

Northwestern Rural Electric Cooperative Association, Inc.

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives
serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

Northwestern REC

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7 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.

Amy Wellington, Editor

Guest Column



We've got this!

Billing services pre- and post-COVID-19

By Connie Sovisky, *Vice President of Member Services*

NOTHING compares to a sudden and mandatory office closure that makes you examine your current billing services, and you're still able to say, "We've got this!" That is exactly what happened in Northwestern's Member Services Department in March 2020, when COVID-19 closed our office, yet we were able to carry on with business as usual.

Prior to COVID-19, we already had many remote billing services in place that several members were using. Northwestern Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) has always tried to be ahead of the game when it comes to technology. Some of these remote billing services include pay-by-phone, automated payments, online account access via SmartHub, electronic billing, prepaid accounts and an online chat feature.

Members who preferred not to use those methods were still able to pay their electric bills using traditional direct mail or other remote options, such as the payment kiosk in our front foyer or MoneyGram at CVS Pharmacy, Walmart, or Wegman's. We are happy to announce a new payment option with VanillaDirect. Using a barcode found on a delinquent notice or in SmartHub, cash payments are now accepted at Dollar General, Sheetz, CVS and Family Dollar.

Please be aware the co-op will never contact a member demanding immediate payment and threatening to disconnect their electricity. If you ever receive such a call for any type of service, hang up and contact the

company directly. Northwestern REC does have a collection process in place for delinquent accounts that provides plenty of advanced warning, including two delinquent-bill mail notifications.

The co-op also provides a courtesy call to remind members of their past due accounts, but these calls never seek payment. Disconnecting an account for non-payment is the very last resort for the co-op.

On the contrary, the co-op does everything in its power to keep a member's lights on. Our own employees find creative ways to raise funds for Member-to-Member, Inc. (M2M). M2M is a fund established by the members and for the members of Northwestern REC. It provides hardship grants to those members who are struggling to pay their electric bills.

Funds for M2M are typically raised through Operation RoundUp, member donations, the annual M2M golf outing and employee payroll deduction. On occasion, employees will also pay \$1 to M2M when they wear shorts to the office. Other employees coordinate silent auctions at the office with 100% of the proceeds going to M2M.

So as your vice president of member services and fellow co-op member, my promise to you, pandemic or not, is "we've got this." We are here for you.

Cooperatively yours,
Connie Sovisky
Vice President of Member Services

The power behind your power

Lineworker Appreciation Day is April 11

By Amy Wellington, *Director of Communications*

YOU'VE likely noticed Northwestern's crews out and about, working on power lines and other electrical equipment in our community. It's no secret that a lineworker's job is tough — but it's a job that's essential and must be done, often in challenging conditions. This month, as we celebrate Lineworker Appreciation Day on April 11, I thought I'd share some interesting facts about electric line crews with you.

The work can be heavy, in more ways than one. Did you know the equipment and tools a lineworker carries while climbing a utility pole can weigh up to 50 pounds? That's the same as carrying six gallons of water. Speaking of utility poles, lineworkers are required to climb poles ranging anywhere from 30- to 120-feet tall. So, if you have a fear of heights, this likely isn't the career path for you.

Line crews must be committed to their career — because it's not just a job, it's a lifestyle. The long hours and ever-present danger can truly take a toll. In fact, being a lineworker is listed in the Top 10 most dangerous jobs in the U.S.

Lineworkers often work non-traditional hours, outdoors, in difficult conditions. While the job does not require a college degree, it does require technical skills, years of training and hands-on learning. Did you know that becoming a journeyman lineman can take more than 7,000 hours of training (or about four years)? That's because working with high-voltage equipment requires specialized skills, experience and an ongoing mental toughness. Shortcuts are not an option, and there is no room for error in this line of work.

Despite the many challenges, Northwestern's linemen are committed to powering our local community. During severe weather events that bring major power outages, lineworkers are among the first ones called. They must be ready to leave the comfort of their home and families unexpectedly,



LINWORKER APPRECIATION DAY

We thank lineworkers for their courage and commitment to powering our community.

and they don't return until the job is done, often days later. That's why the lineworker's family is also dedicated to service. They understand the importance of the job to the community.

