

RELAY

FLORIDA'S ENERGY & ELECTRIC UTILITY MAGAZINE

Volume 54 • Issue 4 • Summer 2022

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Meals by mail. Anything from Amazon delivered in a day, maybe two. Skip the lines and catch a movie on a streaming service. Customer expectations around convenience continue to evolve — a trend that pre-dated the pandemic but was accelerated by it. Across all industries, technology plays a critical role in enabling more customer-centric service.

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Where in the world is RELAY?

Garnie Holmes, FMEA creative director, remembered to pack a copy of RELAY magazine on a trip to the mountains of Korfu, Greece. Don't forget a copy on your next trip! Send pictures to relay@flpublicpower.com.

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The Ritz-Carlton of the Electric Industry

Ritz-Carlton. Whether you've stayed there or not, the name alone conjures feelings of glamour and luxury. Ritz-Carlton is also known for its unparalleled customer service that lies in strict adherence to its "Gold Standards," which were established from the company's outset. The company empowers all its employees, from housekeeping to management, to be their brand ambassadors and provide their guests with unique, memorable and personal experiences. Ritz-Carlton's customer service standards are widely known as the best of the best.

In public power, our customer service approach is also the "Gold Standard." Why? Our customers — the residents, friends, neighbors and families within the communities we serve — are why we exist. They depend on us to power their homes and businesses with safe, reliable, affordable electricity. But this essential service is more than just something our customers need to charge their phones or turn on their lights. Electricity is key to livelihood, a means to fulfill basic needs, such as heating and cooling or safe food storage and cooking. And for some, electricity may be a matter of life or death.

Regardless of the need or situation, public power is committed to maintaining a gold standard in serving each and every one of our customers, no matter their background, situation or ZIP code. When customers need help better understanding their energy usage, we step in to offer energy-saving

tips and other ways to reduce their bill. We provide in-home energy audits and offer rebates for energy efficient appliances. We offer payment assistance programs, prepaid metering and payment extensions. We tailor our customer services and programs to fit a wide range of needs. This is the public power "gold standard."

As public power utilities, we have a naturally strong focus on serving our community and providing the best possible service to all customers. We are not-for-profit and locally owned and governed — meaning our customers are our owners. Members from within our community — either by being elected to our city councils or serving on our governing boards — make policy decisions and provide our utilities direction to make us successful for our customers and the overall community. Through public meetings and other community engagement forums, our customers have many opportunities to share their input and thoughts directly with our decision-makers and the utility. Our operations consist entirely of local people making decisions toward their own energy future.

Public power customers also depend on us for factual information about their energy use and to protect them from utility imposters. We've probably all been approached by a scammer asking us to send money somewhere, had fraud committed on our credit card or been asked to click on a link that results in malicious intent.

Unfortunately, scams are occurring in the utility industry, too.

Utility impostors send out phishing emails or text messages aimed at convincing you to make a payment or supply personal or financial data to sort out a service issue. Identity thieves use stolen personal information to open utility accounts and run up charges in the victim's name. Or scammers will spoof the phone number of the local utility and call customers requiring a payment be made immediately or power will be shut off.

But public power is fighting back against these bad actors. We continuously educate our customers about these potential scams, making them aware of suspicious behaviors and the evolving tactics that scammers use to target customers. We do it because we care about our customers.

Public power utilities know the relationship with their customers is paramount. Every employee, from customer service managers to field workers, recognizes that customer service is a key component of their job. As the energy industry evolves, so do customer expectations, and Florida Public Power responds by being nimble and flexible to the changing environment. With our inherent strong focus on and connection to our customers, and through the services and programs we offer, public power is the Ritz-Carlton of the electric industry when it comes to customer service. ■

The Return of the Congressional Fly-In

by Nicole Albers and Michael Nolan

It's hard to remember just two years ago. But the events surrounding the American Public Power Association (APPA) Legislative Rally in early 2020 would change our lives forever. FMEA's advocacy efforts on behalf of Florida public power took a sharp turn immediately after returning home from what would be one of the last in-person gatherings in Washington, D.C., for a while. The mysterious illness spreading in places far away was now in the U.S. COVID-19 was declared a pandemic — and a national emergency. Almost overnight, the country shut down. Our lives — and how we do business — would be changed forever.

FMEA and our members quickly adapted, successfully hosting a spate of virtual

Congressional meetings throughout 2021, but we all longed for the return of the in-person fly-in.

Two years into the pandemic, 2022 presented that opportunity. In one of the first in-person gatherings under the New World Order, the APPA Rally was open for business. Even with stringent local pandemic restrictions and longstanding visitor restrictions that significantly limited access to Capitol Hill, FMEA members were eager to get back to Washington. Nearly 30 attendees from 10 Florida public power communities, including Jacksonville Beach, Jacksonville, Key West, Kissimmee, Lakeland, Mount Dora, Orlando, St. Cloud, Tallahassee and Wauchula joined FMEA

and the Florida Municipal Power Agency to discuss with members of Congress critical issues of importance to public power and the communities we serve.

Congressional Meetings, Public Power Issues

Over the course of two days, Florida attendees, with certain pandemic restrictions, traversed Capitol Hill for meetings with Reps. Posey, Soto, Gimenez, Steube, Rutherford and Franklin, and with legislative staffers from the offices of Sen. Rubio and Rep. Demings. Additionally, we had the honor of hearing from two key Florida members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Republican Rep. Neal Dunn and Democratic Rep. Darren Soto at the Florida House — the state's beautiful unofficial embassy on Capitol Hill.

FMEA and our members focused on four key issues, all of which enable Florida's public power utilities to continue providing affordable, reliable and clean energy.

Supply Chain

Global supply chain issues are impacting all sectors of the electric utility industry. Industry-wide delays in securing transformers, wires and other essential equipment could lead to lengthier outages for customers during hurricane season and even hamper overall economic development goals.



L to R: FMEA/FMPA General Counsel Jody Finklea, FMEA Executive Director Amy Zubaly, Congressman Daniel Webster, Mount Dora Electric Utility Director Steve Langley, and FMEA Director of Public Affairs & Strategic Communications Nicole Albers outside of Rep. Webster's office.

Inflexible FEMA procurement and bidding requirements should be relaxed to avoid unnecessarily penalizing utilities for supply delays, which lead to unforeseen delays in the procurement process.

Direct Payment Tax Credits and Municipal Bonds

As tax-exempt entities, public power entities are ineligible for tax credits designated for expanding production of clean energy. Public power utilities should have access to comparable incentives, such as the refundable, direct payment tax credits introduced in the tax title of the Build Back Better Act, to enable all sectors to invest in clean energy resources.

Critical for cost-effective financing of reliability improvements or new public power infrastructure projects, and to save our customers money, modernization of the municipal bond market must include reinstatement of advance refunding and small issuer exception.

FEMA Reform

Florida communities impacted by hurricanes over the past several years are still owed millions of dollars in FEMA reimbursements. Some utilities take out loans to cover their restoration costs while facing lengthy wait times for federal reimbursements, and in turn, often accrue large amounts of interest on those loans. We urged Congress to support the bipartisan FEMA Loan Interest Payment Relief Act, which would require FEMA to pay loan interest while communities await reimbursements.

Infrastructure Funding

Florida public power applauds Congress for passing the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which will provide federal funding and incentives for investments in critical infrastructure and supplement and advance the expansion of electrification in Florida communities.

Washington Conversations – Part of an Ongoing Dialogue

Since the APPA Rally, FMEA has remained actively engaged in lobbying these

critical issues and following other developments at the federal level.

FEMA Loan Interest Payment Relief Passes Full House

A top priority issue we've been advocating for several years that will bring relief to disaster-stricken communities has finally passed the House. The U.S. House of Representatives approved legislation that will help disaster-stricken communities get relief from FEMA-related loans. Sponsored by Reps. Dunn and Soto, H.R. 2669 — FEMA Loan Interest Payment Relief Act, would require FEMA to pay the accrued interest on loans taken out to cover costs

of disaster recovery while communities wait for FEMA reimbursements. Other Florida co-sponsors include Reps. Rutherford, Lawson, Gimenez, Bilirakis and Posey. The language was included in H.R. 5689 — the Resilient AMERICA Act, which passed April 5 with bipartisan support (383-41).

This is a nice legislative victory for FMEA and for all public power; FMEA has led this effort in Congress, fully supported by APPA. We will continue to work with the Senate to get the companion measure, S. 2212 (similarly titled to H.R. 2669), sponsored by Sens. Rubio and Scott, passed as well.



Congressman Darren Soto, a Democrat member of the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee, addresses FMEA members at The Florida House on Capitol Hill.

Electric Grid Supply Chain Delays Impacting Industry – Additional Concerns During Hurricane Season

With hurricane season upon us, the prospect of lengthy outages for storm-impacted areas grows — an important issue we continue to raise with all Florida members relates to the availability of supplies. Global supply chain issues are increasingly disrupting the U.S. supply chain for electric grid equipment, leading to lengthy delays in equipment delivery and depleted stocks. Along with other energy and electric utility sectors, Florida’s municipal electric utilities are concerned about risks to electric reliability, as well as power outage response efforts during the upcoming hurricane season and ongoing community development projects. As the industry seeks to find solutions to these issues, FMEA will continue to bring awareness to electric utility risk exposure caused by global supply chain problems.

