

RCAP field staff honored with awards for service

Profiles of remaining six honorees

Nine RCAP staff members were honored with awards for exceptional service in their positions on Sept. 16, 2009, at a banquet lunch during RCAP's national conference.

The honorees are staff in four of RCAP's regions. Each was presented with a glass award etched with his/her name and a framed certificate.

This is the first time RCAP has presented awards at the national level. RCAP staff across the entire network were invited to nominate their fellow staff members in five award categories. Technical Assistance Providers and State/Regional Coordinators were eligible. The honorees were chosen by a panel of RCAP board members chaired by ex officio panel member and RCAP Executive Director Robert Stewart.

Stewart said the RCAP board is happy to honor staff members who have continuously demonstrated their ability to provide critically needed technical assistance and training to communities. "Each of these awardees demonstrates an exceptional level of dedication and perseverance to their work and to the communities that they serve."

OUTSTANDING ROOKIE AWARD

This award was given to a staff member who has been with the RCAP program for two years or less but who has made

contributions over and above what would be expected for a new staff member. The recipient has adapted to her job quickly, has made positive suggestions and contributions for program improvement, and has shown outstanding initiative.

Awarded to: Karen Conrad, Operations Management Specialist with Community Resource Group, the Southern RCAP

"I try to help each client to the best of my ability in whatever area of need they may have," said Conrad, who was completing her second year with RCAP at the time of her award. "I love the fact that I can help communities and rural water systems in many different ways."

"Karen has assisted many communities in Oklahoma with a variety of needs, including billing and accounting issues," said Stewart. "She jumped right into the SMART Program for source water protection, producing needed training and informational materials." Her background as a water operator allows her to bring a comprehensive array of expertise to any project she undertakes.

Conrad said water quality in general is her true passion. "Anything that assists the needy communities and rural water sys-



Ed. note: Because of space constraints, the profiles of three of the nine staff who were given awards at RCAP's national conference in Sept. 2009 were included in the Fall 2009 issue of Rural Matters. This article features the remaining honorees.



Karen Conrad with Robert Stewart, RCAP Executive Director

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tems in helping them get back into compliance or in some way improving their water quality, which in turn improves their quality of life, is something I greatly enjoy and strive to do each day.”

“Like many other RCAP employees, Karen is energetic, committed and dedicated to improving living conditions for rural communities,” added Stewart.

RCAP HALL OF FAME

Inductees into RCAP’s new Hall of Fame have made significant positive contributions to RCAP in the course of their work over the years. All are long-term staff members.

Stewart said the three inductees, with their many years of dedicated and productive service, have contributed far more to RCAP and the communities they serve than he could ever recount. “All have proven themselves with years of direct assistance to communities, success in managing programs and staff, service to co-workers, and never-ending dedication to doing whatever is necessary to help rural America.”

Stewart added, “If you ever really want to know what RCAP is all about, just ask one these three outstanding individuals.”

Inductees:

Joe Dvorak, Regional Director for North and South Dakota and Nebraska with Midwest Assistance Program (MAP), the Midwest RCAP

“Joe has been a foundation for MAP’s success from the very beginnings of the Midwest RCAP,” said Stewart. “He is a consummate team player and a generator of new ideas while upholding those old (but never out-of-style) ideals of service to low-income, economically challenged rural communities.”

Dvorak said it is a great honor to be inducted into the Hall of Fame.



“I strive to keep all federal and state agencies as well as all state congressional office staff aware of the technical assistance activities of the Midwest Assistance Program, and the RCAP Network in general,” said Dvorak.

Although he is a Regional Director now, Dvorak said he enjoyed being in the field and providing onsite technical assistance to small communities full-time.

“With his vast technical knowledge and extensive field experience earned from a lifetime of dedicated work, Joe is an invaluable resource not only to communities within MAP but also to the many MAP employees to whom he has acted as a manager, trainer, mentor and friend,” added Stewart.

Mark Rounsavall, Director of Community Resource Group, the Southern RCAP

Rounsavall is known as the “go-to” man by the RCAP national office because, as a long-serving RCAP staff member, he knows what works and what doesn’t.

“I have known Mark for over 20 years, and I have never met anyone with the breadth of experience in providing assistance to rural communities and in understanding the many issues that impact how water utilities are funded, managed and operated that Mark has,” said Stewart.

Rounsavall strives to make sure that RCAP field staff he oversees are productive. “The only thing that we as an organization can offer to small communities and utilities is our people (as a resource for those com-



*Joe Dvorak,
above (also at right),
and
Mark Rounsavall, below,
with Robert Stewart*



munities),” he said. “We have to make sure that our staff are productive, that they know what they are doing, and that they have the tools and resources to do the job.”

“I would have to say I would feel most satisfied about making a real difference in the small communities that we are helping and doing something that we have not done before,” he added.

