Support SVEC Energy Assistance This Winter

Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative (SVEC) is asking member-owners to consider supporting fellow member-owners who face financial hardships in paying their electric bills this winter. The Energy Assistance Program is designed to aid individuals and families who have financial stress during months when bills tend to increase because of colder weather. People receiving SVEC Energy Assistance funds must be member-owners of SVEC, but this does not mean the support will be only for electric bills; it will assist with any type of energy costs (i.e., electric, oil, gas or wood). However, the funds will not be available for use as utility deposits.

SVEC’s Energy Assistance is administered by a number of outside organizations listed below.

Anyone wishing to contribute to the fund should sign up or donate a lump sum amount to SVEC’s Operation Round Up. Please note that this arrangement is a new way for member-owners to participate in Energy Assistance. Contributions will only be accepted through Operation Round Up and no longer can be added onto winter bills.

Operation Round Up is a program where SVEC member-owners voluntarily “round up” their bills to the nearest dollar, and the cents flow into a charitable fund to aid area civic clubs, volunteer organizations, nonprofits and more. The average amount someone participating in Operation Round Up would give is $6 a year. If you want to make a bigger impact for SVEC Energy Assistance, please consider giving a lump sum to Operation Round Up, either separately from registering for the program or in addition to your voluntary enrollment.

Ways to Contribute

Please bring a check made out to Operation Round Up to any SVEC office, or mail a check payable to Operation Round Up to Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative at P.O. Box 236, Mount Crawford, VA 22841.

You may also sign up and contribute to Operation Round Up through svec-online.coop by selecting “Operation Round Up” found under the “Account” section on the left.

Please help support SVEC Energy Assistance and those less fortunate than yourself; remember, this is member-owners helping member-owners.

SVEC’s Energy Assistance Partners

- Frederic, Warren and Clarke counties and City of Winchester —
  Congregational Community Action Project (CGCAP)
  112 S. Kent St.
  Winchester, VA 22601

- Rockingham County —
  Harrisonburg-Rockingham County Salvation Army
  185 Ashby Ave.
  Harrisonburg, VA 22802

- Highland County —
  Highland County Evangelistic Association
  P.O. Box 143
  Monterey, VA 24465

- Page County —
  Page One
  42 W. Main St.
  Luray, VA 22835

- Shenandoah County —
  St. John Bosco Catholic Outreach (SJBCO)
  315 N. Main St.
  Woodstock, VA 22664

- Augusta County —
  Staunton-West Augusta County Salvation Army
  1700 West Beverley St.
  Staunton, VA 24401
 Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative (SVEC) celebrated the opening of its Rockingham Complex with a ribbon cutting and open house on Saturday, Sept. 8. About 250 people attended the event throughout the afternoon.

The Cooperative opened the complex in July, addressing a growing need for space since the acquisition of parts of Alleghany Power’s service territory in 2010. It includes a combined headquarters and Rockingham District office building, district warehouse and garage. Visitors received tours of each of the buildings to gain a better understanding of the many aspects involved with providing reliable and safe electric service at the lowest possible cost.

“This is not an expense for the Cooperative, as much as it is a long-term capital investment,” SVEC President and CEO Michael Hastings said. “The Rockingham Complex enhances our member service experience and improves employee efficiencies in a property that will suit everyone’s needs for the foreseeable future.”

The Rockingham Complex is at 180 Oakwood Drive in Rockingham, Virginia.
Your Co-op’s ‘Front Line’

Have a Question? MSRs Have an Answer

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 MSRs 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.

SVEC has the lowest residential rates per 1,000 kilowatt-hours among electric cooperatives regulated in the commonwealth, and MSRs 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, MSRs 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 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 MSRs 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 MSRs 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 MSRs

MSRs 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.