Pole Attachments: The Facts in Florida

We also continue to have serious concerns about misinformation being circulated in Congress regarding municipal electric utilities and attachments to our utility poles. FCC Commissioners on March 31 appeared before the House

Energy and Commerce Communications and Technology Subcommittee. In advance of the hearing, we reached out to Florida Reps. Soto and Bilirakis, both subcommittee members, to provide information and context on the broadband pole attachment landscape in Florida — that several major, for-profit telecommunications companies continue to mislead Congress in describing municipal electric utilities and cooperatives as barriers to entry when it comes to deploying their 5G infrastructure across our service areas.

What’s Next?

Expect a good deal of Congressional legislative activity over the next several weeks, running right up to the August recess and ahead of November’s mid-term elections. Several big-ticket items, including immigration, voting rights reform, a China trade bill and climate change, remain controversial in a bitterly divided and partisan Congress.

On the energy front, a bipartisan group of senators met recently to gauge interest in a bipartisan climate and clean energy bill this year, including revisiting critical energy provisions — an expansion and extension of energy tax credits to include

refundable direct pay tax credits for public power utilities. One participant in these discussions is notable — Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Joe Manchin (D-WV), a key vote in the Senate who was largely responsible for killing the White House’s Build Back Better package late last year. Revival of the tax title in the all-but-dead BBB is a key ask we made in Washington and one we will continue to push. Despite the bipartisan talks, it’s too early to tell if Republicans will go along.

As Congressional action on key Democratic priorities stalls, the Biden White House is taking executive action on energy and climate issues, issuing a bevy of executive orders on pipelines and oil and gas leases. In addition, federal agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Energy, are moving quickly on new federal rules — DOE on infrastructure implementation and EPA on climate-related rules coming this fall, including proposed regulations on CO2 emissions for power plants. FERC is quite active, working on their climate change agenda and new transmission rules. FMEA is following it all and continues to advocate on behalf of their members. ■



Congressman John Rutherford (third from left) is joined by leaders from JEA, Beaches Energy Services and Jacksonville Beach Mayor Christine Hoffman (second from left).



Q&A with OUC's Clint Bullock

What was your first management role?

I was promoted to manager of commercial services and development services at OUC in 1999.

What were some early lessons you've learned about managing people?

Don't micromanage — it inhibits ideas, creativity and collaboration. I actually learned this lesson while coaching someone to ease up on their micromanaging style. In talking with them, I realized I had a tendency to do the same thing.

How have your parents influenced your leadership style?

I got my father's work ethic and my mother's perseverance. My dad taught me that hard work pays off in the long run. My mom taught me that even though I faced challenges I had to pick myself up and keep going.

What are some leadership lessons you've learned?

A leader needs to play the long game and focus on the big picture. Don't get caught up in things that distract you from accomplishing more meaningful objectives. I'm a strong believer in teamwork. I've learned that it's best to be humble as you progress in your climb.

When you went to college, did you have an idea of what you wanted to do for a career?

I thought I wanted to go into computer programming, but realized I was too much

of a people person to be in a computer lab all day, so I switched my major to marketing. I thought I would go into sales. I was interning at OUC while attending the University of Central Florida and was hired after graduation. My goal was to be involved in the overall growth and success of the organization and after 30 years of working here, I've been blessed with the opportunity to have a well-rounded career, working in customer service, sustainability and strategic planning, and electric and water delivery.

How do you hire? What qualities do you look for?

I look for candidates who are prepared and can demonstrate commitment. I also like candidates who are team oriented with a passion for the organization. It's important for me to determine if they are prepared and understand the position and strategic direction of OUC. I look for confidence in their approach with a strong work ethic.

What is your best interview question?

"Tell me about something that didn't work out as you had hoped and how you handled that situation." I ask this question to see how candidates have handled failure or a mistake and did they own up to it or make excuses.

What career and life advice do you give to graduating college students?

Work for two or three years before going to grad school. An MBA will be more valuable

after you've gotten a few years of real-world work experience.

Is there a particular value that is particularly important to you?

Make Safety First. That's our top corporate value, and it's very important to me coming from an operations background. That experience gave me an appreciation for the risks utility workers face. They put their lives on the line every day. I know them and their families personally, and I want them to be able to go home to their loved ones every night. So safety is a value that we will not compromise.

What behavior do you not tolerate, aside from the obvious ones?

For me, there are several behaviors that are "non-negotiable": lack of integrity and transparency and not being a team player.

Describe some of your first impressions when you first became a CEO. Were your expectations different than what you expected?

While I knew the CEO role was large, there were some aspects of the role that I've since realized are even bigger than anticipated. It's required me to adjust my leadership behaviors to the needs of the new role. My primary responsibility is less about day-to-day operations and more about overseeing the company's strategic direction with a focus on the future, while ensuring employees understand why this direction is critical to our overall future success.

What do you think makes you different?

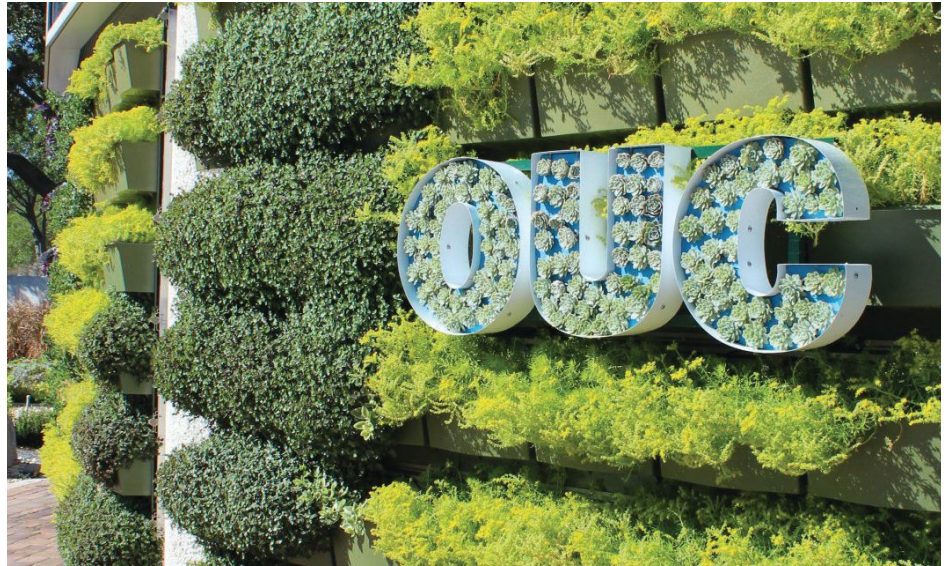
I've been fortunate in my career to take on various work opportunities in different areas at OUC. I think my diverse background has helped me think more holistically about OUC and the people who work here.

What if a new hire asked you: "What should I know about working with you day to day? What are your pet peeves, and what do you particularly like?"

You should know that I expect you to come prepared to offer solutions that will help us meet our objectives. My job isn't to solve every problem. I lean on my team to make recommendations for meeting challenges. I realize that mistakes will be made, but I'm less tolerant when they're repeated. A pet peeve is people who take credit for themselves instead of sharing it with their team. You should also know that I'm analytical and I like numbers.

What makes the biggest difference in terms of who ultimately succeeds and who doesn't?

Being a team player. If you're not, you're not going to succeed.



What gets you excited each morning to get out of bed?

I know I'm part of an organization that's very important to my community's quality of life. We have a tremendous responsibility to meet our customers' needs and keep pricing affordable, while at the same time we're making substantial investments in alternative water supplies and renewable technologies, like solar and energy storage. We're fostering a

culture of innovation that will inspire people's critical and creative-thinking abilities to support our sustainability goals. This truly is a transformational time for OUC and the industry as a whole. We're committed to closing our two coal-fired plants over the next few years and reaching net zero CO2 emissions by 2050. Every day brings new challenges. I can't think of a more exciting time in OUC's nearly 100-year history. ■





Interest Relief and Hazard Mitigation Included in Bill Passed by House

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) would be required to help pay interest expenses for loans taken out to cover costs that will eventually be repaid with FEMA public assistance grants under legislation passed by the House. Under H.R. 5689, the amount automatically set aside for pre-disaster mitigation funds would also be increased from 6 percent of public assistance granted for the year to 15 percent. The interest provision is based on legislation that was drafted to assist public power utilities and rural electric cooperatives that take out loans to cover disaster-related costs, which will eventually be repaid by FEMA.

White House Aims to Help Rural Communities Access New Federal Programs

The Biden administration launched a program to place federal field staff in more than 25 rural communities in multiple states, Tribal Nations and territories where they will help local leaders navigate and access resources made available by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. The aim of the Rural Partners Network is to help rural communities create economic opportunity by leveraging resources from all federal departments and agencies.

Ditto Asks President Biden to Prioritize Modernization of the Columbia River Treaty

In an April 4 letter to President Biden, APPA President and CEO Joy Ditto asked the president to direct the State Department and a

negotiating team working under National Security Council officials to move faster on renegotiating the Columbia River Treaty with a particular emphasis on rebalancing the power provisions between the U.S. and Canada.

Meanwhile, at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission ...

