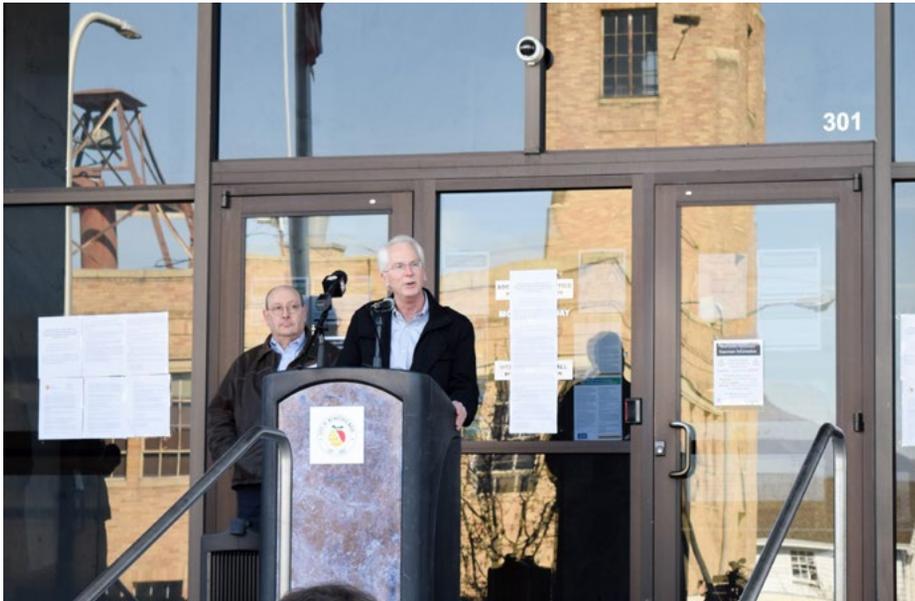


PUBLIC POWER TEAMS UP TO FACE AN UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGE

By Brenda Dunn



Chelan PUD General Manager Steve Wright speaks at a press conference with Wenatchee and East Wenatchee mayors and local health experts on March 19.

We keep the power on for our communities via a fine-tuned assembly line of essential employees all doing their part, from customer/member service representatives to engineers to dispatchers to lineworkers. Public power knows how to do this through any weather, be it snowstorms, ice storms, wildfires, or flooding. It's not always easy, but they always get the job done. However, when local governments began suggesting social distancing and mandating stay-at-home orders, the playing field changed significantly.

With Washington being one of the earliest states registering significant numbers of COVID-19 cases, some Washington utilities began closing their utilities to outside traffic the week of March 9; by the following week, the majority were doing so in Oregon, California, Washington, Montana, and Idaho. By the end of the month, most of our 157 member utilities had closed their offices to non-essential visitors. When any of them will reopen remains uncertain.

Safety first

A clear concern for both the safety of the members and safety of the employees has been evident throughout the industry. But managing that safety for a staff made up of field personnel as well as office employees, oftentimes with employees in more than one location, has been a challenge. Some offices have split into teams to staff the buildings on alternate days, while other teams are able to hunker down at home and work remotely. Everyone has their challenges, but no one is giving up.

Clatskanie PUD in Oregon has found a good way to manage the day-to-day office work while also keeping everyone—customers and employees—safe. Even though their lobby is closed, someone still needed to pick up the drop box payments, make the bank deposits, process mail, and coordinate with the crew in the field. To handle these tasks, they split their staff in half to create two teams (Red Team and Blue Team) that alternate working from home one week and from the office the next week. This

format reduces the number of people in the building at one time while the other team works remotely from home; the next week, they switch.

“We wanted to be able to follow COVID-19 recommendations to stay safe, as well as continue to provide excellent customer service,” said Customer Relations and Services Manager Sarah Johnson of the Red Team. “It is working well so far, and the change of scenery each week helps with not feeling too isolated during this challenging time.”

