

## Stipends for Wastewater Utilities Participating in Wastewater Surveillance Programs

National Wastewater Surveillance System (NWSS) jurisdictions can support their wastewater partners by paying stipends directly to their utility partners. These stipends serve as a financial incentive to encourage active involvement in wastewater surveillance programs and offset the costs associated with participation. To assess the current use of stipends by NWSS jurisdictions, the Water Environment Federation (WEF) requested meetings with key wastewater surveillance program contacts in state, city, and territorial health departments with ELC funding for NWSS as of July 2023. So far, WEF has had conversations with health department representatives in 43 out of 53 jurisdictions with NWSS funding, plus one additional jurisdiction not currently funded but ramping up its program (44 jurisdictions total). Although WEF continues to gather information, below is a summary of the information collected so far related to the frequency of stipend use, typical stipend cadence and amounts, and successful distribution mechanisms.

### Stipend Use

Of the 44 jurisdictions for which WEF has information, eight (18%) are currently offering stipends (California, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, Utah, Wisconsin, and Wyoming), and four (9%) are in the process of exploring mechanisms and evaluating the resources required to provide stipends (Illinois, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Oregon). Usually, but not always, these jurisdictions use NWSS ELC funding for stipend payments.

### Stipend Cadence

Some jurisdictions (three out of eight) offer stipends on a per-sample basis, while others pay a lump sum at a regular interval. Lump sum payments can be made on a monthly, quarterly, or annual basis. One jurisdiction does not handle stipends directly, but rather relies on its local project leaders to do so.

### Stipend Amounts

For jurisdictions that pay stipends on a per-sample basis, the amounts vary from \$100 per sample to \$150 per sample. For jurisdictions that pay a lump sum, the amounts range from \$2,000 to \$15,000 per year. The variation in stipend amounts is due to differences in available funding, sampling strategy, sampling frequency, number of participating treatment plants, and resource allocation approaches.

### Stipend Distribution Mechanism:

Jurisdictions employ different mechanisms to distribute stipends to utility partners. Two common distribution mechanisms are:

*State Contracts:* Some health departments create contracts with each participating utility to offer reimbursement per sample. This approach creates accountability for utility partners to sample regularly and provides prompt financial support, but increases the administrative burden on utility partners and can be challenging to implement within the health department, especially due to overworked contracting staff and bureaucratic procedures related to bid acceptances and city approval.

*Invoice-based System:* Other health departments utilize an invoice-based mechanism for stipend distribution. Utility partners must become vendors in the state vendor system and

submit invoices to the health department at an agreed-upon frequency (monthly, quarterly, or yearly). Once the health department verifies the invoice, utility partners are reimbursed for the stipend amount. This approach eliminates the burden of creating individual contracts.

### Lessons Learned

- **Persistence is key.** Establishing contracts or a smooth invoicing process can take time, effort, patience, and creativity.
- **Stipends are a well-received “goodwill gesture”.** While stipend amounts may not be sufficient for hiring new personnel, utilities generally appreciate them.
- **When considering stipends, starting with your finance department may be helpful.** The finance department may have insight into the most feasible way to establish an approach for paying stipends to utilities.
- **Stipends are not the only way to support utilities.**
  - **Sampling and Shipping Supplies:** Of the 44 jurisdictions for which WEF has information about sampling supplies and shipping, 43 provide sampling and shipping supplies at no cost to utilities. The one jurisdiction not offering any stipends or supplies to their utility partners has yet to start a jurisdiction-run program and their wastewater partners are receiving sampling supplies at no cost from a private lab (Biobot or WastewaterSCAN).
  - **Other Equipment:** Some jurisdictions have also offered to purchase autosamplers and any other necessary equipment for their utility partners.
  - **Contact Hours:** In addition to paying for sampling supplies and shipping, two jurisdictions offer contact hours for treatment plant operators for attending monthly meetings or completing a free online training course.
  - **Recognition:** Two of the 44 jurisdictions chose to publicly recognize their utility partners by implementing an appreciation week. This appreciation week consists of gift baskets, public praise (social media or news sources), and certificates of appreciation.