- **Transmission.** FERC issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to reform the Commission's electric regional transmission planning and cost allocation requirements. The proposed reforms are intended to remedy perceived deficiencies in the Commission's existing regional transmission planning and cost allocation requirements, with a focus on planning for a changing resource mix. APPA staff is seeking member input on the FERC proposals.
- **Electricity Markets.** FERC directed the operators of six regional organized electric power markets to provide information regarding their changing system needs and plans for potential reforms. The order follows a staff whitepaper and four technical conferences conducted in 2021 that explored the changing nature of the organized markets and their operations.
- **Dynamic Line Ratings.** APPA filed joint comments with the Large Public Power Council (LPPC) in response to a FERC Notice of Inquiry seeking comment on whether dynamic line ratings are needed to ensure just and reasonable wholesale rates. APPA and LPPC said FERC should hold off on considering a requirement to utilize dynamic line ratings while the power industry implements a closely related ambient adjusted line ratings requirement. ■

Odds and Ends *from Across the State*

OUC, Talquin Electric Take Top Honors at 2022 Florida Lineman Competition

The annual Florida Lineman Competition brings electric lineworkers from all over the state together to demonstrate their skill and knowledge in the craft of line work. Competitors took on various challenges such as replacing crossarms and insulators on utility poles, changing out transformers and completing a simulation of rescuing injured lineworkers. Competitors earned points for completing the tasks as quickly as possible and lost points if safety standards and proper work practices were not followed. Journeyman teams, which included at least one lineworker who has been in the industry for five years or more, are made up of three lineworkers. Apprentices, or lineworkers in training, competed individually.

The 2022 Overall Journeyman Team Winners Cup was presented to Mike Harper, Lance Rivenbark and Jonathan Hermann of Talquin Electric Cooperative. Winning the Overall Apprentice Award was Matt Coakley from OUC. This year, 20 journeyman linemen teams (totaling 65 journeyman competitors), 72 apprentices and 43 judges from 11 utilities participated.

Tallahassee, OUC Bring Home 2022 Public Power Lineworkers Rodeo Trophies

The American Public Power Association (APPA) hosted its 2022 Public Power Lineworkers Rodeo in Austin, Texas, in March of this year. The return of the event was widely anticipated after a three-year hiatus due to the pandemic. Seven Florida Public Power utilities recently competed in the APPA 2022 Public Power Lineworkers Rodeo held in Austin, Texas. Fifty-five teams and 96 apprentices from across the country competed in this year's event. Congratulations to the following FMEA members who were among the top contenders:

Apprentice Competition

- *City of Tallahassee:* Thomas Steverson, second place Overall and third place Written Test; Jordan Reddick, third place Double Dead-end Bell Change-out and third place Pole Top Pin Insulator Change-out;

- *Kissimmee Utility Authority:* Ethan Shellabarger, third place 90-degree Crossarm Relocation; Karl Glass, second place Double Dead-end Bell Change-out
- *Orlando Utilities Commission:* Matthew Coakley, third place Overall; Evan Englert, first place 90-degree Crossarm Relocation

Journeyman Competition

- *City of Tallahassee:* Team Randall Crum, Josh Helton, Justin Johnson and Coy Judd, fifth place Overall, second place Suspension Insulator Change-out and third place Transformer Banking
- *JEA:* Team Chance Jones, Caleb Macabitas, Cody Stokes and Adam Strickland, first place Hurtman Rescue and third place 4kV Crossarm Change-out; and Team Dan Baye, Kelvin Jasper, Gregory Scott Johnson and Franklee Taylor, third place Suspension Insulator Change-out

Florida Public Power Utilities Recognized for State, National Safety Records

FMEA recognizes and rewards safe operations through its annual Safety Awards. A total of 17 utilities received a Safety Award in their respective category (based on worker-hours), including City of

Alachua, City of Blountstown, City of Chattahoochee, City of Green Cove Springs, City of Mount Dora, City of Newberry, Town of Havana, Fort Pierce Utilities Authority, Ocala Electric Utility, Beaches Energy Services, Keys Energy Services, Utilities Commission, New Smyrna Beach, Lakeland Electric, City of Tallahassee,



Gainesville Regional Utilities, Orlando Utilities Commission and JEA. In addition, the American Public Power Association recognized Florida utilities with the lowest safety incidence rate within their groups. Receiving APPA Safety Award recognition were the following: Fort Pierce Utilities Authority, Keys Energy Services (photo on page 12) and JEA.

FMEA Members Earn Top Reliability Distinction from APPA



American Public Power Association

Five FMEA members earned Reliable Public Power Provider (RP3) 2022 designations by the American Public Power Association, a special

distinction recognizing a utility's dedication to operating an efficient, safe and reliable distribution system. The 2022 Florida Public Power designees are Gainesville Regional Utilities (Diamond); JEA (Diamond); Leesburg Electric Department (Platinum); City of Mount Dora (Platinum); Utilities Commission, City of New Smyrna Beach (Gold). The RP3 designation is good for three years. These utilities join seven other Florida Public Power utilities that currently hold the distinction: Beaches Energy Services; City of Tallahassee Electric Utility; Fort Pierce Utilities Authority; Homestead Energy Services; Keys Energy Services; Kissimmee Utility Authority; and Ocala Electric Utility. Congratulations!

Ocala Electric Utility Signs Large Commercial Customer for 100 Percent Community Solar

In early February, Ocala Electric Utility (OEU) celebrated the signing of one of its largest commercial customers for the city's solar subscription program. Among OEU's top 10 largest commercial customers in the utility's service area, Signature Brands — a leading manufacturer and distributor of products from well-known brands such as Betty Crocker, PAAS, Cake Mate and more — asked OEU for help to fulfill its commitment to go 100 percent solar. Powered by the Florida Municipal Solar Project (FMSP), a partnership between the Florida Municipal Power Agency and 16 Florida municipal utilities, OEU has signed 44 residential and two commercial customers since the program's inception in October 2020.

Gainesville Regional Utilities Makes Investment in Reliability

Gainesville Regional Utilities (GRU) recently replaced a power



transformer at Serenola substation after having been in service for nearly 50 years. Up until it was decommissioned in December, the transformer served more than 5,000 customers. GRU completed the replacement of this

transformer on Valentine's Day, and it now has an even greater capacity that will result in a more reliable electric grid for all GRU customers.

JEA Ranked 14th on Forbes Best Mid-Sized Employers List

JEA was named to the Forbes 2022 list of America's Best Mid-Sized Companies. JEA ranked 14th on the final list of 500 employers across the country! This ranking was calculated from 60,000 Americans working for businesses with at least 1,000 employees who were anonymously surveyed. JEA is the only Florida utility named to the Forbes America's Best Mid-Sized Employers List.

OUC Breaks Ground on St. Cloud Operations & Maintenance Center

Recently, representatives with OUC – The *Reliable One* and the City of St. Cloud led the groundbreaking ceremony for OUC's state-of-the-art St. Cloud Operations & Maintenance Center, the first net-zero campus for a Florida utility. The \$63.6 million, 24-acre campus will reach net-zero emissions through conservation and efficiency practices and its use of renewable energy. The project aligns with OUC's and the City of St. Cloud's commitment to sustainability and renewable energy.

Construction includes building a 55,000-square-foot warehouse and a 22,000-square-foot fleet maintenance facility with service bays, parts stores, electric vehicle (EV) fleet charging and fueling stations, and a vehicle wash area. When completed in December 2023, about 54 OUC employees will call the campus home. Future phases are expected to include an administrative facility and a substation.

The project includes several sustainable features, including rooftop solar panels, floating solar, high-efficiency water fixtures, rainwater harvesting tanks, Florida-Friendly Landscaping, walking and biking trails, and EV charging stations. Human-focused design strategies were added to promote well-being, safety and encourage healthy choices. Buildings on campus were designed to meet the stringent requirements of LEED®, Fitwel and WELL Health Safety Standard.

The project marks a milestone in OUC's partnership with St. Cloud. In May 1997, the two entered a long-term agreement for OUC to operate and maintain the city's electric system.



JEA Recognized as Outstanding Utility by Florida Urban Forestry Council

The Florida Urban Forestry Council (FUFC) recently recognized Florida public power utility JEA as the state's 2021 outstanding utility for being a champion in protecting and advancing the urban forest industry in Florida. The awards program recognizes achievements of organizations and individuals in their efforts to manage urban forests in their communities. The Outstanding Utility Award recognizes JEA's commitment to "a sustainable and resilient tree canopy" as part of its mission to build a better community.

KUA Stages Mock Disaster Ahead of Hurricane Season

Kissimmee Utility Authority staff members took part in a mock disaster drill in April to test the readiness of the utility for this year's hurricane season. The four-hour drill involved a wide range of activities, including both live-action training and tabletop exercises. Activities included pre- and post-hurricane scenarios and other threats that will be handled with the same intensity as real-life incidents.

A team of observers evaluated the drill to identify vulnerabilities and exposures and make recommendations for improvements.

These observations were shared with utility management in a drill debriefing.

Tallahassee Partnership with FSU Earns EPA Honors

A solar energy program operated by the City of Tallahassee received national recognition through a partnership with Florida State University. The university has earned membership to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's "Green Power Partnership" program because the campus uses solar power to meet about 30 percent of its electricity demand. Congratulations, Florida State University and Tallahassee Solar. ■





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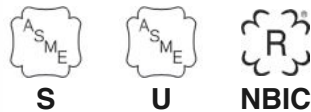
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Who's Who in the Florida Public Power Community

Beckham Appointed Interim GM, Lakeland Electric



Lakeland City Manager Shawn Sherrouse has appointed Mike Beckham as interim general manager of Lakeland Electric, effective April 14, 2022. Former Lakeland Electric General Manager Joel Ivy accepted a position with Lubbock Power & Light and began overseeing the Texas municipal utility in May 2022.

As interim general manager, Beckham will report directly to the city manager. This appointment is scheduled for up to six months and is intended as a trial basis for both Beckham and the city manager to evaluate performance. Beckham will assume all the duties, responsibilities and authority of the general manager for Lakeland Electric.

Beckham has been with Lakeland Electric since 2015. Please join us in welcoming Mike Beckham as interim general manager of Lakeland Electric!

