part-time work and caring for their families. And utilities such as EBMUD offer entry-level trainee jobs that can lead to journey level positions, but have difficulty recruiting enough candidates with the abilities and potential to do these jobs.

EBMUD’s partnerships with local colleges have helped the colleges to focus on skills development relevant for utility jobs; offered students experience they need to better compete for those jobs; and provided utilities with a larger, diverse and skilled candidate pool to maintain and improve their facilities for the next generation. ■

Teaching skills to a hungry workforce: EBMUD partners with community colleges to increase local job opportunities

By Elaine Lew-Smith and Andrea Pook, East Bay Municipal Utility District



They called it a “silver tsunami” of retirements. In 2005, Baby Boomers made up 65 percent of the total East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) workforce. By 2008, nearly half of the water and wastewater district’s operations and maintenance workforce was eligible for retirement.

At the same time, it was becoming challenging for EBMUD to hire skilled candidates to operate and maintain its pipelines and treatment infrastructure. The district was facing a decrease in the number of candidates with the skills to do these jobs due to local military base closures and two generations of high school students without access to vocational training programs.

To best maintain a qualified and diverse workforce, in 2010 EBMUD turned these challenges into an opportunity to broaden local job opportunities by partnering with Laney College, an Oakland community college in EBMUD’s service area. Over the next five years, EBMUD planned to hire

20 Water Distribution Plumbers annually. These trainee jobs presented excellent entry-level job opportunities. District and Laney College staff worked together to design a nine-week program that included refresher math, English, physical fitness, and an orientation to plumbing maintenance. Laney College recruited and enrolled diverse students from local communities, and the EBMUD plumber exam was scheduled at the end of the training program. After two plumber training programs were complete, graduates were excited and positive, saying that the classes prepared them well for job opportunities with EBMUD and other employers. But only one graduate successfully gained employment as an entry-level EBMUD plumber.

EBMUD realized that more in-depth training, including relevant hands-on work experience, would increase the students’ job preparedness. EBMUD joined with other Bay Area utilities to develop a Treatment Operator training program with Solano College. The sponsoring utilities also offered internships at their treatment plants so students could become eligible for state-mandated Operator certificates. This partnership has increased the number of certified operator job candidates in the Bay Area, and