

## OUR POWER

# Counting on Kentucky co-ops

*Critical steps ensure reliability despite COVID-19*

JOE ARNOLD

February started simply enough with electric co-op employees across Kentucky following the early advice of public health experts to increase handwashing and decrease physical contact with others.

As COVID-19 pandemic concerns intensified in March, cooperatives responded with characteristic discipline, setting into motion procedures and policies for the safety of consumer-members and employees.

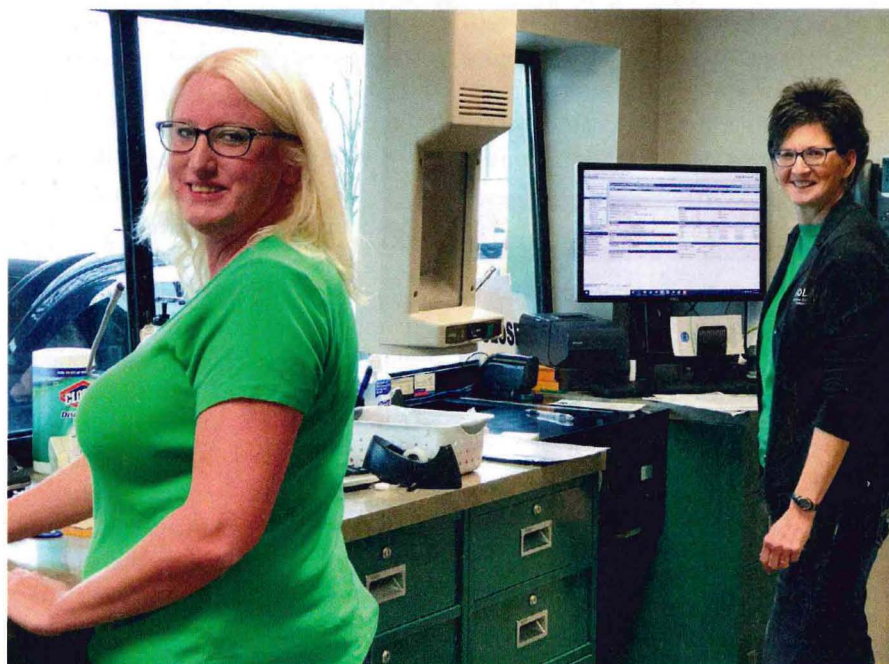
Disasters are what electric co-ops know well. Staffs are trained to respond quickly and safely to ensure consumer-members have electricity.

## Safety steps co-ops are taking

At Farmers RECC's offices in Glasgow and Munfordville, the first steps included closing the lobbies and a regular deep cleaning of commonly touched surfaces.

"We have redeployed our workforce as much as possible, including alternating employee shifts and dispersing employees among different locations," says Farmers President and CEO Bill Prather. "We want to assure our members that Farmers RECC has taken multiple steps to ensure continuous, normal business operations with a focus on serving our members with safe, reliable, affordable service, as always."

In Paintsville, Big Sandy RECC implemented the highest level of its



Nolin RECC employees Christina Stottmann, left, and Rhonda Grigsby practice social distancing while they serve members in the drive-thru. Photo: Sarah Fellows

pandemic plan. With the exception of its billing department, employees are working from home. Customer service representatives work alternating shifts.

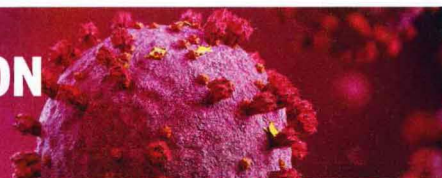
"Our CSRs wear latex gloves and disinfect payments and paperwork received in the drive-thru and the mail," says Big Sandy RECC President Bruce Aaron Davis. "We are also practicing social distancing while in the office."

Staggered shifts for line crews are also the new practice at Jackson Energy Cooperative in southeastern Kentucky. The co-op's safety

culture extends beyond the workday. All employees and their families have been encouraged to stay home when they are not working and on their personal time off.

"With the uncertainty created by the coronavirus pandemic, we know our members are facing many concerns," says Carol Wright, president and CEO. "Jackson Energy is dedicated to finding the best solutions for our membership while ensuring the continued safety of our employees and our members during this difficult time."

## IMPORTANT FINANCIAL INFORMATION DURING COVID-19



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Not-for-profit electric co-ops have no shareholders and routinely return excess revenues to their consumer-members. Because of this structure and the desire to keep energy costs as low as possible, some co-ops have limited reserve margins to sustain high rates of members not paying their electric bills.

Many electric co-ops have temporarily suspended disconnecting electric service and are waiving late payment fees. Importantly, these disconnect suspensions are not bill waivers. That's why many co-ops are also working with their members on deferred payment plans and other assistance to ease the transition once the COVID-19 pandemic has passed.

Electric cooperatives are encouraging their consumer-members to

pay at least a portion of their bill as they are able. This will help avoid a large multi-month balance when the pandemic is over.

The \$2 trillion Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act signed by President Trump in late March includes funding for families, organizations, small businesses and communities impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.

In most cases, you do not need to file to receive the benefit; it is automatic based on your income earnings filed with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

Most Kentuckians will receive a \$1,200 "recovery rebate" from the IRS, with most married couples receiving \$2,400, and up to \$500

for each qualifying child. The amount of the benefit begins to decrease for individuals earning more than \$75,000 and married couples earning more than \$150,000. The maximum income level to receive any payment is \$99,000 for individuals and \$198,000 for married couples.