Hood River Electric Cooperative General Manager Libby Calnon agrees that alternating your staff is a good option. “One lesson I would share is to separate your critical staff into two or more groups and don't have those groups intermingle,” she said. “This is challenging for small utilities but will help to ensure that if some of your group gets sick, you have a lower risk of everyone getting sick.”

As far as the customer side, for the most part utilities are reporting that their customers understand, and appreciate, the necessary changes and precautions. Many customers can already pay online or via an app, which nullifies the need to come into the office at all. Will this crisis lead to long-term changes in business practices related to interfacing with customers or the integration of technology? Only time will tell. However, some utilities are using the changes as a teaching moment. “We are seeing this as an opportunity to help our customers evolve to more self-serve and online options,” said Mason PUD 3 Public Information and Government Relations Manager Joel Myer.

For a lot of our utilities, they need to also manage traffic at public meeting spaces such as auditoriums, parks, and dams. For example, on March 26, Grant PUD in Ephrata, Wash., announced that it had “made the difficult decision to close all its parks, campsites, boat launches, and other recreation areas and

facilities until further notice as an added measure to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 Coronavirus.”

Chelan PUD, Mason PUD 3, Franklin PUD, and many other Washington utilities all released similar updates.

Social distancing, travel restrictions, and the inability to assemble large groups meant that many annual meetings would also be canceled, or would at least look very different.

OPALCO was one of the first to announce that its annual meeting had been cancelled. Serving the San Juan Islands, OPALCO’s territory is remote and not easy to get to. A coronavirus outbreak on any of the small islands would most likely spread rapidly and many of the members are retirees, placing them in the higher-risk age group. On March 3, OPALCO announced that they were canceling their wildly popular annual meetings that are conducted on the ferry.

“We considered the risk to our membership and staff,” said General Manager Foster Hildreth, “and decided it’s best to err on the side of caution and follow the CDC guidelines for social distancing—at least until the threat of the virus has passed.”

With election ballots already limited to mail and online, no changes would need to be done to that process. As for the meetings, those would be conducted by remote video conferencing in April.

Helping those in need

With so many people out of jobs due to the mandatory closures of businesses, customers are facing financial burdens with various monthly bills, including utility ones. However, many utilities have quickly embraced suspension of disconnects, late fees, and charges for their customers.

California’s SMUD announced on March 27 that they will extend the suspension of disconnecting power due to non-payment for residential and commercial customers for three weeks.

“We made this decision due to the impact that COVID-19 is having on our local communities,” said Arlen Orchard, CEO and general manager of SMUD. “We want to ensure that our most vulnerable customers have access to power during these times.”

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative also announced a suspension of disconnects and late fees, and said in a release that they “will continue to evaluate other ways to support our members for

the duration of this quickly evolving public health emergency.”

Snohomish PUD in Washington suspended reading meters and sending meter readers into the field in an effort to protect both the PUD employees and their customers. As a result, some PUD residential and small business customers may temporarily receive an estimated bill rather than one based on an accurate read. A tried-up bill will be sent once the PUD begins reading meters again.

Others, like Lewis County PUD in Washington, have offered relief by reducing customers’ bills. Last month the PUD’s board of commissioners directed staff to reduce customer bills by up to \$1.2 million.

“Our PUD is a community-driven organization,” said Commissioner Ben Kostick. “We’ve been tightening our belt and making strategic investments that allow us to offer this relief during a time when our customers need it most.”

Many utilities are reminding their customers of existing assistance programs, such as Grays Harbor PUD’s Project Help fund, that can be used to help someone struggling to pay their bill due to the pandemic.

“For several years, the PUD’s customers have made donations to the Project Help program to help their neighbors and community members during difficult financial times,” said Customer Service Director Katy Moore. “It is times like these that this assistance can really make a difference in our customer’s lives.”

Or as in the case of Snohomish PUD, utilities are constructing new programs. On March 23, Snohomish announced that it has developed a COVID Community Support Plan to help customers struggling to pay their electric and water bills. The plan makes funds available for both residential and small business customers affected by the COVID outbreak.