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 MSRs do not have access to your credit or debit card numbers.
According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), one in four women and one in seven men face severe physical violence by an intimate partner at some point during their lifetime. Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative is committed to supporting employees who are victims of intimate-partner or family-member violence by providing referrals to community resources and/or time off. In recognition of October as Domestic Violence Awareness Month, below are messages from area personnel who work year round on the issue.

Manuela S. Vazquez, community outreach and volunteer coordinator, First Step (Rockingham County)

Domestic violence includes various types of abuse, such as: verbal, emotional/psychological, economic/financial, sexual assault and stalking. Although physical abuse is more commonly known and is the most noticeable, it’s important to note the prevalence of other types of abuse and keep in mind that these are not mutually exclusive.

We hear daunting stories of someone being killed at the hands of their abuser and we think, “How could this have happened?” Something most of us find surprising is that abusive relationships often begin in verbal abuse, which can gradually turn into physical abuse as the perpetrator continues to manipulate the other person.

First Step can be reached by calling (540) 434-0295 or visiting firststepva.com.

Kara Marushi Pyles, director of programs and development, New Directions Center (Augusta County, Staunton, Waynesboro)

There is not one person or community that is immune from becoming the victim of intimate-partner violence. It affects all socio-economic classes, ages, ethnicities and communities; however, the warning signs or red flags of domestic violence are still rarely talked about or widely known, making prevention extremely difficult.

Without education on the dynamics of domestic violence, people are more susceptible to becoming entrapped in a violent and lethal situation. According to the CDC, half of all female homicide victims are killed by intimate partners. It’s so important to take this form of violence incredibly seriously because it doesn’t just leave a scar. It destroys lives.

New Directions can be reached by calling its 24-hour crisis line at (540) 886-6800 or visiting newdirectionscenter.org.

Beth Ogle, court and community collaboration coordinator, Response Inc. (Shenandoah County)

It’s important to know that the most dangerous time for a survivor is when they leave the abusive relationship. We urge anyone who is thinking of leaving to reach out for services first. A domestic violence advocate can help you develop a safety plan to make sure you get out safely and with the least amount of difficulty.

People who are exposed to intimate-partner violence face trauma that can affect their physical and mental health. It can influence every aspect of their life, from productivity at work and school, to their ability to interact with their peers. When a community understands the dynamics of intimate-partner violence, they can better respond to the needs of the survivor and help them recover from this trauma more effectively.

Response can be reached by calling its hotline at (540) 459-5161 or visiting responseva.org.

Debbie Dart, director, Choices/Council on Domestic Violence (Page County)

Common misconceptions regarding domestic violence are that a person in a violent relationship can leave anytime he or she wants. This is not true. Fear is a very powerful tool. Victims of domestic violence believe that their partners are omnipotent. They believe the threats of suicide and homicide. They believe it when abusers tell them that “no one will believe anything that you say.” Abusers are often more likely to seriously injure or kill their partner when they leave.

In a rural area, advocates and victims have to get creative to maintain safety. Safety planning is crucial prior to leaving a violent relationship. For example, having signals worked out with neighbors, i.e., blinds up or down, porch or barn light left on, and hiding important documents in the trunk of a car, at a friend’s home, or a local domestic violence program’s office.

Choices of Page County can be reached by calling (540) 743-4414 or visiting choicesofpagecounty.org.

Faith Power, executive director, The Laurel Center (Winchester and Frederick/Clarke/Warren counties)

This month presents us with an opportunity to recognize the individuals and organizations that work tirelessly to prevent domestic violence throughout our region. Many organizations that help survivors of domestic violence will be holding events to raise awareness.

Participation in these events is an important way to raise awareness and to help break the cycle of violence in our communities. Some other ways you can make a difference are to volunteer, donate goods, distribute purple ribbons to visible community members, and make small donations to shelters and agencies that run on shoestring budgets.

Together we can make change and bring domestic violence out of the shadows and help ensure that victims receive vital services.

