

## Neighbors Helping Neighbors

*Many utilities and customers have partnered to help those in need*



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Across the United States, programs have been created to assist customers of utilities—whether public utilities, cooperatives or municipalities—who are struggling to pay their bill. Some programs are cooperatively run by multiple utilities or an outside agency. Others are managed by a single utility.

The thing these programs have in common is the premise of neighbors helping neighbors. Each program receives at least part of its funding from utility customers making donations to the program to assist other utility customers.

It is a working example of the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Many customers making donations express gratitude that the programs exist. Should they ever find themselves in a position to need temporary assistance, they’ll find others have given to help them, just as they give to help others.

Having these programs available to help those in need is invaluable, especially during the cold winter months when utility bills are higher.

Many programs provide assistance to those who cannot pay their utility bill because of a temporary change in their financial situation. Often, people needing help do not qualify for other forms of assistance. The programs supported by their neighbors’ donations are their only resource for making it through an unexpected circumstance.

Each program has its own criteria to qualify for assistance. Each also has its own method for utility customers to be a part of the program via donations. Consumers often can select a flat amount to be added to the utility bill each month to go to the program. Some utilities provide the option to round the utility bill up to the next whole dollar, while others give the option to add any amount to the utility payment.

Every utility customer must make the choice whether or not to donate to the program. It is not an automatic process. Generally, customers are asked to call the utility to make arrangements, fill out a section on their bill to donate or make arrangements through their utility’s online bill paying system. The generosity of each utility’s customers is what makes programs such as this work. Often, the donations provided by fellow customers are tax deductible.

Utility assistance programs exist under various names across the country: Neighbors Helping Neighbors, Utility Assistance Program, Neighbor Aid, etc.

At Klickitat PUD, our customers are the driving force behind the emergency assistance program Operation Warm Heart. Generous and caring Klickitat PUD customers have given to this fund since 1989 to help their neighbors in Klickitat County. All funds raised by Operation Warm Heart stay in the county to help local families who are experiencing a temporary financial hardship.

During the past five years, Operation Warm Heart has given more than \$100,000 to help hundreds of families in financial crisis. These situations arise for various reasons: health emergencies, change in employment or some other extenuating issue. Applications for Operation Warm Heart are accepted by Klickitat PUD, which works with the Goldendale Ministerial Association to screen applicants for program eligibility.

At KPUD, the donation process mirrors many across the country. Some customers add \$1 or \$2 to their bill each month. Some make an annual contribution. Others participate in Operation Round Up, where they have elected to have their utility bill rounded up to the nearest dollar with the difference going to the Operation Warm Heart fund. Regardless of the method they choose, the willingness of customers to help others in need is impressive.

The tradition of giving across our nation is an important one to continue. Check with your local utility to see if it sponsors or participates in an assistance program.

We all know unexpected things happen and can cause a temporary hardship. Having resources available through the utilities that provide power, water and wastewater services to our communities to help customers through those times makes us all better.

For those struggling to make a utility payment, contact your utility’s assistance program. Some programs also offer the opportunity for customers to request assistance for someone they know is struggling, but who may be too proud to ask for assistance themselves. It may provide the helping hand needed to get through a tough time. ■