KEYS' LLera Named Risk Management Professional of the Year



Juan LLera, safety and risk coordinator for Keys Energy Services (KEYS), was recently recognized as the Risk Management Professional of the Year for 2022 by Preferred Governmental Insurance Trust (Preferred). Chris Kittleson, director of loss control technical services for Preferred, presented LLera with the award during the

Utility Board meeting on Wednesday, April 13.

LLera was recognized for his efforts and excellence in the field of risk management. This award is given annually to one of Preferred's 400 qualified members.

GRU's Carter Takes on Expanded Role with Gainesville

Gainesville Regional Utilities' Yvette Carter's role in the Gainesville community is being expanded to have an even greater impact. Yvette has been a vital voice inside GRU on issues of social responsibility/corporate citizenship, community outreach, government relations, volunteerism and diversity, having developed GRU's first comprehensive inclusion and diversity strategy. Yvette's new role is the director for the Office of Government Affairs and Community Relations for the City of Gainesville. In this role, Yvette will bring her talents to the entire city while still maintaining the community-based programs she's built at GRU. Congrats to Yvette.

Homestead's Quiñones Featured in South Florida Business Journal

Barbara Quiñones, director of Homestead Energy Services, was recently highlighted on the Energy Influencers Executive Panel by GCI Worldwide Corporation, in partnership with the City of Homestead Energy Services, FPL and the *South Florida Business Journal*. The



“We have to be innovative and creative.”

Barbara Quiñones





program convened executives from across the business, utility, health care and economic development sectors to explore how businesses and leaders rely on electrical resources to empower growth. Quiñones touted the utility's solar projects, electric vehicle

was named one of *Orlando Business Journal's* 40 Under 40. Lisa's leadership has helped OUC be recognized as a valued community partner. Congratulations, Lisa!

Florida League of Cities Recognizes Home Rule Heroes from Florida Public Power Communities

The Florida League of Cities recognized leaders from Florida public power communities with Home Rule Hero Awards for their work during the 2022 legislative session. Home Rule Hero Award recipients are local government officials, both elected and nonelected, who consistently responded to the League's request to reach out to members of the Legislature and help give a local perspective on an issue. They worked tirelessly throughout the legislative session to promote local voices making local choices, protect the Home Rule powers of Florida's municipalities and advance the League's legislative agenda.

Congratulations to the following Home Rule Heroes from Florida Public Power: City Manager Terry Atchley (Wauchula); Mayor Nathan Blackwell (St. Cloud); Mayor Gib Coerper (Alachua); Mayor John Dailey (Tallahassee); City Manager Reese Goad (Tallahassee); Councilwoman Sandy Golding (Jacksonville Beach); Mayor Janice Hart (Havana); Mayor Christine Hoffman (Jacksonville Beach); Mayor Linda Hudson (Fort Pierce); Commissioner Curtis Johnson Jr. (Fort Pierce); City Manager Steve Kennedy (Green Cove Springs); Vice Mayor Leo Longworth (Bartow); Mayor Jordan Marlowe (Newberry); Mayor Janice D. Mortimer (Starke); Commissioner Tony Ortiz (Orlando); Council Member Cal Rolfson (Mount Dora); City Manager Mike Staffopoulos (Jacksonville Beach); Commissioner Robert F. Stuart (Orlando); and Commissioner Phillip Walker (Lakeland).

charging stations and future cryptocurrency industry partnerships in Homestead.

JEA Promotes Selders



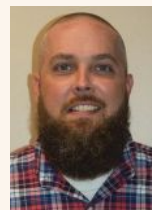
Congrats to Steven Selders on his new role as JEA vice president of application delivery and enterprise architecture. He joined JEA in 2005 and most recently was director of IT strategic planning and solution development. He'll now oversee multiple teams across technology services.

OBJ Recognizes OUC's Curran



The Orlando Utilities Commission proudly announced that Lisa Curran, OUC's director of marketing and community engagement,

Chad Lynch Named Deputy Director of Ocala Electric Utility



Ocala Electric Utility recently promoted Chad Lynch to serve as the utility's deputy director. Lynch most recently served as Ocala Electric's Supervisory of Substation & System Operations Center. His service to the Ocala community spans more than two decades with a career that began at Ocala Electric Utility in 1999.

Congratulations to Chad on his new role. ■



FMEA MEMBERS ELEVATE THEIR EFFORTS AGAINST **UTILITY SCAMS**

NUMBER OF ATTEMPTED SCAMS RISES 'EXPONENTIALLY'

by John Egan

FMEA members are fighting back against utility scams with expanded messaging and a streamlined reporting process. Several have joined a national, industrywide effort to fight utility scams.

Same scam, different day.

The scam script runs like this: "I'm calling from the utility company to let you know your power will be shut off sometime in the next 30 to 90 minutes unless we receive payment for an overdue bill."

That's the reality facing Florida's municipal electric utilities. Scammers continue to actively target customers. Sadly, too many customers are duped, leaving them with less money to pay for housing, food, medicine and, yes, utility bills.

"To win against the scammers, you need to find the right person on your team who is as tenacious as the scammers," commented Chris Jackson, JEA's director of customer revenue. "This is a constantly shifting game of cat and mouse. You will only succeed by flooding the zone, using all forms of communication to alert and protect your customers. It comes down to repetition, repetition, repetition."

Scams: A Big Problem

The FMEA members and utility professionals we interviewed agreed scams continue to be a big problem. But it's tough to characterize the scope of the problem because not all utilities have built databases to track scammer activity.

JEA in Jacksonville has created a database based on the idea that you can't manage what you can't measure.

Data tracked by Tonya Lewis, manager of the customer center and revenue assurance operations at JEA, shows a surge in scams in 2015 and a second surge from 2017 to 2020. Since then, the utility has recorded a swift decline in reported scams.

Statistics show JEA and the Kissimmee Utility Authority (KUA) are leaders in fighting scams. Less than 1 percent of JEA's 485,000 customers called the utility to report an attempted or successful scam during the utility's worst year. KUA also kept under the 1 percent line

in its heaviest scam year. Other utilities have reported far higher levels of customer targeting, in the range of 4 percent to 9 percent.

JEA's detailed tracking of scam attempts also allows the utility to spot a seasonality to deceptive pitches. They tend to trend up during the summer when bills are higher and customers depend more on air conditioning, though sometimes there is a brief surge during the first months of a given year.

KUA, which serves about 90,000 customers, also tracks scam activity and had less than 1 percent of customers report an attempted scam in 2021. According to Susan Postans, KUA's vice president of customer service, KUA saw an increase in 2020 to just about 1 percent of their customers reporting an attempted utility scam; but in 2019 and 2021, that percentage was far below 1 percent. Some of the reports that came in were actually served by neighboring utilities, but the scammer identified themselves as a KUA staffer.

The Pitch Remains Constant

Scams outside the utility industry show a remarkable ability to quickly evolve in response to events like hurricanes and natural disasters, COVID-19 relief funding and anticipated tax refunds.

But for utility customers, the pitch has remained stable.

Most scam attempts originate on the phone, though some FMEA members have recently noticed increased use of text messaging. Occasionally, a scammer will show up on the customer's premises to demand payment.

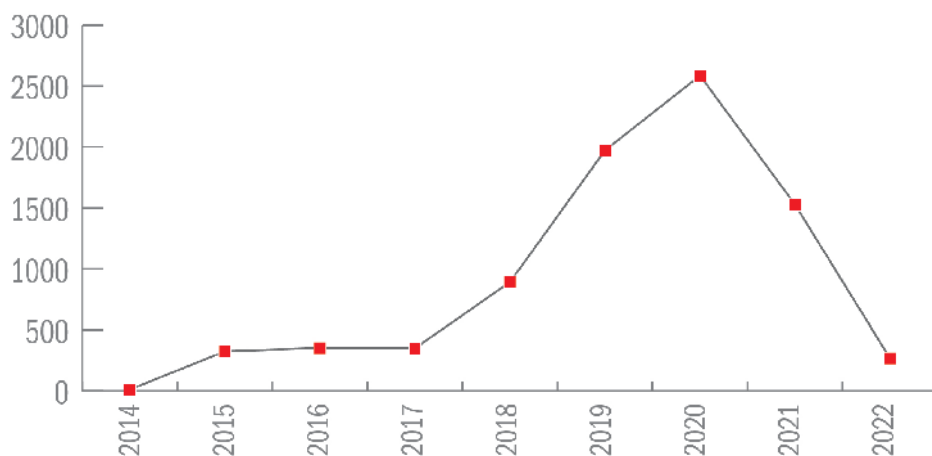
Sometimes the scammer will say the most recent bill is past due; other times they will say prior payments were declined and the customer must pay several months of back bills immediately.

Manager of Customer Service Slobodan "Bud" Ajdukovic at KUA shared this particularly heartbreaking story:

"We have a longtime elderly customer whose average bill was rarely over \$100. On December 1, they paid their \$72 bill in full like they do every month. On December 22, they were contacted by a scammer who told them that their previous payments had all been reversed and they owed KUA \$1,500. The customer went to the local convenience store and purchased three different prepaid cards in the amount of \$497 each and provided them to the scammers."

Unfortunately, use of prepaid payment cards, or online applications like Venmo or Zelle, ensures customers will never be able to recover their money. Customers can dispute fraudulent payments charged to a Visa or Mastercard, but prepaid payment cards and

OVERALL SCAM CALLS BY YEAR *Source: JEA*



online applications don't have that element of customer protection.

Who Is Targeted?