If someone claims you as a dependent, even if you are an adult, you are not eligible for the benefit.

Individuals must have a valid Social Security number to be eligible, with an exception for members of the military.

The CARES Act increases unemployment benefits by \$600 a week for the next four months, and it adds 13 weeks of eligibility to Kentucky's existing unemployment benefit maximum of 26 weeks.

### Electric co-ops critical and essential

Co-op employees and contractors are among the workers in critical infrastructure industries identified by the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency as essential to continued infrastructure viability.

"With so many cooperative members isolated at home, it is critically important that we maintain reliable electric service," says Anthony "Tony" Campbell, president and CEO of East Kentucky Power Cooperative, Winchester, which provides power to 16 electric distribution co-ops in central and southeastern Kentucky.

In addition to such measures as teleconferencing, limiting travel and strict social distancing, EKPC is taking special care in its role as

a major power supplier to co-ops serving consumer-members in 87 counties in Kentucky and to PJM Interconnection, the nation's largest electrical grid. Some work areas have been isolated. Critical staff such as plant operators and line crews have been isolated, and shifts have been separated.

"EKPC is doing everything we can to keep our employees healthy and to prevent the spread of illness, so we can keep the power flowing," Campbell says.

To help consumer-members to pay their electric bill safely, cooperatives are encouraging them to use electronic transactions via co-op websites and mobile apps. In addition, most drive-thrus remain open and night-deposit boxes can accept payments. (Please check with your local electric co-op or see the center

section in this issue to confirm before going.)

"We understand the challenges and overwhelming circumstances that many of our consumer-members are facing," says Greg Grissom, president and CEO of Jackson Purchase Energy Cooperative in Paducah. "JPEC will not disconnect consumer-members or charge late fees for a limited time. While this is not our normal procedure, we are sensitive to the unforeseen circumstances and financial burden being placed on many of our consumer-members."

This is the case at many electric cooperatives, but consumer-members are encouraged to pay at least a portion of their bill as they are able. This will help avoid a large multi-month balance when the pandemic is over. Contact your co-op for payment options. **KL**

## OUR POWER

# Co-ops, primary election adjust for pandemic

Scam alerts, assistance with electric bills and new voting procedures

JOE ARNOLD

## Scam alerts—please report

Electric cooperatives across Kentucky are reporting a surge in phone scams attempting to exploit the COVID-19 crisis. Scammers pose as local co-op employees and threaten to disconnect service without immediate payment.

In March, the Kentucky Public Service Commission issued an order for utilities it regulates to halt disconnections for nonpayment and fees for late payments, cautioning that these temporary measures do not relieve the obligation to ultimately pay bills in full.

“Always verify the identity of any caller who asks for personal information or payment over the phone,” says Attorney General Daniel Cameron. “We’re committed to stopping scammers who try to take advantage of Kentuckians during COVID-19, and we encourage consumers to

report scam attempts to our office immediately by visiting <https://ag.ky.gov/scams> or calling the Consumer Protection Hotline at (888) 432-9257.”

## Trouble with your bill?

COVID-19 business restrictions have squeezed the pocketbooks of Kentucky workers. An astounding 600,000-plus Kentuckians have filed for unemployment benefits, as of early May.

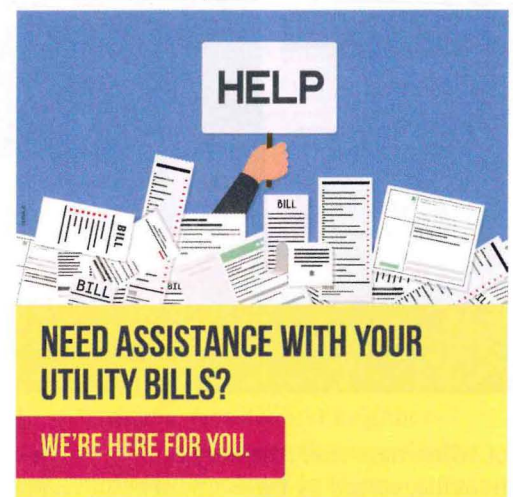
Local electric cooperatives encourage consumer-members to pay what they can to avoid facing large balances in the future. Co-ops work with members on deferred payment plans and other assistance.

Applications are now being accepted until June 30 for a special spring 2020 enrollment period for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

“It will help take some of that stress off,” says Roger McCann, executive director of Community Action Kentucky.

## New voting dates, procedures

As he works to safely accommodate voting for Kentucky’s primary election, rescheduled for June 23, Secretary of State Michael Adams is endorsing the Co-ops Vote initiative.



The campaign of Kentucky’s electric cooperatives began four years ago with the goal of reversing a downward trend in rural voting.

In-person early voting is June 8 through June 23, under new sanitization standards due to COVID-19. The state has mailed every eligible registered voter a postcard with instructions to apply for an absentee ballot, which will be delivered by mail.

“This plan fulfills my promise to make it easy to vote and hard to cheat,” says Adams. “Through expanding absentee voting—with appropriate safeguards—limiting the number of polling sites, and adopting in-person voting methods that limit personal contact, we prevent Mother Nature from disenfranchising Kentucky voters, while we also protect the lives of both our voters and our poll workers.” **KL**