



Utilities and municipalities often support assistance programs that serve local communities. ADOBE STOCK IMAGE BY DRAGANA GORDIC

Neighbors Helping Neighbors

In a time of great need, community assistance programs pitch in

By David Herder

As people began to stay home and stay safe due to the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment rose and individuals, communities and small businesses were put in economic danger. In Goldendale, Washington, Klickitat County PUD Customer Service Supervisor Brandy Myers could see the community's lights dimming.

"When we were driving up Main Street, you could see all the lights that were off and the businesses that were closed," Brandy says. "It sank in, and it was like, 'Oh my goodness, how are these guys going to survive? How is our town going to continue to exist?'"

Fortunately, utilities and other local organizations have a tradition of helping keep the power on. Many electric cooperatives and municipally owned utilities offer community assistance programs to help those undergoing hardships.

A common program sees charitable participants round up their monthly electric bill to the nearest full dollar, with this extra amount donated to the assistance program. Typically, the community assistance program then helps consumers struggling to pay their utility bills. The Klickitat County PUD version of the program, called Operation Warm Heart, was first instituted in 1989 as a way for neighbors to help neighbors. The past year saw many neighbors in need.

"What we care about is that you are having an emergency and you need help," Brandy says. "We're going to try to provide that."

Operation Warm Heart has dispersed more than \$10,000 since April and has seen an increase in lump-sum donations to the program.

Peace River Electric Cooperative in Wauchula, Florida, runs a community assistance program known as Operation Round Up. The program has its own board of volunteers, is independent from the cooperative and puts a great amount of thought into each program donation. Ellen Hamel, board chairperson for PRECO ORU, says in 2020 they needed to act quickly to help the communities they serve.

“We tried to get as much money out into the community as we could to try to assist,” Ellen says.

Typically, the program has given individual donations to local food banks that have applications accepted. According to Feeding America, as many as 50 million Americans may be experiencing food insecurity, a nearly 40% increase from 2019. The PRECO ORU board actively sought partnerships with local food banks. As of December, the organization had given more than \$63,000 to nine area food banks.

Ellen says more members rounded up their bills in 2020 than in years past, and some even made additional donations.

“We’re especially proud of all the people who are willing to contribute on a monthly basis,” Ellen says. “The spare change on their electric bill, if they only knew, or could recognize the amount of goodwill it does for all of our communities.”

PRECO ORU also helped local school districts cope with closures and distance learning. At the start of 2020, PRECO ORU planned to make mini grants up to \$500 to schools or teachers needing extra materials for projects, school trips or other extra efforts. The organization donated \$10,000 among 10 school districts in its service territory, earmarked to help provide internet service or necessary devices to facilitate distance learning. This year, PRECO ORU hopes to implement the original mini-grant program.

Humboldt County and the city of Winnemucca in Nevada also relied on community programs to help local schools. Last summer, the Humboldt County School District knew students would not be able to go back to school full time in the fall, according to Akicia Heiser, Winnemucca city manager. She says local parents would need to continue working, and distance learning school children would need supervision.

Fortunately, the area received financial relief from a nationwide community assistance program: the CARES Act. According to researchers at Columbia University, funding from the CARES Act helped keep 18 million Americans out of poverty and helped lower the number of Americans in poverty between March and July 2020. It also allocated money to states, counties and municipalities.

Winnemucca received \$1.4 million from the CARES Act, with Humboldt County getting \$1.6 million. Working together, the city and county partnered with local community programs to help the school year run smoothly and safely.

The Boys & Girls Club helped run after-school programming. This school year, with a \$300,000 grant from the city and county, the club has helped open and staff elementary school gyms in Winnemucca so students can do distance learning while their parents work. A subgrant of more than \$300,000 was given to school districts to enable network upgrades to ensure access for all students and for schools to buy personal protective equipment, sanitizers, air purifiers and other necessary items.

“Winnemucca is a really unique place,” Alicia says. “It’s one of the only places in Nevada—and probably one of the few places around the country—where the city, the county, the school district, the Boys & Girls Club, everybody has a really close working relationship.”



Klickitat PUD held a silent auction fundraiser for Operation Warm Heart, spearheaded by Engineering Support Assistant Shelby Manka, left, and Billing Clerk Lori Fakesch, with auction items gathered by Buyer Robbie Cacy, right. PHOTO BY BETH SCHRÖDER

Winnemucca and Humboldt county also used CARES Act funding to help local small businesses. To help businesses remain safe places for customers during a respiratory pandemic, the small business assistance program helps cover eligible expenses that only exist because of COVID-19, such as PPE and hand sanitizer.

“We feel like we’ve done a real good job of putting some of that funding directly back into our own community,” Alicia says.

In Goldendale, Klickitat PUD also helped local businesses. Near the start of the pandemic, the Bonneville Power Administration issued a surcharge relief, which gave KPUD about \$64,000 in additional funds. KPUD commissioners decided to pass this money on to local businesses.

“The commissioners had a lot of foresight,” Brandy says. “The thought was, if you’re helping small businesses, you’re also helping employment. You’re helping everything.”

Beginning in May, KPUD worked with Klickitat County Economic Development to screen applicants for grants. They gave discounts on basic fees to small businesses, plus discounts of up to 50% on energy use for storefronts and 30% for home businesses. KPUD helped 114 small businesses with more than \$50,000 in discounts.

KPUD also extended its senior discount program. The utility has offered senior discounts since 1979, and the program’s availability was increased this year as KPUD worked with local senior services to help more people qualify for the program.

“The help we’re providing isn’t exorbitant, but we were able to provide help,” Brandy says. “When we’re driving down Main Street, we’re like, ‘All right!’” ■