

Somerset Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives
serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

Somerset REC

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Director of Marketing and Member Services

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Phil Stern,

Manager of Metering

Office Hours

Monday through Friday

7:30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Emergency Outage Number

814-445-4106

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Guest Column



Bend instead of break

By Emily Baer

LAST February, I traveled with three Somerset REC directors to the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association Annual Meeting in New Orleans. This meeting is where leaders of America's electric cooperatives can make valuable professional connections, share best practices, discuss today's critical issues and set a practical agenda for moving the industry forward.

In 2021, this meeting will be held virtually, and it will not be the same. I am a "people person." I believe face-to-face communication and personal interactions allow me to really get to know a person. Without this person-to-person contact, this year's meeting will lose some of its value.

Two short weeks after my return from New Orleans, the COVID-19 shutdown struck. Many of my co-workers and I packed up our files and began working from home for what we hoped to be only a couple of weeks or possibly a few months. When we found out the problem was not going to go away for many months, we reluctantly continued teleworking almost every day, still hoping it was just temporary.

And it is not over yet. But it will be — eventually, and when it is, we will return to our offices, in-person staff meetings, and get back to normal. Or will we?

It turns out, this remote way of working — as much as we resisted it and the uncertainty of the transition — has its upside. In fact, we have been doing it for a long enough time to realize that even when it is safe to get back to business as usual, we might not want to.

Take a moment to reflect on what cooperative employees have done to keep the daily operations running while working remotely. Employees managed system outages, answered questions concerning your HVAC system, monitored your electric use and acquired your meter readings, posted payments to your electric account, planned a drive-thru annual meeting, and made sure *Penn Lines* hit your mailbox at the beginning of each month.

At the start of all this, we thought we could not do it, and then we realized we did it well. So, when we get the green light, will we want our "old normal" back? Incorporating lessons from our pandemic workstyle into our daily lives could be a good thing. When you feel like breaking, bend instead and realize that readjusting is OK.

Even so, we missed out on many human connections in 2020. We had to revamp the annual meeting format, cancel the Somerset County Home Builders Mega Show, limit the way we participated at the Somerset County Fair, cancel Member Appreciation Day and more. I look forward to 2021 to renew those face-to-face conversations and community engagements.

While I have enjoyed working from home, I also enjoy going into the office. When I walk down the cooperative halls, a sense of "we're all in this together" comes across me. When "this" is all over, I am rooting for a hybrid work schedule — some work-from-home days and some office days. But, whatever the future may bring, I'm ready to bend. 🌞

Cooperative employees learn to bend with change

By Emily Baer

LIKE MOST organizations, the coronavirus shutdown put the cooperative in uncharted territory. Employees of the cooperative have experienced more uncertainties in our working schedules this year than most of us do in our entire working career. The front lobby has been closed, opened, and closed again to help keep our employees, members, and those within the community safe. Work-from-home rotations have begun for the second time for office staff, and the operations department is still staggering starting and ending times.

Since Somerset REC is considered an essential business, the cooperative never shut down, and all employees are expected to continue to do their job. Each department at Somerset REC has been faced with change. Sometimes, these changes happen smoothly, and sometimes the transition is not an easy one. Over the last 11 months, employees have witnessed firsthand the effects of change and



INVENTORY: Each year, the operations department conducts an inventory, and this year it looked a little different. Linemen Garrett Thomas, left, and Carter Engleka take preventative measures by wearing a mask while counting pole top insulators.



ANNUAL MEETING: Co-op employees Kara Specht, far right, and Wendy Durica mask up while registering members at the 2020 drive-thru annual meeting at the cooperative office.

how to adapt to new situations. From outage restorations to HVAC services, being considered an essential business during a pandemic sometimes creates obstacles when a job needs to be done.

From the onset, the cooperative's primary focus was to ensure it had the necessary workforce to provide reliable electric service and respond to emergency situations. To accomplish this, Somerset Rural Electric took several steps to mitigate the chances of COVID-19 exposure to our employees. These included social distancing,

wearing masks and frequent hand-washing.

In the Operations Department, some of the steps taken during the first five weeks of the outbreak included specific pairing of employees instead of using the typical rotation, limiting the interactions during business hours between our employees and the public, and alternating half of our workforce to work for two weeks and then be on standby for two weeks while the other half of the workforce took over. Another example of the ways the cooperative encouraged

social distancing was employees were instructed to use the private fueling station located within the Somerset Industrial Park rather than public gas stations.

“We learned a lot from those early efforts and have made changes that we believe still provide for the safety of our employees, yet better meet the needs of our members,” comments Doug Glessner, manager of outside operations. “Currently, all of our outside crews are working full shifts. We are still pairing employees and have also staggered their starting and ending times. We have also scheduled crews to use different entry points into the office to prevent all the employees from being in the same location at any given time. Through trial and error, I believe that we have been able to adapt to the many challenges that we were presented with.”

Co-op operations employees who can remotely dispatch from their residences are doing so to limit the potential spread of the virus.