“As a technical assistance provider, manager, trainer of all, grant-writer, loan fund developer, lobbyist, counselor, codirector of the national RCAP program managers’ activities, creator of numerous publications to assist communities and staff in the field, and keeper of RCAP institutional knowledge, Mark has done it all and done it in an exemplary fashion,” added Stewart.

Deb Martin, Director of WSOS Community Action Commission, the Great Lakes RCAP

Martin is prolific in her work for RCAP at the national level, a commitment that grows out of her dedication for her work in her region. Her work can be seen in her occasional writing for this magazine, when she makes a presentation at conferences, or when she travels to Capitol Hill to testify before a Congressional committee.

“Deb is the rare individual who not only volunteers for additional assignments, she carries through on each one with a dedication and professionalism that is unmatched,” Stewart said. “She has consistently done an outstanding job of developing relationships with all sectors of the water and wastewater utility industry in

Ohio and has secured an impressive number of grants and contracts that greatly expands WSOS’s ability to assist rural communities.”

“Whatever good I’ve been able to accomplish is really because of all of the great people I have around me,” she said. “It’s very gratifying to work with people who are so dedicated to what they do.”

Martin said she is a perfectionist, so it’s in her nature to never be completely satisfied and to always try to make things a little bit better. She’s most passionate about trying to leave communities better off than they were before RCAP arrived and trying to shape public policy that affects small communities. “In this way, we can have a lasting impact on a much broader level by helping the system work better for all small communities,” she explained.

OUTSTANDING MENTOR AWARD

Few jobs are as important, yet often receive as little credit, as teaching and mentoring new Technical Assistance Providers (TAPs) and helping them become productive members of the RCAP team. This award was given to a Regional Coordinator who has made a difference in the program through her expert guidance and valuable knowledge and being a nurturing, fostering leader.

Awarded to: Chris Fierros, Chief Operating Officer of Midwest Assistance Program, the Midwest RCAP

“Virtually everything about Chris’s work exemplifies the best qualities of a mentor,” Stewart said. “She will always go out of her way to help any MAP staff who ask for advice or assistance. Regardless of how busy she might be with her own work, she takes the time to help others.”

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Deb Martin, above, and Chris Fierros, below (also at left), with Robert Stewart



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Stewart said Fierros has knowledge and experience coupled with a sincere desire to help every staff member. “Her mentoring includes not just directly related program issues but also those dealing with legislation, congressional liaison, organizational needs and financial management.”

Fierros said she feels “honored and humbled” by this award.

“I strive to do the best job I can, give good advice, and be a team player,” she said. “I always know that there are areas that I can still learn, so I like to listen to others to be able to do my job better.”

She said she gets satisfaction out of knowing that RCAP’s work is helping others out of bad situations. “There are positive outcomes in what we do, and the best part is seeing it happen,” she explained.

barriers, led a program along a road to realize a vision, and brought a plan to fruition. The person has been a true connector and has led programs to success.

Awarded to: Tommy Ricks, Mississippi State Coordinator for Community Resource Group, the Southern RCAP

Ricks said he was “surprised and humbled” at receiving this award. He himself had nominated another RCAP staffer for the same award and was worried that he would be called upon to speak about that person at the banquet, assuming his nominee had been chosen to receive the award.

“Tommy is always looking for ways to connect with other groups and professionals in the water industry in an effort to make his work and that of CRG the most effective it can be in assisting rural communities,” said Stewart.

“He is one of those people who always seems to have something new and exciting in the works, so much so that you can’t help but be impressed with his energy and determination,” Stewart added, saying that he could list many initiatives that Tommy has been involved in, from establishing a mandatory training program for board members of water utilities in Mississippi to coordinating CRG’s response to Hurricane Katrina

Ricks gives credit to his RCAP colleagues in Mississippi, whom he said have also earned the award. “Everyone who works on my team in Mississippi puts their heart into the work we do, and it truly is an honor to be surrounded by professionals who love what they do in making a difference,” he said.

The part of his job he enjoys the most is establishing relationships with members of the communities he works with. “I have been blessed to be able to work with some really great unsung heroes who serve as local officials, operators, and other staff of rural community water and wastewater systems,” he said. ■

THE BILL FRENCH BRIDGE-BUILDER AWARD

This award is named for Bill French, one of RCAP’s founding members who unwaveringly supported the RCAP program, building it into a strong and well-respected agency nationwide.

The award was given to an RCAP staff member who has been successful in building his state RCAP program, whether in reputation and

credibility or in funding. He has advanced his state program to a higher level of operations through new and enhanced relationships with funding and/or primacy agencies or other partners, new services offered to communities, and/or new grants or contracts obtained. This award was given to a recipient who has successfully advanced his state program to a higher level of operations.

The recipient has, in the sense of being a bridge, enabled a program to cross over



*from left to right:
Bill French, Tommy Ricks
and Robert Stewart*