



THE AGENCY CONNECTION

IRWA partners with agencies and expands on a winning strategy

An Interview with Leslie Finnigan, SR/WA and Joe Gray

BY BARBARA BILLITZER

With the highly specialized skills required for overseeing today's complex infrastructure projects, continuing education and training is more vital than ever. For agencies that have a large staff but are faced with a limited training budget, an IRWA Agency Agreement could be a great solution.

"Agency Agreements are one of the most mutually-beneficial programs we offer, and the interest in them continues to grow," said Daniel Stekol, IRWA's Vice President of Field Operations, who heads up the program. "If an agency has at least 20 employees and commits to their participation in just two IRWA courses, the arrangement offers significant cost savings."

When Daniel joined IRWA in 2009, there was only one such agreement - with the Federal Highway Administration. Since then, other such agreements have brought affordable training and association membership to hundreds of employees. In addition to State Departments of Transportation, utilities like Maricopa City Public Works and quasi-government entities such as Ameren Utility have similar agreements with IRWA. The Virginia Department of Transportation currently has the most employee participants with 99, and the Texas DOT is a close second with 83. In total, more than 450 agency employees are benefiting.

In January 2014, IRWA formalized an agreement with the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT). Daniel credits two key players with bringing it to fruition - Leslie Finnigan, SR/WA and Joe Gray. Leslie serves as Chair of IRWA's International Public Agency Committee and is the Western Regional Manager for Universal Field Services. Joe is Assistant State Right of Way Manager at ODOT, where he has worked since 1986. To gain some insight into the working relationship, we asked Leslie and Joe to explain the advantages associated with their Agency Agreement.

Can you explain the Agency Agreement?

Leslie: In essence, it is an annual agreement between ODOT and IRWA that allows for reduced membership fees and cost-effective education. While the program requires a minimum of 20 people, ODOT actually has 40 employees committed to membership. Only one membership payment is needed, and it's made annually through a single point of contact. You can imagine the time-savings.

Joe: Of the 40 employees participating, 23 are new members and 17 are renewals. We are proud to say that the entire Right of Way Department at ODOT is benefitting immensely.

How does ODOT benefit?

Joe: In addition to the lower membership rate, the training opportunities are invaluable. Our agreement enables us to work with IRWA on tailor-made educational programs. With so many employees requiring the same kind of training, we can support a course that is specifically targeted to our needs. This gives us the flexibility to craft training material that is unique to our agency's requirements. Another benefit is the option to have a course presented on site, which alleviates the travel costs and time away from the office.

Are there other benefits for employees?

Joe: Not only does this provide our staff with the opportunity to learn more about the industry and how it impacts their particular job, but being a member of IRWA gives employees access to an entire network of specialists. They can learn the intricacies of the profession from other members' experiences, gain exposure to best practices and network with peers. Given all the recent retirements and cutbacks, the department has lost many employees with years of knowledge. This connection ensures our newer employees get formalized training to help fill the experience gap.

How does IRWA benefit?

Leslie: From the Chapter perspective, there are tremendous advantages. It's crucial for new members to feel connected at the local level, as this is what typically inspires people to get involved. Those of us in Chapter 3 want to make sure that happens. It will be good to see new leaders rise from ODOT, and we look forward to their participation.

How did the agreement evolve?

Joe: After becoming the Assistant State Right of Way Manager/Operations Manager, I began looking for an efficient way to provide more staff training. Knowing that IRWA courses were readily available, I wanted to explore the possibility of getting training that was not just economical, but more tailored to our needs as well. I brought this to Leslie Finnigan in early 2013, and she felt confident that we could accomplish this.

Leslie: After working out the details with Daniel Stekol, Joe asked me to make a presentation to the ODOT right of way management team. So I presented the benefits of the program and emphasized the ability to create customized training, as well as the certification and designation opportunities. Management strongly agreed that it would be good for their employees!

Was internal approval required?

Joe: Envisioning the potential and actually making it happen was a team effort. After Leslie's presentation, I solicited feedback and support from the field office right of way managers who clearly saw the value of training and cost savings. ODOT's right of way management team, especially the State Right of Way Manager Rick Crager, played an instrumental role in moving it forward. After we addressed all the questions and suggestions, the agreement was finalized and officially executed in January 2014.

What role does continuing education play at ODOT?

Joe: Continuing education is crucial. We need to ensure that our employees are as knowledgeable about their discipline as possible. Specialized training will help us focus on where the gaps are and identify

what will be needed, not only for the present, but also for the future when different project requirements arise. Our next step is to prioritize which courses will help our employees become more knowledgeable and productive. Working closely with IRWA on our training goals and future objectives on a yearly basis will ensure we meet our internal business objectives.

What about credentialing?

Joe: ODOT is always looking for new ways our employees can increase their knowledge base, and credentialing is a great tool for this. Belonging to a professional organization like IRWA shows them that opportunities exist, and if they wish to move in that direction, we will fully support their efforts.

Leslie: By the way, Joe is very close to getting his SR/WA. I believe he is scheduling to do the review this summer and then take the exam.

Any feedback to date?

Joe: The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Employees feel that management understands the importance of training and the value of belonging to a professional organization. Managers appreciate the cost savings and the ability to get specific educational needs accomplished with one provider.

Has the IRWA-ODOT relationship always been strong?

Leslie: For many years, ODOT played a major role in our local chapter. In fact, when I began my right of way career in 1986, I worked for ODOT. From the very beginning, the management encouraged me to join the Association and get involved. At the time, IRWA was the training source for all of our agents, and many of them were actively involved in chapter leadership. Then in the late 1990s things changed, and until recently, the support just wasn't there. Fortunately, the new ODOT leadership recognizes the importance of education and certifications. This Agency Agreement is a testament to their commitment.

Who else would benefit from an Agency Agreement with IRWA?

Leslie: I hope this becomes a lead-by-example situation where we can encourage others with 20 or more employees to pursue this kind of arrangement. If we can help get the word out about the upside of an Agency Agreement, more agencies will want to take advantage of the reduced training costs and the opportunity to connect with others in the profession. It's definitely a program where both parties benefit greatly. ✪

For more information about IRWA's Agency Agreement program, please contact Daniel Stekol at stekol@irwaonline.org.



Making it happen, IRWA's International Public Agency Chair Leslie Finnigan, SR/WA and Joe Gray, Assistant State Right of Way Manager for the Oregon Department of Transportation.