

# Your Co-op's 'Front Line'

Have a Question? MSRs Have an Answer



Susan Alexander, an operations member service representative, designed and painted the wall in the Augusta District to reflect the Cooperative's commitment to its member-owners.

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*This institution is an equal opportunity  
provider and employer. SVEC supports  
our armed services and veterans in  
employment opportunities.*

by Preston Knight, SVEC Writer

It's plastered over all things at Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative (SVEC), but with a wall-sized artistic rendering overlooking them, June Grove and Jenny Tilburg are definitely in no position to overlook it: "We exist to serve our member-owners."

While the Cooperative's mission statement is a guiding principle to employees across all departments, perhaps nobody carries it out more on any given day than member service representatives (MSRs). They are the ones answering the phone each time you call SVEC and they are present to address your needs as soon as you enter any Cooperative office.

"We're the front line," said Grove, a lead MSR in the Augusta District.

As a lead, she oversees and trains her district's MSRs, who include Tilburg. In the unlikely case SVEC's mission statement were to ever be lost on them, it is drawn — along with sketches of a lineman, person on the phone and light bulb — on the back wall of the Augusta District MSR area.

"We're often the first point of contact for member-owners. First impressions are lasting impressions. You have to be friendly, courteous, respectful and knowledgeable," Tilburg said. "It's important to know customer service and a little bit about everything at SVEC."

Grove adds: "We exist to serve our member-owners.' That's big for me. I enjoy dealing directly with member-owners and not only meeting, but also exceeding their expectations."

### Handling All Thrown Their Way

Across five offices, SVEC employs 31 MSRs, including a lead for each building. They field well over 100,000 business calls a year, with an average speed of answering these inquiries of about a minute.

"You've got to be a chameleon," Tilburg said, referencing an MSR's ability to adapt to a member-owner's specific

situation. "You need quick thinkers."

The MSRs handle a myriad of issues, from taking outage calls to providing information on Cooperative programs, or accepting applications for electric service, to name a few, said Barbara Frye, manager of Member Services. If they do not know an answer to a question, they at least know where to go to find it.

Helping member-owners understand their bill and consumption history is one of the most common daily tasks for MSRs. It's one that Grove, in particular, embraces.

"I enjoy the satisfaction of helping others," she said. "If I can sit down with one of our member-owners and go over a high-bill concern by using resources available to us, and the member leaves with a good understanding of their bill, then I feel a sense of accomplishment."

"We are always billing a month behind and sometimes with the seasonal changes, it is hard to remember how cold or hot it was the previous month. We can look and pinpoint dates and times when someone's usage was very low or high."

Through what's known at SVEC as the Command Center, MSRs can access a member-owner's electricity consumption relative to daily high and low temperatures. From there, they can answer any account-related questions and even provide charts for the member-owner.

"It can be a challenge to break it all down," Grove said, "but if you are successful, it's like a light bulb going off in that member-owner's head. Sometimes, it is just a matter of helping the member-owner remember a period of time when the temps were either very low or very high, they previously had an appliance, heat pump or well pump issue, or additional people were in the home. All of these drive up usage."

Frye said: "This information from SVEC's metering system, combined with the MSR's training to evaluate the information, is a valuable tool to assist member-owners in their energy-management efforts. This attention to member-owner service makes the 'Cooperative Difference.'"

Additionally, member-owners can analyze their bills on their own and calculate how much electricity-specific appliances consume through SVEC's Home Energy Advisor, found at [svec.coop](http://svec.coop).

SVEC has the lowest residential rates per 1,000 kilowatt-hours among electric cooperatives regulated in the commonwealth, and MSR's seek to maintain that status.

"Some of us are member-owners ourselves," Tilburg said. "We want to keep our own bills down as much as possible."

### There to Help

One of the toughest parts of the job, MSR's say, is trying to accommodate member-owners who are struggling financially. In these situations, the earlier someone can express their hardships to the Cooperative, the better.

"If member-owners will contact us far enough in advance, we can offer payment arrangements, or suggest local agencies for assistance," Grove said, adding that calling 211 or visiting [211.org](http://211.org) is a good resource to find what's available in your community for assistance.

The disconnection of a member-owner's service does not occur overnight. For

those facing challenges with making their payments, or for those who perhaps simply forgot to pay, it's important to understand that there are two bills and a delinquent notice sent before electricity is cut off. Altogether, payment is 50 days past due before disconnection occurs.

But MSR's want to help member-owners avoid getting to that point.

"We're parents. We have children in the home. We've had hardships. We're human. We're empathetic," Tilburg said. "We'll follow up with people to make sure they are being taken care of."

Days that might be spent assisting member-owners with high-bill concerns or working with those in difficult financial times require a "tough person," said Alice Kenney, an MSR in the Winchester District.

"All of us work really hard, and some days it's easier. That's why it's important to have good lead MSR's so that we're all treated equally," she said. "If it ever gets to the point of being too stressful, you just try to take a deep breath, and try to laugh."

More often than not, an MSR ends the day with a sense of accomplishment, knowing the next day will bring a new, unpredictable set of questions. The writing

is already on the wall: They exist to serve member-owners.

"I don't like leaving them with a feeling that they didn't get an answer to their question," Grove said. "We certainly don't have all the answers, but we do know where to go to get them. This may require researching and calling the member-owner back or referring it to another department to follow-up."

"When a member-owner calls back to thank me for helping them, it really makes my day."

### SVEC July Major Outages

- 7/4** South Braddock Street area  
1,000 members out for 3 hours  
Live tree off of right-of-way
- 7/15** South Braddock Street area  
1,000 members out for 3 hours  
Lightning
- 7/25** Fort Valley, Mt. Olive and Deer Rapids areas  
2,500 members out for 1 hour  
Snake in substation

## Important Tips from MSR's

MSR's offer the following pieces of information in hopes of allowing them to be as efficient and effective as possible.

1. Keep your phone number current. You can update this without calling or visiting an office by logging onto the e-Business page at [svec-online.coop](http://svec-online.coop).
2. When placing a work order, please have as much information about the project as possible.
3. Do not be concerned with paying by credit or debit card over the phone. The system that SVEC uses is set up to keep a member-owner's information secure, and MSR's do not have access to your credit or debit card numbers.