For the office staff, the IT department had every employee set up to work remotely within 48 hours of hearing the work-from-home requirements. Since some of the daily tasks cannot be done from home, management also came up with a rotation to have 25% of the staff in the office daily, while the other 75% worked



WORKING FROM HOME: Billing Clerk Kristi Burkett shares her at-home work setup. She comments, “I like working from my kitchen table at home because it makes me feel safe by social distancing, yet comfortable assisting members with questions. I am excited to get back to the office soon to meet with members in person.”

from home. Having the ability to work from home has allowed the co-op to run efficiently and assist the needs of the membership while keeping safety a priority.

“I am very proud of the office staff at the cooperative,” says Jonathan Hillegas, office manager. “During the last year, we have had to make some changes rather quickly as to how the office is run day to day. As always, the entire staff was willing to pitch in any way needed. With safety in mind, we decided to close the office to the public and come up with a work-from-home rotation.”

Phil Stern, manager of metering, recalls a unique situation last spring when one of the meter technicians transferred into a staking engineer position.

“Hiring and training a new meter technician with limited office time during a pandemic was quite unique,” says Stern. “It is astonishing the technology available to us today. We were able to adapt from running metering reports in the office to accessing those reports from home. When a meter or metering device needs to be looked at, we can drive straight to the problem without driving to the office first.”

Another area affected by the pandemic is HVAC services. Since more people have been spending time at home, the desire to have a comfortable environment, whether that means more heat or air, proved to be a high priority this year.

HVAC Manager Tony Retassie comments, “The HVAC department has been very busy throughout the pandemic, selling more mini-split heat



THUMBS UP: Ken Walker, HVAC technician, gives a thumbs up to members attending the drive-thru annual meeting. His friendly personality hit the spot when welcoming members to the event.

pumps in 2020 than any other year. At times, installations were very difficult to complete in a timely manner because of the high demand for certain items.”

Like other situations rural electric cooperatives are sometimes faced with, a nationwide pandemic has proven to be quite challenging. Being prepared by having plans in place and resources available to provide safe, reliable electricity to our members is top priority. Adapting these plans as needed has proven to be vital in the cooperative’s efforts to keep everyone healthy.

“I would like to thank the entire membership for being patient and understanding with us during these challenging times. We’re all learning how to bend,” Hillegas adds. 🌱

2020 A. D. Stainbrook Award

PETER FITZGERALD, editor of *Penn Lines* and director of communications & member services for the Pennsylvania Rural Electric Association (PREA) — a statewide trade association that represents Pennsylvania and New Jersey cooperatives — presented the 2020 A.D. Stainbrook Award for Cooperative Communications Excellence to Somerset Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc., on Nov. 19, 2020.

In 1980, the A. D. Stainbrook Award for Cooperative Communications Excellence was instituted. It recognizes the cooperative, which through its local news pages in *Penn Lines* and other communications efforts, has earned the distinction of excellence in member communications. A.D. Stainbrook was the nation's longest serving rural electric cooperative director. He served as a director from Northwestern Rural Electric Cooperative from 1936-1988 and Allegheny Electric Cooperative, Inc. from 1946-1980.

Since then, the world of communications has expanded and the PREA board has incorporated other areas of communications into the criteria for receiving this award. Four independent judges reviewed all the entries for this award.

The award is presented each year to a local Pennsylvania rural electric cooperative that demonstrates excellence in communications with cooperative members, promotes the co-op's business and philosophy, and builds a sense of pride in the ownership among the co-op membership.

It is a prestigious honor to receive this award. Emily Baer, director of marketing and member services, is instrumental in the preparation of your monthly magazine. 🌟



AWARD: Emily Baer and Ruston Ogburn show the plaque noting Somerset REC's designation as the winner of the 2020 A.D. Stainbrook Award for Cooperative Communications Excellence.

Somerset REC scholarships available

EACH YEAR, Somerset REC awards \$1,000 scholarships to high school seniors.

- ▶ Applicants must be a graduating high school senior whose parents or legal guardians are Somerset REC members.
- ▶ Students attending public, private, parochial or home school are eligible to apply.
- ▶ Student must be enrolled in an accredited college or university.
- ▶ The 2021 deadline to apply is Monday, April 5.



Applications are available at the cooperative's website at somersetrec.com and can be found under the Programs → Scholarship link. Applications are also available in the front lobby at Somerset REC and guidance offices at local high schools.

The scholarship funds come from unclaimed capital credits refunds that previously had to be turned over to the state. Thanks to the efforts of our political advocates, we can now keep those funds in our local communities. 🌟



BRAVING THE COLD: Jessi Ditzler, left, and Jessica Maurer, office assistants at the cooperative, braved the cold Dec. 18 to ring the bell for the Salvation Army Red Kettle Campaign. Somerset REC matches the total donations received for this location on the day the employees volunteer. It is a tradition that co-op employees look forward to annually as familiar faces within our community stop by the kettle while purchasing last-minute Christmas gifts.