

THE SUN GAZETTE

Self-Help to train rural water boards

February 12, 2020

By: Staff

Self-Help Enterprises holds 2020 Rural Communities Water Managers Leadership Institute in Visalia

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VISALIA — Providing life's most basic need for water has become increasingly complicated. Water contamination, drought and groundwater depletion are all issues that private and municipal well owners have to test, treat and track. That may seem routine for cities that employ engineers and technicians who can advise those elected to set rates and make decisions, but it can be difficult for those operating rural water systems who may not always have access to staff or the experience and knowledge to understand them.

In order to help residents of small, rural hamlets make informed decisions about their community's water, Self-Help Enterprises is inviting community water board members and staff, water leaders and residents from rural communities to participate in its 2020 Rural Communities Water Managers Leadership Institute taking place this year in Visalia and Madera.

Self-Help Enterprises (SHE), a nationally recognized community development organization whose mission is to work together with low-income families, has organized the six-month Leadership Institute which will consist of trainings, workshops, and educational tours focused on building and maintaining long-term water management expertise in rural communities. The curriculum for the program will focus on topics including, but not limited to: local and regional community water uses, challenges, and solutions; California water management and planning programs including, water management agencies, laws and regulations; effective community participation in water management and planning; available funding and financing; an educational water tour; and sustaining community participation in water management and planning, building community networks and recruiting/building new community leaders. The Visalia Leadership Institute cohort begins March 21 and meets the third Saturday of the month through August 2020 at the Self-Help Enterprises' office in Visalia (8445 W. Elwin Ct., Visalia). The Madera Leadership Institute cohort begins June 13 and meets the second Saturday of the month through November 2020 at the Self-Help Enterprises' office in Madera (2425 W. Cleveland Ave, Madera).

"Water planning is important to ensure that water sources are available over the long-term and during drought periods. However, disadvantaged communities have been disproportionately represented on the boards and committees of regional water management and planning programs, such as the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) and the Integrated Regional Water Management (IRWM) program," said Eva Dominguez, Community Development Program Manager at Self-Help Enterprises. "This year, we're excited to bring the Leadership Institute to Madera in addition to Visalia. Through the Institute, water managers from disadvantaged communities will gain the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively participate and represent their communities in these regional water management programs."

Similarly, the Leadership Institute offers a unique opportunity for water board members and community leaders to come together to develop skills and acquire tools to become more effective

water leaders. “This course is so valuable because it brings people together from different rural environments,” said Melinda Barret, a former Leadership Institute participant. “It was clear that some issues affect us all, but we also learned about what makes our communities different. Self-Help Enterprises provided a thorough introduction to a wide variety of topics that are important for water managers, and gave us a chance to interact with each other, visit locations that are important to understand, and see a much bigger picture. They not only taught us what leaders need, they helped us form a group to support each other and move forward together.”

The program is free of charge thanks to the generous support from The Water Foundation, NeighborWorks America, and the United States Department of Agriculture – Rural Development. Additionally, participation stipends will be provided to help cover costs incurred while participating in the program, including gas and childcare. Stipends of \$100 per completed session (up to \$600) will be available to all graduates of the program.

The application and more information is available online at tinyurl.com/2020LeadershipInstitute. Applications due by Feb. 14 for Visalia and May 8 for Madera. Because space is limited and the program free of charge, it is asked that participants commit to fully participate and stay in the program the entire time. Following the Leadership Institute, participants will stay networked to ensure small rural communities have a voice in California’s regional water management, while they pursue resources needed to build sustainable, healthy water systems. To date, the Leadership Institute has trained more than 60 new water leaders in rural communities from Merced County to Kern County.