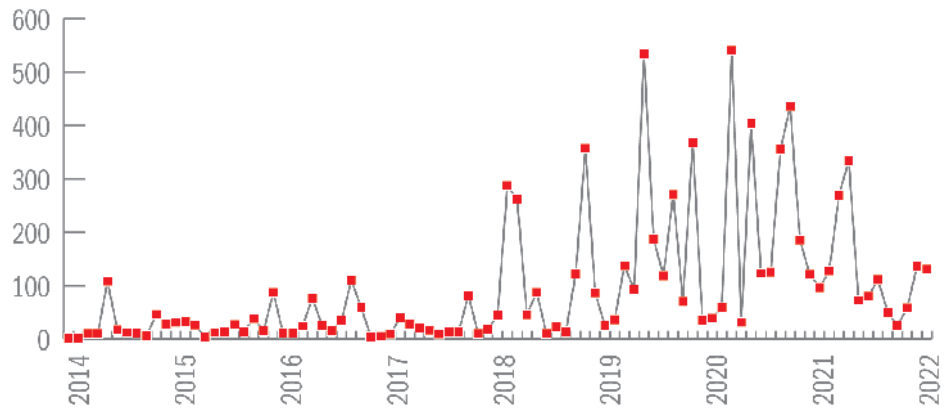
A decade ago, in the early age of utility scams, residential customers were more often targeted than business customers. But scammers quickly recognized that business customers represented a more lucrative opportunity. Threatening a restaurant with the immediate loss of electricity as the lunch rush was beginning was found to be an effective tactic. Businesses that were open on weekends often got calls on a Friday threatening immediate disconnection. Faced with the prospect of a weekend without electricity, and thus commerce, the business often paid up.

Many times, these targeted small businesses had a common language barrier: English was not their native language.

At one time, a veteran utility industry scam-fighter said scammers used the Google Maps application to find areas with high concentrations of drug stores and convenience stores that were likely to sell prepaid cash cards; then they used that information to geographically target nearby residents and businesses.

But it appears the scam has evolved. JEA noticed that targeted businesses were no longer limited to a common geographic area.

OVERALL SCAM CALLS BY MONTH Source: JEA



Instead, businesses in the same industry were being targeted.

"One week we got a lot of calls from beauty salons that were targets, the next week it was dry cleaners or convenience stores," said JEA's Jackson.

Scammers use phone-spoofing technology to deceive potential victims into thinking they are calling from the utility. JEA's Lewis reported that her direct-dial number was programmed into at least one spoofer's system. That, coupled with robo-dialing systems, allows scammers to massively flood local areas with phone calls that appear to come from their local utilities.

Fighting Back: What Works

The good news is that some FMEA members have found a way to fight back

against the scammers. The bad news: There is no silver-bullet solution. Utilities can't solely fight scams by running more print ads or increasing the number of social media posts. Fighting scams and protecting customers calls for a "holistic" approach to communications, according to JEA's Jackson.

"People need to see your messages multiple times and in multiple places, so that it almost becomes background noise. In our experience, no single channel works better than any other channel."

JEA fights scams with billboard advertising, social media, customer postcards, customer newsletter articles, website alerts, messages on the bills and working with the local news media to facilitate stories on broadcasts.



UTILITIES GRAPPLE WITH ICEBERG PROBLEM

Utilities recognize there is a problem with their scams data. Call it the iceberg problem.

Utilities only know a customer has been fleeced or targeted if the customer reports it. And experts agree utility scams are grossly underreported. Longtime scam-buster Jared Lawrence, a founder of Utilities United Against Scams, estimates millions of customers across the U.S. are targeted each year.

"The number of attempted scams has gone up exponentially across the nation in recent years because scammers are using robocall technology," said Lawrence, now an executive with Eversource, a New England utility. "But the good news is that scammers' success rates appear to be going down because customers are getting more skeptical."

“We have had a broad and concerted blitz to make information on scams as visible as possible,” he said.

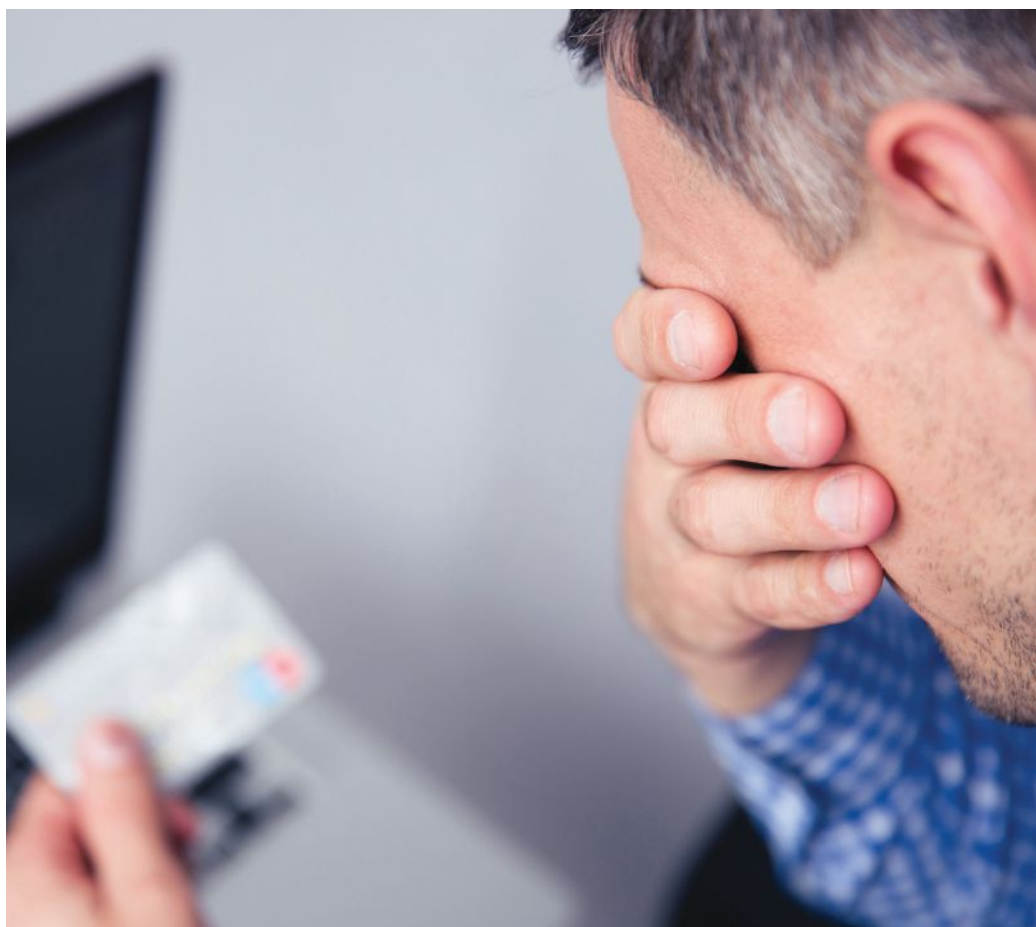
KUA attributed the decline in reported scams to the utility’s continued commitment to finding new ways to communicate with our customers about scams.

The utility is now copying all scam reports to its Corporate Communications department, in case a surge in reports suggests a new customer notification is necessary.

Added KUA’s Director of Corporate Communications Tiffany Henderson: “We recently added the issue of scam awareness to our strategic plan in an effort to target both online and offline audiences. Scam awareness messaging directed to our online audience may include Facebook graphics and posts along with a dedicated scam awareness page on our kua.com website. The awareness targeted to our offline audience, who may make up an older demographic, include radio ads in both English and Spanish, flyers, newspaper ads, community newsletters and closed-circuit TV programs, along with in-person workshops.”

JEA and KUA, both members of Utilities United Against Scams (www.utilitiesunited.org), said they have gained valuable expertise by participating in that national nonprofit organization of utilities. Founded in 2016, membership in UUAS is free and open to any type of utility in North America: providers of electricity, gas and water, whether they are publicly owned, shareholder-owned or cooperatives.

Commented KUA’s Ajdukovic, “UUAS helps provide the tools that a utility can use to help fight back against scammers. The group also provides members the opportunity to meet and discuss trends and ways to protect customers from scammers. We have been utilizing their communication ideas, staying on top of new trends being identified by fellow utilities. The group also provides marketing tool kits for its members to use on social media.”



The good news is that some FMEA members have found a way to fight back against the scammers.

Ajdukovic became vice chair of UUAS for 2022.

UUAS is working with a third party, Somos, to remove toll-free numbers used to target utility customers. As manager of the North American Numbering Plan (NANP), Toll-Free Numbers (TFNA) and the Reassigned Numbers Database (RND), Somos administers more than 3 billion phone numbers on behalf of more than 1,400 communications service providers. Since 2017, UUAS members have assisted Somos in deactivating more than 12,000 toll-free numbers used by scammers, UUAS said.

The group also helps coordinate awareness campaigns. At the national level, UUAS helped get the U.S. Congress to declare November 17 as “Utility Scam Awareness Day.” This November 17 will mark the seventh anniversary of Utility Scam Awareness Day.

Added JEA’s Jackson, “A benefit of being a member of UUAS is staying in the know regarding options used to continue our efforts of combatting scammers.”

A handful of FMEA members including Gainesville, JEA, Keys Energy Services, KUA, Beaches Energy Services and Tallahassee are members of UUAS and taking advantage of its many benefits. FMEA is also a member. The group has 145 members across North America, and it is always looking for new members.