Nationwide, there are approximately 120,000 electric lineworkers. Here in northwestern Pennsylvania, Northwestern Rural Electric Cooperative has 30 linemen who are responsible for keeping power flowing around the clock, 365 days a year. To do this, they maintain 2,650 miles of power lines across five counties. In addition to the highly visible tasks our linemen perform, their job today goes far beyond climbing utility poles to repair a wire. Today, our linemen are information experts who can pinpoint power outages from miles away. Line crews now

use laptops, tablets, drones, and other technologies to map outages, survey damage, and troubleshoot problems.

Being a lineworker may not seem like a glamorous job, but it is absolutely essential to the life of our community. Without the exceptional dedication and commitment of these hardworking men and women, we simply would not have the reliable electricity that we need for everyday life.

So, the next time you see one of our lineworkers, please thank him for keeping the power flowing, regardless of the time of day or weather conditions. After all, our lineworkers are the power behind your power. Please join us as we recognize them on April 11 and follow "#ThankALineworker" on social media to see how others are recognizing their line crews. 🌟

Everything You Need To Know

About the 2022 Annual Meeting

1 Director Nominations are Due May 22

Nominations by email or petition are due on or before May 22 in order to proceed to the Member Panel on Director Elections. Districts 1, 2, 3 and 4 will be on the 2022 ballot. Nominations should be emailed to nominations@northwesternrec.com.

2 Voting Opens June 21

The official annual meeting notice and 2022 director ballot will be emailed and mailed on June 21. You will receive one notification or the other, not both. If you haven't received this information by June 28, please contact the cooperative at 800-352-0014.

3 Voting Closes Aug. 17

You will be able to vote electronically, via SmartHub or with mail-in ballots until the afternoon of Aug. 17. This will give the third-party survey company enough time to tally the votes, which will then be sealed and delivered to the co-op's attorney before the annual meeting.

4 Annual Meeting is Saturday, Aug. 20

The annual meeting will be held on Aug. 20 at the New Beginnings Church of God on Leslie Road in Meadville. The hour-long meeting begins at 11 a.m. and is open to the public for those who want to stay. It will also be broadcast live on Facebook and YouTube.

5 Annual Meeting Drive-Thru is also on Saturday, Aug. 20

As we have for the past two summers, there will be an annual meeting drive-thru in front of the church, beginning at 9 a.m. and ending at noon. All memberships that participate will receive a \$25 electric bill credit as the annual meeting gift.

6 Extra Annual Meeting Gift Coupon in August Penn Lines

You will find a coupon in the August 2022 *Penn Lines* that can be redeemed for an extra gift at the co-op's booth in Home Show Building 1 during the Crawford County Fair, Aug. 21 - 27, 2022. *The co-op will not be handing out annual meeting voucher booklets to the fair this year.*

Dos and Don'ts: Smart Technology



SMART technology can transform your home, making certain tasks easier, energy bills cheaper and your house safer. But with the plethora of smart devices and appliances out there, you may be overwhelmed as you consider what to buy. Keep these tips in mind as you plan your smart home to ensure you avoid the stress while enjoying all the benefits smart technology has to offer.

Do:

Make your home more secure

Many smart devices can make life more convenient, but some also keep your home and family safe. Smart doorbells, locks and security cameras can help you catch a burglar in the act, know when your family safely arrives home, and even lock up the house if you forgot to before heading out.

Buy compatible devices

If you already own some smart technology, you should choose others that work with your current setup. Smart devices can communicate through Wi-Fi, Bluetooth or a smart-home hub that could use Zigbee or Z-Wave protocols. Ensure any prospective devices can connect seamlessly.

Check for rebates

Some smart technology can be pricey, but you don't have to empty your bank account to create a smart home. Many energy companies offer rebates when you buy smart devices that can help you save energy. Plus, some homeowners

insurance companies can offer a discount when you buy security-related products. Talk about a win-win.

Don't:

Invest in smart tech you won't use

Adding a bunch of smart devices and appliances may seem like a great idea, but will you actually use them? A smart thermostat, speaker and power strip are a good start, but before purchasing something large, like a smart clothes washer, consider if the features are worth the cost and effort for your family.

Be afraid of the install

Setting up smart devices can seem daunting, but it's surprisingly easy. Once one device — like a smart speaker — is plugged in and connected to Wi-Fi, other devices can be easily integrated with step-by-step instructions followed in the connected app.

Assume your router can handle it all

Some routers provided by internet providers can begin to struggle to provide a consistent connection if more than 20 devices are connected. Consider adding a Wi-Fi extender or additional router to boost the signal throughout your home.

Now that you know what to look for and what to avoid, you can make the smart move of integrating devices to save time, energy, and money. 🌟