The Laurel Center can be reached at its 24-hour hotline at (540) 667-6466 or by visiting thelaurelcenter.org.
Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative (SVEC) encourages everyone to vote in this year’s elections on Nov. 6. The first step is to make sure you are registered to vote.

In September, SVEC began holding voter-registration drives throughout its service territory, including on National Voter Registration Day on Sept. 25. These efforts continue the first part of October, so please contact SVEC, visit svec.coop or check any of its social media channels to learn where additional events will be held.

The deadline to register to vote, or update an existing registration, is Monday, Oct. 15.

Voting is an important right for every American. At SVEC, the civic virtue of voting is in our DNA. Encouraging voter participation in elections is one of the ways we demonstrate our cooperative principle of Democratic Member Control. Hosting opportunities for our communities to register to vote is a second way this voter-registration program demonstrates our cooperative principles, our Concern for Community.

Aside from general elections, mid-term elections being held this year are the highest profile elections in the country and give voters a chance to affect the makeup of the House and the Senate as well as to select their local legislators.

One challenge has been inspiring rural populations to turn out to vote. Research has demonstrated that updating voter registration in advance is the surest way to ensure people have trouble-free experiences at the polls.

Please consider registering to vote this year and let your voice be heard at the ballot box!

Happy National Co-op Month!

October is National Co-op Month, which is the perfect time to highlight the many ways cooperatives stand out. Cooperatives exist to meet a need that was previously unmet in the communities they serve, and they are ever striving to anticipate and plan for the future needs of their member-owners.

Co-op Month has been a nationally recognized celebration since 1964, when U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman, a former Minnesota governor, proclaimed October as Co-op Month. There are more than 40,000 cooperative businesses in the United States with 350 million members, many of whom belong to more than one co-op.

Cooperatives abide by seven guiding principles, such as Democratic Member Control and Concern for the Community, all of which show a commitment to members’ needs.

Please join Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative in celebrating co-ops across many facets of our area this October!
It Takes a Village ... 

Creative Works Farm 
Makes Anything Possible

by Preston Knight, SVEC Writer

Search for Adaville, Virginia, on a map and you will come up empty. The only way to find this tiny hamlet is to drive deep into the gated community along a gravel road, past a large barn on your left and swim complex off in the distance to your right. It’s an unexpected spectacle of yesteryear, this 1950s-era village that has everything except humans.

There’s a pool hall, diner, gas station, general store, theater, barber shop, town hall and, to literally top it off, a 14-foot-tall statue of a soda jerk keeping watch. If the whole place were to serve no greater purpose than to just exist, it would be one of the coolest spots in the Shenandoah Valley.

But it’s much more than that. Adaville is the main hub of the 160-acre Creative Works Farm outside of Waynesboro. Creative Works Farm doubles as the name of a non-profit organization that provides agricultural educational opportunities for anyone but primarily operates Camp LIGHT, which serves more than 150 children and adults with special needs each summer.

A carpenter by trade, Scott Balsley opened the farm and camp with his wife, Cathy, in 2014 and has progressively developed Adaville to be an integral part of both in the years since.

“Every building and every road, we built. It’s been a true blessing,” he said. “I’m just a big kid. I love being with the kids and hanging out with them, and hopefully making a small difference in their lives.”

Camp LIGHT stands for “Love Inspire Give Hope Teach” and brings in youth ages 6-17 for weeklong experiences throughout the summer. An adult camp was introduced this year.

Children and adults with special needs are invited to attend the camp. More than half of them also have some level of behavioral diagnosis. This is one way in which Camp LIGHT shines.

“Some camps may not accept children with behavioral issues because it does change the dynamic, but we are fortunate to have counselors who understand how to work in these situations and how to help kids decompress,” said Kelly Truxell, Creative Works’ development director and Scott Balsley’s sister. “It’s important that the kids get to interact with others who are facing similar obstacles. They realize they are not so alone, and they build friendships with peers they wouldn’t meet otherwise.”