There’s no cost to join UUAS, and FMEA members report their membership has generated sizable benefits. ■



MEMBER FOCUS

EVOLVING TO MEET CHANGING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS: GRU

by John Egan

Meals by mail. Anything from Amazon delivered in a day, maybe two. Skip the lines and catch a movie on a streaming service. Customer expectations around convenience continue to evolve, a trend that pre-dated the pandemic but was accelerated by it. Across all industries, technology plays a critical role in enabling more customer-centric service. As the expectations of its customers evolve, Gainesville Regional Utilities is also evolving its customer service options.

“There’s no line online,” Kinn’zon Hutchinson, chief customer officer at Gainesville Regional Utilities (GRU), said in a recent interview.

“We are expanding our use of technology to become more customer friendly.”

“We are flexing to give our customers better service the way they define it,” he continued. “Customers expect to do business with us online, without having a phone conversation. We’re not in business to put customers in a box.”

GRU Investing Millions to Enhance Customer Experience

Like all public power utilities, GRU continually makes investments in its system and service models. GRU is investing north of \$31 million to install a new customer information system (CIS), a project expected to go live February 2023. Hutchinson said it’s too early to know all the benefits the new CIS will bring customers, though better-quality answers to customer questions likely is one significant benefit.

GRU is also developing a web portal that allows customers to view their account information on the go. Delivering that service, as well as potentially offering a prepaid metering service, is anticipated upon completion of the utility’s advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) project, on which it is spending at least \$80 million. The AMI project, now in its first phase, is expected to be complete by 2024.

And, most importantly for the utility’s environmentally aware customers, GRU’s customer communications have highlighted that nearly 30 percent of electricity produced is from renewable sources. That’s significantly higher than the state’s 3 percent average. A lot of that clean electricity comes from a biomass plant that GRU had contracted with years ago, at what turned out to be significantly higher than market prices. By buying out that contract in 2017, the utility is hoping to bring down some of the more historically high rates.

But again, in this customer-centric world, some portion of GRU’s customer base doesn’t mind paying a premium for clean electricity.

GRU had been using Opower’s energy efficiency communications package, under which a select number of customers received monthly reports that compared their energy use to their neighbors. But after customers expressed concerns about the validity of those reports, GRU discontinued them.

“We’re trying to increase collaboration, inside GRU with employees and outside with our customers, in order to deliver a world-class customer experience,” Hutchinson said. He became chief customer officer in January 2021 after 11 years with the utility.

Changes Implemented During the Pandemic

Public health concerns caused GRU to close its lobby for several months at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, about 5,000 customers each month had been paying their monthly bills in person at the lobby. GRU needed to find a solution for these customers — and fast.

GRU responded by directing customers to drive-thru payment lanes as well as third-party payment kiosks at locations like Publix Super Markets and Western Union. It extended hours for its call centers to transact business. Customer use of GRU’s online stop/start/move service, which had been in the market for years, surged. Call volumes went down but emails increased, Hutchinson reported.

Recognizing the devastating impact the pandemic had on customers’ lives and jobs, GRU provided payment extensions for about 5,000 customers, about 5 percent of the overall customer population. Also, like many Florida public power utilities, GRU suspended all late fees and disconnections for nonpayment for several months in 2020 during the early stages of the pandemic.

The utility, to help keep the lights on for its most impacted customers, secured more than \$1 million in federal and state grants to pay down or pay off the electric bills of about 4,000 customers whose payments became delinquent.

Students at the University of Florida comprise nearly half of the utility’s 100,000 electric customers.

Providing Services Around Customer Needs

To better respond to customer queries, either on the phone or in person in its lobby, GRU offered permanent full-time positions to six temporary customer service representatives (CSRs) in order to retain their accumulated knowledge of policies and procedures, which enables them to provide customers with higher-quality service.

The utility also recently ramped up its GRU in the Neighborhood program and its energy surveys, under which GRU energy experts perform walk-through audits and offer advice on how to lower usage. In May 2022, GRU also raised to \$10,000 the amount of no-cost upgrades it will provide to income-qualified customers through its Low-Income Energy Efficiency Program Plus (LEEP Plus). It also opened that program to renters for the first time.

GRU’s LEEP Plus offers income-qualified customers free home improvements that can lower their electric bill, improve comfort and reduce energy use.

Potential no-cost upgrades under the GRU LEEP Plus could include:

- Replacing or servicing central air conditioning and heating systems
- Repairing and sealing duct systems
- Installing additional insulation
- Replacing the water heater
- Upgrading electrical service panels
- Installing a programmable thermostat
- Weather stripping and caulking of doors and windows
- Providing up to 10 LEDs

“By going to where our customers live, we changed the dynamics of our customer interaction,” said Hutchinson, a certified change-management practitioner with an MBA. “This is a good thing we want to continue.”

The GRU executive recognizes that customer service is a journey, not a destination. As new customer expectations arise, GRU, like any good business, stands ready to evolve to meet the new expectations. ■

FLORIDA'S PUBLIC POWER UTILITIES: *Looking Through the Eyes of Their Customers to Better Meet Their Needs*

by John Egan

Community-owned electric utilities across Florida are stepping up their efforts to improve service to special populations like Florida's large swaths of seniors and non-English speakers, and for lower income customers, those with medical needs and many more.

According to the 2020 U.S. Census, more than 50 percent of central Florida residents are Hispanic or Latino — a large portion of which does not speak English as their primary language. Language can simply not be a barrier to providing excellent customer care, so Kissimmee Utility Authority (KUA) and the Orlando Utilities Commission (OUC – The *Reliable One*) beefed up their Spanish-language service offerings.

OUC has made many changes to better assist customers who speak Spanish, according to Michelle Lynch, the utility's director of corporate communications. Those changes include:

- Nearly 30 percent of customer service agents are fluent in Spanish
- The creation of [Espanol.ouc.com](https://www.espanol.ouc.com), a mirror site of [OUC.com](https://www.ouc.com)
- Proactive storm and overdue bill alerts to be offered in Spanish starting this summer
- An interactive voice response (IVR) system providing assistance in Spanish
- Electronic newsletters, communications and advertisements in Spanish
- Translation of news releases and social media posts into Spanish

- Proactively pitching stories to Spanish-language media (print and TV) with Spanish-speaking spokespersons and subject matter experts

In addition, OUC, Florida's second largest public power utility, which provides electricity to over 267,000 customers, also offers the Google Translate tool on [OUC.com](https://www.ouc.com) to ease the navigation for customers who speak a language other than English or Spanish.

KUA, which serves approximately 90,000 customers in Kissimmee and surrounding areas, offers Spanish-language support for all interactions with customers, said Tiffany Henderson, the utility's director of corporate communications. That includes the call center, lobby, cashiering, on [KUA.com](https://www.kua.com) and live chat.

"All KUA communication channels deliver a Spanish translation including KUA news releases, social media, advertisements and publications," she continued.

"In 2022, for the first time, our annual student art calendar was also printed in a bilingual format and our annual hurricane guides are also printed in both languages," Henderson

said. "In addition, customers soon will have the option of choosing which language they prefer to receive their bills."

Language Barriers Not the Only Challenge

Customers who communicate in languages other than English are not the only challenge facing Florida's municipal electric utilities. What about those who do not use technology, whether because of language, age or other reasons?

The City of Tallahassee this past spring rolled out voice ID, which allows customers to access their accounts over the phone simply by using their voice. The service, now available in English, with a future deployment in Spanish, makes it easier for customers to do business with the city without having to locate their account number or remember an account password.

"This next-generation technology [is already] being used by banks and credit card companies," explained James Barnes, chief customer officer for the City of Tallahassee.

"We are totally changing the way we engage with customers," Barnes continued.

"You can't communicate with customers in the same way as you did before the pandemic. We started looking into voice ID before the COVID-19 pandemic, but we accelerated our work on enhanced customer contact during the pandemic."

Voice ID is a convenient, simple and secure biometric technology that allows customers to access their City of Tallahassee accounts faster with the unique sound of their voice. Barnes said a customer's unique voiceprint enables an authentication process that is fast, secure and easy to use. "Voice ID is more convenient than traditional methods and effectively protects a customer's identity."

Voice ID is part of a multimillion-dollar investment in technology that Tallahassee is making to upgrade its customers' experience. The city is in the process of upgrading its customer information system and meter data management system so that customer service agents will be able to answer customer questions faster, he said. The city has also scheduled upgrades to their phone app and website.

Later this year, Tallahassee plans to roll out options where customers can pay their bill or ask general questions via Amazon's Alexa service, the cloud-based voice-activated service that enables millions of people a more intuitive way to interact with the day-to-day technologies they use.

Unbanked and Low-Income Customers

Across the nation, about 34 million households representing about 27 percent of the population had trouble paying their electric bill or kept their residence at an unsafe temperature in order to minimize energy bills in 2020, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA).

Job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic and the "Great Resignation" likely drove up the number of energy insecure households.

Roughly 12.7 percent of Florida households were at or below the poverty line of \$25,926 for a family of four in 2019, the U.S. Census reported. Job losses, both voluntary and

involuntary, have worsened household poverty since the start of the pandemic in March 2020.

One way Florida's community-owned electric utilities support their low-income, energy insecure, elderly, infirm or other vulnerable segments of their customer base is by offering discounts, special programs, extended payment arrangements, medical alerts, emergency energy assistance and more. Florida Public Power utilities ramped up their activities during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide relief to their most impacted customers.

But prepaid metering is a program that goes deeper than that by empowering customers to make conscious, smaller, more frequent, pre-use purchase decisions about their electricity. Prepaid metering consciously involves customers in their energy-use decisions, and that additional hands-on engagement educates customers about how their energy use impacts the monthly bill.

