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NOWRA Introduces the Team Behind Its New USDA-Funded Technical Assistance Program for Small Rural Communities

Free help with onsite and decentralized wastewater systems is now available to eligible rural communities nationwide

WESTFORD, Mass. — October 21, 2026 — The National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association (NOWRA) today introduced the team leading its new Technical Assistance and Training program, funded by USDA Rural Development's Rural Utilities Service. The program runs October 1, 2026 through September 30, 2027 and gives small, rural communities free, hands-on help keeping their onsite and decentralized wastewater systems working, affordable, and protective of public health.

NOWRA is delivering the program together with its State Affiliates, so communities get support from people who know their state's rules, soils, and systems. Services are free to eligible communities with populations under 2,500.

"Small towns shouldn't have to figure out their wastewater options on their own. We've put together a team that knows these systems inside and out, and with our State Affiliates, we can bring that know-how right to the communities that need it most," said Tom Groves, NOWRA's Executive Director.

Meet the Team

Dr. Sara Heger, Director of Educational Grants - Sara leads NOWRA's educational programming, including its nationwide small-community webinar series and curriculum development for new regulators, responsible management entities, troubleshooting professionals, and college students. She also manages the organization's Technical Specialists and supports affiliates that provide technical assistance. She brings more than 25 years of experience in onsite wastewater research, design, and education. Before joining NOWRA, Dr. Heger worked at the University of Minnesota's award-winning Onsite Sewage Treatment Program, where she led the research program and provided training and technical assistance to professionals, small communities, and homeowners in Minnesota and across the country.

Vern Steel, Technical Assistance Programs Director — Vern is the program's primary contact and oversees NOWRA's partnerships with participating State Affiliates. He brings more than 30 years in the water industry, from his early days as a Level 4 water treatment and distribution operator to years spent helping small water systems with technical, managerial, and financial assistance.



David Laughlin, Program Manager — David runs day-to-day program operations and oversees the technical assistance professionals working through NOWRA's State Affiliates. He brings years of experience leading federal technical assistance programs for rural communities, including supporting a nationwide network of technical assistance providers in the field.

Ashley Voight, Education and Program Support Specialist — Ashley coordinates scheduling, webinar administration, and program documentation. She's completing graduate work at Texas A&M University, where she's worked on onsite sewage facility research with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension, and she brings prior experience with USDA's Farm Service Agency.

Technical Consultants Marcia Degan, Tom Fritts, and Chris Edwards round out the team, bringing years of onsite wastewater industry knowledge and hands-on experience to the communities the program serves.

How Communities Can Get Help

Rural communities, utilities, and local officials interested in assistance can contact the NOWRA office at 978-496-1800 or their state's onsite wastewater association.

About NOWRA

Founded in 1992, the National Onsite Wastewater Recycling Association (NOWRA) is the largest organization in the U.S. dedicated to educating and representing the onsite and decentralized wastewater industry. Its mission is “advancing sustainable decentralized wastewater infrastructure through advocacy and professional development, to protect public and environmental health.” NOWRA’s nearly 6,000 members include regulators, engineers, contractors, soil scientists, manufacturers, educators and service providers. Through a network of State Affiliates representing 33 states, NOWRA works to protect North America’s water resources and the communities that depend on them. Learn more at www.nowra.org.

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