Most children attend the camp from within a 40-mile radius, though with long-term plans to host overnight camps, the reach will likely expand. At that point, Truxell said the number of campers served would be able to increase to about 600 a year.
That’s quite a jump considering the humble beginnings operating out of one bay of a three-bay garage on the property. Then again, you can’t stop progress when a burgeoning town needs the space.

**Home of Fun and Silly**

The Balsleys purchased the property from a stranger named Walton Thompson, who agreed to donate 40 of the 160 acres and finance the rest. He then surprised everyone at Creative Works Farm’s ribbon cutting in 2014 by announcing he would forgive any remaining debt and donate the entire property to the non-profit.

In creating Adaville, the Balsleys returned the favor, as best they could, to Thompson. Ada is the man’s late wife, the general store is called Thompson’s and the road through the makeshift town is Walton’s Way.

“He calls us his children,” Scott Balsley said of Thompson, who is now 97 and lives in Madison County. “His gift was such a huge thing for us.”

Balsley and Truxell grew up in a home environment that they said stressed the importance of giving back and accepting others, especially children with special needs. Creative Works Farm is the byproduct of that upbringing, and Thompson’s generosity accelerated their ability to make it come to fruition.

It’s hard not to direct your focus to Adaville, and it’s difficult to imagine a more stunning gift for children and “big kids” alike to enjoy. The gas station has a “ring bell for service” button that, when pressed, initiates an engine that revs and car headlights that flash. Kids build a pinewood derby car in the shop during camp.

A music store enables you to stand in front of a green screen, wear your costume of choice and create a music video to take home on DVD. You can get fun tattoos in a tattoo parlor, take photos in a camera store, hang out in a 1950s-replica diner and hold a theater production inside a makeshift television set.

Then there’s the 14-foot “Sam the Soda Jerk,” which is fashioned after the Midas “Muffler Man.” To make Sam, Balsley borrowed a mold of the Midas statue from his friend Mark Cline, a well-known artist who is famous for making whimsical, eye-popping works locally, such as the Foamhenge display now in Centreville.

“I like making things that are fun and silly,” Balsley said, channeling his inner-Cline.

Truxell said birthday parties are welcome in Adaville since the pool hall makes for a perfect play spot. However, during camp, that building is only open on the final day so it doesn’t distract from other recreational opportunities kids would not normally have.

“People don’t get enough of that, just enjoying the big outdoors,” Truxell said.

With that, it’s worth viewing Creative Works Farm as more than Adaville. It has a corn maze, hiking trail, garden, pool, fishing pond, archery area, horseback riding, and future plans to add many more amenities, including a zip line. The barn that you pass on your left upon entrance is nearing completion, and will be an additional educational resource as well as small event center.

School groups frequently visit the farm while special events are held year round to benefit Camp LIGHT. To those who have attended the program, they don’t need to look for it on a map. It’s home to them.

“For parents, it’s a trusting place to send your kids. They overcome fears. They try new things and learn to stretch their limits,” Truxell said. “Seeing kids do things they thought they never could, to go from, ‘I can’t do it,’ to being able to do it is just really cool. You can’t help but feel fulfilled after spending time with them. There are just so many moments that warm your heart.”

For more information, visit creativeworksfarm.org.

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**Creative Works Farm hosts several events throughout the year, with its biggest endeavor being “Farming in the Valley,” through a partnership with the Greater Augusta Regional Chamber of Commerce. Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperative is proud to be one of the sponsors of this event.**

**What:** A family-friendly festival geared toward educating children about agriculture through a petting zoo, pumpkin painting, corn maze, pony rides and more.

**When:** 12-5 p.m., Sunday, Oct. 7

**Where:** Creative Works Farm, 107 Creative Works Lane, Waynesboro

**Cost:** $5 for adults; $3 for kids 5 and up; children 4 and under free. Tickets can be purchased at the gate on the day of the festival.

For more information, visit farminginthevalley.com.