Prepay metering has been controversial in some areas, where critics challenge it as a form of redlining. But utilities that offer that program say customers who pay for electricity in advance tend to embrace the program because it is built around their needs. They feel respected and empowered.

Some portions of customers are unbanked — they pay their bills and conduct their personal business on a cash basis. For example, bartenders collect cash tips each day. At the end of the week, many of them are either paid in cash or their employer is willing to cash their paycheck. It's entirely possible that some percentage of workers in a cash economy simply don't have a bank account.

And cash has a way of disappearing fast. So, in 2014, OUC introduced its Power Pass prepaid metering program. More than 15,000 residential and small business customers are on that program today.

OUC's experience mirrors other utilities that have offered prepaid metering to their customers: Electric usage has gone down

about 8 percent to 10 percent, and customer satisfaction has gone up because customers are able to do business with their utility how they want.

Explained OUC's Lynch, "OUC Power Pass is a pay-as-you-go or pay-in-advance program for utility services so they can avoid deposits, late fees and a monthly bill. Statistics have shown that pay-before-consumption programs result in a reduction in electricity and water usage as customers become more aware of how much they consume."

Customers can check electric and/or water usage daily using the OUC Power Pass portal or receiving consumption alerts via text, email and/or phone. Customers can put as many funds or as little as they like on their accounts.

OUC Power Pass at a glance:

- No fees or deposits: late fees or disconnection/reconnection fees
- Flexible purchasing opportunities: daily, weekly or biweekly payments
- Provides complete customer control over energy use and costs
- Encourages energy conservation/awareness

Lynch said one of OUC's most impactful programs for special populations is its Empowerment Zone program, which is helping revitalize neighborhoods in the 32805 ZIP code, one of the most economically disadvantaged areas within OUC's service territory. Together with several agencies, including the City of Orlando, OUC is working to help families build better lives by bringing jobs, pre-apprenticeship opportunities, educational programs, mixed-income, energy-efficient housing and more.

"The Empowerment Zone is huge for us," Lynch said. "It's where the largest number of disconnections occur and many of those who live in that ZIP code make less than \$34,000 a year, on average."

Like most utilities, Tallahassee and KUA suspended their in-person home energy audits initially during the pandemic. Those

utilities resumed over the last year or so and are in high demand. During those free walk-through audits, technicians can check, and sometimes install, energy-saving devices like compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) and weatherstripping, change HVAC filters and inspect the caulk on windows to ensure proper sealing.

In addition, some utilities offer rebates to offset the cost of a home's energy efficiency upgrades. For example, KUA offers rebates to their residential customers for insulation upgrades, duct/leak repair, smart thermostats, heat pump replacement and hybrid electric water heater replacements.

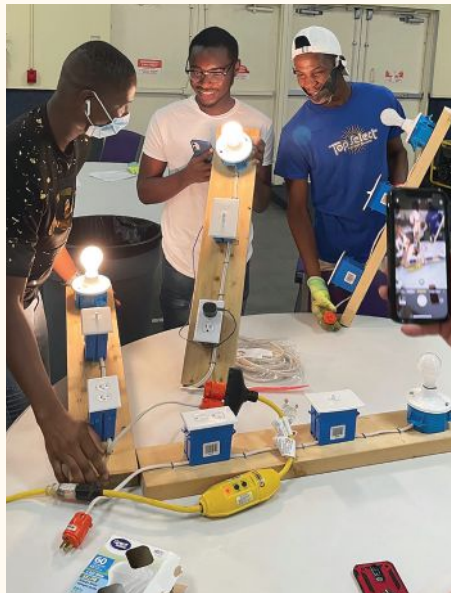
Being a Good Neighbor

People of a certain age remember when neighbors used to look out for each other. Being a good neighbor meant you shoveled the sidewalks or checked on your elderly, infirm or absent neighbors before and after a tropical storm or hurricane. When a family went on a vacation, a neighbor would mow the vacationing family's lawn. Maybe you shared lawn equipment or power tools.

KUA calls its bill round-up program the Good Neighbor Program. Under the Good Neighbor Program, customers and employees can increase their utility payment to the next full-dollar increment to assist their fellow community members, which can include low-income residents and those simply experiencing a challenging time. KUA matches all contributions dollar for dollar, effectively doubling the available assistance. During the pandemic, the utility also made an additional \$100,000 payment to the fund.

"More than 7,500 customers are enrolled in the round-up program and that number continues to grow daily," Henderson said. "The fund raised \$82,881 and assisted 312 customers during KUA's 2021 budget year."

OUC offers Project CARE, a utility bill assistance fund supported by the utility, its employees and customers, to customers needing utility payment assistance. OUC contributed \$2.6 million to this program during the pandemic. The fund



is administered through the Heart of Florida United Way's 211 program. Since 1994, OUC, its employees and customers have contributed more than \$6 million through a process where OUC matches donations 2 to 1 and provides lump-sum contributions during times of crisis such as 9/11, the 2008/2009 economic downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the spirit of being a good neighbor, Tallahassee has an interesting program. Under its Helping Hands program, customers who provide a doctor's note confirming their limited mobility can have their trash cans brought to the sidewalk so the city's sanitation crews will empty them during their regular curbside pickup routes.

Chief Customer Officer Barnes said the program has been operating since 2009.

"When the city enacted curbside trash pickup in 2008, we realized that some people don't have the ability to take their refuse or recycling cans to the curb," he said. "The Helping Hands program supports the elderly and those customers with limited mobility at no cost."

Tallahassee also offers a premium concierge service. For \$49.93 a month, it will roll a customer's trash cans to the sidewalk weekly. No doctor's note is needed, and you don't have to have limited mobility or be elderly.

Roughly 500 customers are on that concierge program.

Barnes said the city's very successful Neighborhood Reach program selects income-qualified areas for walk-through energy audits and direct installation of energy-saving devices. He said it can take six to eight weeks to conduct a complete door-to-door canvassing and improvement of all the homes in the selected neighborhood.

The Neighborhood Reach program, launched in December 2010, has upgraded more than 9,500 homes, resulting in approximately 6,300 megawatt-hours of saved electricity per year, Barnes said. Participating households have reduced their electric bill by about \$640,000 per year. Through this program, Tallahassee has provided more than 2,000 ceiling insulation grants, more than 2,000 HVAC repair grants, more than 300 hot water leak repair grants and at least 250 duct leak repair grants totaling more than \$1.2 million in financial assistance.

"Homes in low-income neighborhoods tend to have less weatherization and therefore higher electric bills," he said. "The Neighborhood Reach program has touched more than 30,000 homes since it was introduced in 2010. It has built tremendous goodwill and improved our customer satisfaction scores because people see the value of what we do. For those customers, we're no longer just the utility, we are *their own* utility company."

"We believe in engaging our customers on many different levels because our customers are our owners," Barnes continued. "If you are not engaging with your customers on a regular basis, then in times of need you'll not have a relationship that will allow you to make difficult decisions together. [You'll] be in a world of hurt."

Like many community-owned utilities, Tallahassee often works in partnership with charitable, human service, and other non-profit agencies. "There's power in partnership," Barnes said. "Any initiative we have is strengthened when we go to the community with a trusted partner." ■

'A PENNY SAVED IS A PENNY EARNED'

CUSTOMERS SAVE MONEY WITH FLORIDA PUBLIC POWER'S FREE ENERGY EFFICIENCY PROGRAMS

by Dave Heller

Todd Wexler recalls a phone conversation with a customer asking how to maximize energy efficiency in a new home, and he feels good about the outcome.

Wexler, a senior energy conservation specialist at Kissimmee Utility Authority (KUA), logged in from his office to the customer's smart meter as the two chatted. Wexler immediately spotted how much electricity the AC system was pulling at that moment, as well as over a full day. That was valuable data because he could tell the customer how that power draw would affect monthly bills.

The call highlights an intriguing paradox about Wexler's job: His mission is to reduce the amount of money that his employer makes from customers.

"My whole job is to help customers get money back, and while that's less money for KUA it really makes customers a lot happier," he said.

At a time when prices are rising across the economy, a happy utility customer is priceless.

"It's a great feeling to be able to help people who want help," Wexler said. "We use advanced technology that allows us to get real-time data about each customer's own electric system, and we're highly trained. The job requires a lot of certifications, so we have the knowledge and the tools to offer money-saving ideas."

Wexler got his start in the industry as an electrician more than 20 years ago. He's worked big jobs at Disney and Universal, as



well as small residential jobs, so he's been at the forefront of changing technology. Now, as an energy auditor for the past five years, Wexler loves to use new technology to help customers save money.

"All of it is totally free," Wexler added. "We don't charge for energy audits and other services, and oftentimes that surprises customers. They don't expect their utility to give them information that helps lower their power bill. Some people even send us cards and emails to thank us for our work."

Wexler and his energy audit colleagues are equipped to provide effective solutions to customers because Florida Public Power utilities are continually making infrastructure investments to make the grid smarter. Consider smart meters, or advanced metering infrastructure (AMI), transforming utility operations and the customer experience.

AMI is a two-way communication system allowing utilities to connect with smart meters and read real-time, detailed data about a customer's power usage. Wexler

has been trained to parse that data. He can read little nuances, such as amps being drawn at any moment, and figure out which appliance or electrical component is drawing that power.

That information is enormously helpful in troubleshooting and improving a home's energy efficiency.

"Our training teaches us to see what's using power like a heat strip, pool heater or water heater, for example," Wexler said. "I asked one customer to go to the home's breaker box and turn off each breaker, one at a time, until we got all the way down to zero. Then we could see which areas of the home were using power and how much. That use of technology is beneficial and much more effective than the manual readings we used to perform."