“We know these are challenging times for some of our customers and we want to ensure that we are helping



Hood River staff constructed a temporary payment window, complete with a plexiglass window, using an exterior board room door to receive their high-volume of cash payments.

support those that need help,” said Snohomish PUD CEO/GM John Haarlow. “We are all in this together and as a provider of a critical service we play an important role, one which we take seriously.”

Above and beyond for community

As always, public power has flexed its ingenuity muscles and has come up with other ways to help the members of its communities.

“We realize how fortunate we are to still have our jobs right now and we are trying to support our local economy where we can,” said Mason PUD 1 General Manager Kristin Masteller. “To help stay isolated at the office, we order lunch to be delivered from local restaurants because we want them to still be there for us to visit when this is all over. We’ve moved up our printing orders a few months to keep our small mom-and-pop print shop operating a bit longer. They were going to lay their two employees off last week and now they have at least another week of work. These little things add up and help keep our economy afloat. We know who we work for. We know whose utility this is. We wouldn’t have paychecks if it weren’t for these customers, so we need to step up when and where we can. Public power does the right thing because it’s the right thing to do.”

Montana’s Flathead Electric Cooperative figured out a fun and different way to award the college scholarships they didn’t get to give away at their

continued



Copper Valley Electric Association CEO Travis Million has been communicating with CVEA members via videos on their website.

annual meeting. Each year Flathead Electric holds a scholarship drawing for high school seniors who attend the co-op's annual meeting. Though the meeting was cancelled this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Flathead still wanted to give local students a chance to win those scholarship dollars, which are funded by unclaimed capital credits. They explained the process in a fun post on their Facebook page: "While our local high school students are stuck at home, taking online classes, and practicing their social distancing, they will have a chance to put their name in the hat for the random scholarship drawing scheduled for March 30. Four \$500 scholarships will be awarded." Students only needed to complete an online application, which did ask a few questions about hydropower, to be entered into the random drawing.

Or what about constructing a new door at your utility so your members can continue making cash payments? Hood River Electric Cooperative in Oregon has a large number of members who walk into their office and pay in cash every month. After the office closed to walk-in traffic, Hood River still wanted to be able to take those payments to avoid members falling behind on their bills. So what did they do? Utility staff constructed a temporary payment window, complete with a plexiglass window, using an exterior board room door. The utility employee wears gloves and a mask at the window to help keep herself and Hood River's members safe, and she sanitizes the payment window

after every member. "Members can now walk up to make a payment at the door without coming in the building," said Calnon. "It's working great."

Lessons learned

We are only a month or so into the pandemic (though it seems like we have been here a lot longer) and already we have learned a few takeaways for when we face the next big challenge, whatever that may be.

Morale must be kept high among your employees. People are tired, people are scared, people are anxious, people are angry. Let them know that they are appreciated, they are safe, and they are not alone.

"There has been nothing like this in our modern history so it is helpful to know we are going through it all together," said Snohomish PUD Communications & Marketing Director Julee Cunningham.

Cunningham continued by sharing a recent story from SnoPUD. Months earlier, employees had chosen March 19 to be their first-ever Employee Appreciation Day, but then the pandemic hit. Lots of people recommended canceling it but more chose to stay the course. When the day came, General Manager John Haarlow sent a heartfelt message to all PUD staff, thanking them for all that they do, while also addressing the current challenges they were all enduring. "I'll be honest, we talked at the ELT [Executive Leadership Team] level on whether to cancel this new occasion and try for another date," he wrote. "But,

sometimes—often even—hard times are the very best time to make sure we are saying thanks and showing our appreciation. That's where we landed and why, indeed, this day—despite teleworking; despite being stretched thin; despite the challenges we are all adjusting to daily—is the absolute perfect day to say THANK YOU!"

Communicate, communicate, communicate. Communicate with your staff so they are all on the same page. Communicate with your colleagues for best practices and idea sharing. And of course, communicate with your customers. When possible, find new ways to keep your customers engaged with your utility. Copper Valley Electric Association in Alaska has turned to video to stay in touch with its members. In its first 90-second video on their website, CEO Travis Million explains to members how Copper Valley is handling COVID-19 concerns; it received 982 views by the end of March. A second video features Million in a hardhat on a job site, assuring members that CVEA is still there and working hard for them. This video highlights CVEA lineworkers, tree trimmers, dispatchers, member service reps, and many more employees on the job. The videos have been so well received—and easy to create—that CVEA plans on releasing several more to continue connecting with its members while the office remains closed to the public.

