

# Closer to Home

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*A proposed water and wastewater capacity-building initiative benefitting Alberta's smaller centers*

*By Kelsie Tetreau*

What if we could assist Alberta communities to find, train and retain people with the knowledge, skills, tools and networks required for safe, clean water and responsibly managed wastewater? The Closer to Home initiative hopes to do exactly that.

Alberta Water and Wastewater Operator Association (AWWOA) has provided Albertans with opportunities for training, partnerships, and public awareness since 1976. Executive Director John Voyer and Executive Chair Brian Brost made a presentation at the ARDN conference on the importance of water quality in Alberta communities and their newest initiative. "Poor water quality is a common reason a rural community dies," says John.

The Closer to Home - Smaller Centres Water and Wastewater Operator Renewal Initiative is a proposed collaborative project created by the AWWOA to ensure that water services their members provide can be maintained with the workforce changes anticipated when "Baby Boomer" staff retire over the next ten years (projected at 50% of the current workforce). "The Closer to Home initiative hopes to combat this shortage before it occurs by training and certifying new employees," explains Brian.

The project has three overall goals:

- Recruitment of the next generation of certified operators
- Local retention of operators
- Sector Capacity Renewal

The project will achieve these goals through its three strategic pillars: education, engagement and empowerment, and its guiding principles:

- Province-wide outreach education through communication within the community
- Direct entry into the career from the community, which identifies and supports career-oriented individuals from local public works
- Support flexible, distributed learning for its employees through curriculum renewal for distributed learning

The next steps for the Closer to Home initiative are to seek comments from stakeholders, gain funding and begin implementation. Money received for the project will be reinvested into water quality and safety programs and services in Alberta rural municipalities.