In addition, KUA has a team of analysts who employs algorithms that can immediately spot when a customer's electric usage runs higher than normal. When that happens, an energy auditor like Wexler can proactively call customers, alert them

to the issue, help identify the cause and offer solutions.

"That helps them take immediate action, whereas previously a customer might not discover high usage until they got their bill for the whole month," Wexler said. "By that time, the bill might be very high. Now we're catching it within a day or two instead of 30 days."

AMI also allows customers to control their own power usage to boost energy efficiency. KUA's online portal allows customers to set up email or text alerts when their usage exceeds a certain level, and they can choose whatever level they want.

"I think it's amazing what we can do these days with AMI," Wexler said. "It's so much better, especially for customers. We can help them prevent large bills because the technology is so awesome, and it's my job to give customers credits when they incorporate conservation measures."

Some of those credits are available through energy efficiency rebates, which vary among

utilities, so customers should contact their local electric provider for details.

KUA currently offers more than a half dozen rebates, including up to \$300 for insulation upgrades, up to \$250 for a heat pump central A/C replacement and 50 percent of the cost up to \$100 for a smart thermostat. KUA issues rebates in the form of credits, so a customer would purchase a thermostat and provide the receipt to get a credit on the bill.

As Wexler looks at his career, he can see that his years as an electrician prepared him perfectly for his current job in KUA's Energy Conservation department. He's also part of the team that processes and approves applications for solar installation projects, a responsibility that will only grow in importance in the future.

"It took me 15 years to see what I was working toward but truly in my heart and soul, I believe this is what I was supposed to do," Wexler said. "I love Kissimmee Utility. I love my job. I love the people I work with. I love the community." ■

BILL PRESENTMENT — WHAT HAS CHANGED WITH THE PANDEMIC?

Getting Ahead of the Curve

by Ruby Irigoyen, ENCO Utility Services

2020 will be remembered as a year that everything changed. One week it was business as usual, the next we were figuring out new ways to communicate and rethinking how we do business.

Now what in 2022? Before COVID-19, 5 percent to 8 percent of utility bills were delivered electronically as e-bills by email. A shift to e-bill presentment is quickly rising to 20 percent, 35 percent and greater for some of our client utilities — and it is continually growing.

Customers want touchless billing and payment methods and with just a little help from the utility, customers are more willing to opt in.

There are plenty of good reasons to switch from paper bills to e-bills:

- It is less expensive. You save more than 40 cents on postage alone for every customer bill.
- It is more secure. Mail thieves cannot steal your customers' personal information.

- Less paper and fewer resources are expended so we have less waste.
- It is more convenient. Your customers can access their e-bill from anywhere.
- It improves your cash flow. On average, e-billed customers pay three days sooner.

From managing finances online to cutting costs, some of these changes are here to stay. How can we pivot to this new reality and get our businesses ahead of the curve?

Let's make the switch and ditch paper! ■

ENERGY EFFICIENCY Q&A WITH JEA'S JOHN FUNCHES

by Dave Heller

John Funches has led a varied career, including a stint as a meter specialist, service risk field investigator and energy auditor. Today, he is the Manager of Conservation and Efficiency Field Services at JEA.

FMEA: John, tell us about your work.

John Funches: We perform in-home and on-site energy audits. They're called JEA Efficiency Assessments. We do a walk-through evaluation of the home or building, and we come up with recommendations that help customers operate more efficiently, be more cost-efficient and reduce their consumption.

FMEA: When you enter a residence, what are the types of things you're looking for?

JF: We're looking at the openings. We're checking the amount of insulation. We're doing visual inspections of equipment. We're checking energy consumption to see how much electricity is being used.

FMEA: Then what do you do with that information?

JF: We compile a report for the customer containing recommendations.

FMEA: What are some common recommendations?

JF: Some recommendations are to lower your thermostat during the winter or raise it in the summer, or generally optimizing your usage based on when you really need it. You want to reduce the amount of time your HVAC is running when no one is home.

FMEA: What is one of the biggest things you can do to increase your home's energy efficiency?

JF: It depends on the age of the home. Homes were made differently 30 to 40 years ago, so adding insulation in the attic or other spaces if it is needed will definitely help the home operate more efficiently.

FMEA: Any suggestions on how to pick an insulation contractor?

JF: We have a Customer Solutions Team that makes recommendations on rebates. Various vendors have signed up to participate in rebate programs, and customers can reference that list on www.jea.com. JEA maintains a list of pre-qualified contractors who can perform work needed to boost energy efficiency. They apply to participate in rebate programs, and each must meet specific criteria to be added to the list. Those vendors and contractors are not ranked or promoted one over

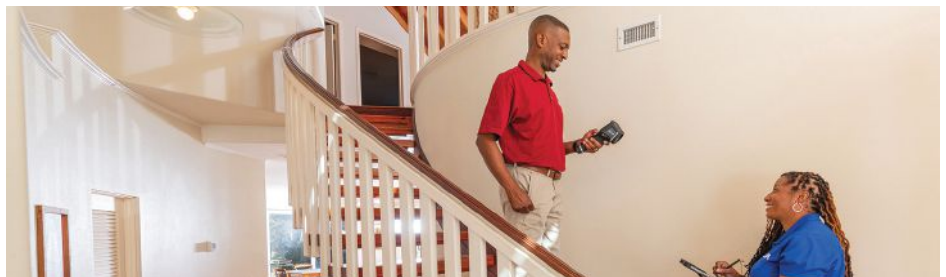
another. JEA also recommends getting three estimates and asking for references when selecting a contractor.

FMEA: What kind of rebates does JEA offer?

JF: JEA offers rebates for equipment, products, appliances and home upgrades that will help to reduce energy consumption. Rebates are offered on various items such as HVAC systems, insulation and irrigation controllers to encourage conservation. A full listing of all current rebates can be found on www.jea.com, as well as information detailing how each program works.

FMEA: Key accounts are an important part of your business. How do you work with those customers?

JF: With key accounts, we traditionally do assessments in much the same way, although we conduct a deeper analysis of



their consumption on an industrial level, or maybe they're operating in multiple locations. For example, we recently performed assessments at Riverplace Tower, which is a very large customer. We identified some things that affect the load factor, and then they could take that information to see how the load factor affects demand. So, if they're looking for ways to reduce their consumption, that's also beneficial for JEA because it reduces the amount of electricity we have to produce for the grid.

FMEA: It's a mutually beneficial relationship.

JF: Absolutely. With conservation, whether it's commercial customers or

residential customers, if we offer good recommendations to help them reduce their consumption, that's a cost benefit to them and it's a cost benefit for the community because it means we don't have to generate as much electricity, and that reduces our operational cost.

FMEA: Customer service is a big part of your area with the energy audits. Why did you take your career in this direction?

JF: It's a great job and it's never the same. Each assessment you perform is always different. I like the fact that it's a way to give back to the community. You go into a person's home and help identify problems that can be fixed. Or

maybe you're just trying to help them understand how their HVAC system works and what they can do to control consumption to save money. They may not actually have an issue with the amount of their bill, but they might not understand the different parts of the bill. Once you show them how different items use power and how that affects their bill, they are very satisfied with information like that.

FMEA: Your commitment to serve others really comes through.

JF: Absolutely. I think we have a responsibility to our customers to be good stewards for our community and our future. ■

OUR INDUSTRY IS FOREVER CHANGED — *CHANGE IS GOOD*

by Kimberly Williams, Itineris

A few pre-pandemic years ago, I bought a home and was required to pay a deposit and complete a service application at the utility. I remember a beautiful atrium, with customer service counters fully staffed by smiling, ready-to-assist agents.

Organized, personable, self-contained.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, utilities were forced to explore how to support remote employees dealing with working from home and simultaneously improving customer experience while helping customers greatly impacted by the pandemic.

Strategic, compassionate, responsive.

COVID-related challenges and lessons have compelled utilities to reimagine their business acumen. Utilities are preparing to be future-ready by leveraging secure cloud and AI technologies to mitigate risk and operate more efficiently. In turn, they are implementing solutions that offer digital agility and digital transformation for solution scalability and intelligence and promoting multichannel communication capabilities to connect to customers in new, meaningful ways in a world disrupted.

These changes can be daunting, but if applied correctly, will be revolutionary. Customer-facing employees will leverage modern communication and automation tools to focus on engaging customers — not just solving a need — and to create relationships promoting a sense of community. Managers will use actionable data and analytics to make intelligent operational decisions.

Adaptive, always available, customer driven.

Our industry is forever changed.

Today, more employees enjoy working from home, and more customers expect a remote experience that includes the intimacy of an in-person visit. In the future, leveraging emerging technology is essential, and the relative insights and possibilities are exhilarating. ■

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CLEAN ENERGY COMMITMENT

OUC is committed to achieving Net Zero CO₂ Emissions by 2050, as well as interim goals of 50% CO₂ emissions reduction by 2030 and 75% by 2040. Through our Strategic Commitments, OUC is proud to be on the path forward to clean energy.

Solar Power



\$420 Million
committed
to solar
technology
by 2030

Energy Storage



\$90 Million
planned
investment in
energy storage
by 2030

Electrification of Transportation



Committed
\$45 Million
to innovative
EV programs
by 2030

Energy Efficiency



\$30 Million
planned
investment in
efficiency and
conservation
efforts
by 2030

**NET
ZERO**
CO₂ EMISSIONS
2050

Learn more at ouc.com/crr