"Video is an opportunity to provide our members with a lot of information regarding our office closure in a quick, easy-to-understand format that is also personal and relaxed—in an otherwise crazy time," said Million. "Our members are clearly responding to video, so we plan to use video more often as a tool to reach and engage with our members."

And if your utility does not have one, work on a crisis communications plan as soon as possible. Benton PUD in Washington created a pandemic plan nearly 10 years ago! They were ready. In a news release, they said they were "well-positioned to meet the challenge of current events" because they maximized their telecommuting capabilities to protect the health, safety, and welfare of their administrative and technical staff while still providing a high level of over-the-phone customer service. Their line crews, warehouse workers, and other essential operational staff transitioned

to a rotating schedule; this process limits individual worker interactions and helps ensure a healthy workforce available at all times to respond to outages and to be responsive to new service connection requests.

Lastly, utilize available technologies to stay connected. Many of us are on a quick learning curve right now with video and conference call options, but it is worth the time to dabble with them to find what works best for you, your staff, and your board.

“I had a very positive experience with my first virtual board meeting in March via a conference bridge we use,” said Columbia REA CEO Scott Peters. “Prior to the meeting I emailed NRECA’s hints for holding a good board meeting via a conference call. Our board members used mute when not talking, they didn’t talk over one another, and they engaged with real questions and discussion.”

For NWPPA, GoToMeeting has been great for weekly staff meetings and project meetings. Microsoft Teams provides great instant messaging, document sharing, and even video calls between employees. Many people are turning to Zoom, a free video communications app, for work and for staying connected with family and friends. Want to Facetime someone from your iPhone, but (gasp!) that person has a Droid? Use the video calling feature on Facebook Messenger to make a video call between different operating systems.

“We are looking into using Zoom for our next board meeting so we can have the video feature, but we will need to research it a bit first,” said Peters. “Prior testing is key to any new technology.”

Resources

Public power works so well because we collaborate, we share, and we learn from one another; it is a constant that shines brightly during this unprecedented time. Even at a distance, we truly are more powerful together.

If you need utility-based resources, there are several. NWPPA of course is here to help you. Our free crisis-related webinars continue throughout the month, as well as our other digital learning opportunities. (For more about our current event offerings, please read Mike Hyatt-Evenson’s article on pages 4-5).

For the customer-facing side, Pioneer Utility Resources (pioneerutilityresources.com) has a gamut of COVID-19

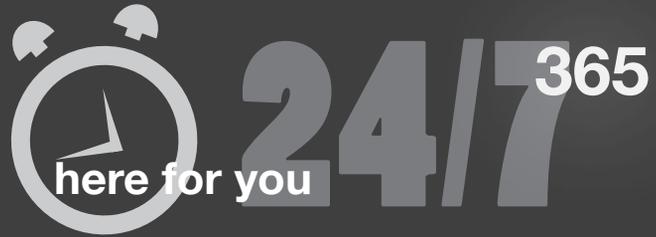
resources that you can use to communicate with your members. Want to know more about how to make the most of your teleworking experience? Read Megan McKoy-Noe’s four tips on pages 20-21.

The national associations (NRECA and APPA) have been sending out weekly, sometimes daily, updates on resources, talking points, guidance, and more. Visit their websites at cooperative.com and publicpower.org respectively.

And, of course, NWPPA will continue to share news and articles

and list our learning resources on the COVID-19-related section of our website found at www.nwppa.org/coronavirus-covid-19. **NWPPA**

Brenda Dunn is the editor at Northwest Public Power Association. She wants to know how you and your colleagues are keeping the lights on during this pandemic, so please email any news releases or COVID-19 thoughts to brenda@nwppa.org.



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