



CALLING CRC

For 20 years, the Cooperative Response Center has helped electric co-ops maintain personal contact with their members

By **Reed Karaim**

For Adams-Columbia Electric Cooperative, 2011 was “one of those years.” In April, tornadoes swept through the service territory of the Friendship, Wis.-based distribution system, followed five months later by a punishing windstorm and then a November blizzard.

Widespread outages resulted from each event, with the September windstorm knocking out service to about half of the co-op’s 37,000 members. “It was the largest number of outages we’ve ever experienced,” reports Keith Weyh, Adams-Columbia Electric manager of support services.

But as the co-op’s line crews toiled day and night to restore power, they had an important ally: the Cooperative Response Center (CRC), a cooperatively owned, 24/7 call center and software provider based in Austin,

Left: Keith Weyh, manager of support services with Adams-Columbia Electric Cooperative in Wisconsin, found call-volume assistance provided by the Cooperative Response Center critical in helping the co-op deal with a rash of storm-related outages last year.

Minn., that offers services like after-hours dispatch, round-the-clock consumer care, and monitoring of home security and personal medical alarm systems.

“We gave CRC a list of our consumer-members’ phone numbers, and they automatically made calls to those affected by the outage in a matter of minutes,” relates Weyh. “We could even tell when a live person had answered the phone or where a message had been left.”

CRC also handled overflow call volume during the day as well as all calls from members that rolled in overnight. The support, Weyh comments, allowed Adams-Columbia Electric personnel to concentrate on making repairs with the knowledge that members were being kept in the loop.

“It made a huge difference on member satisfaction with our response,” indicates Martin Hillert Jr., Adams-Columbia Electric CEO. “In particular, our members were pleased



they could get in touch with a real person. Even if those answering the calls couldn't offer any more information than a recording might have, just the fact that our consumers could chat with someone provided reassurance we were doing all we could."

CRC has been working to make sure someone is on the line for electric co-op consumers since 1992, when it was formed by 19 electric co-ops in the upper Midwest. Today, CRC boasts 283 members and associate members, which serve 4.1 million consumers throughout the United States. The cooperative operates call centers in Austin, Dunlap, Tenn.; and Abilene, Texas.

CRC employees are trained to understand the co-ops they serve. Many spend time at individual co-ops in a "boot camp," where they get a firsthand look at how everything fits together.

"We arrange it so CRC folks go into the field with our linemen and see what happens when they answer an outage call," remarks Larry Dokkestul, president & CEO of Pierce-Pepin Cooperative Services, based in Ellsworth, Wis., one of CRC's first members. "It gives them a good idea of what's involved."

Chris Holt, CRC president & CEO, says the organization strives to be an extension of

the co-op. "To that end, each cooperative is assigned a primary call center closest to it, and whenever possible, calls are routed there. This offers two advantages. First, people are generally a little more comfortable with somebody who sounds like them. Second, our operators and dispatchers work to build relationships, and over time, as they deal with callers and line crews, they begin to know some of a co-op's area, the unique pronunciation of towns, that sort of thing. It's all intended to make a co-op member or employee as comfortable as possible."

Sequachee Valley Electric Cooperative, based in South Pittsburg, Tenn., came on board with CRC about 10 years ago. Mike Partin, the co-op's chief operating officer, sees benefits from strong connections that develop between CRC employees and his staff. "They often know each other on a first-name basis. It helps cement bonds of trust."

Humble beginnings

When CRC was established 20 years ago, founding electric co-ops had a simple goal: making sure consumers could reach a live voice in emergencies.

Dave Oelkers, CEO of Riverland Energy Cooperative, headquartered in Arcadia, Wis., an original CRC member (through its predecessor Tempealeau Electric Cooperative), notes the effort started with only five or six

employees. "The initial mission was to create a central station for medical response devices and home security alarms. Electric co-ops had gotten into those business ventures to meet member needs, but doing so required the ability to answer calls 24/7."

Discussions about forming a new cooperative started during a meeting of chief executives whose co-ops belonged to Dairyland Power Cooperative, a generation and transmission co-op headquartered in La Crosse, Wis. Oelkers credits Ron Steckman, then general manager of Freeborn-Mower Electric Cooperative in Albert Lea, Minn., with the original concept.

"We wanted an organization that would underpin a personal emergency response service we could promote to our members, as well as deal with after-hours calls," Oelkers recalls. "It would backstop all of our cooperatives."

At the time, after-hours trouble calls for many Badger and North Star State co-ops were routed to local sheriffs' offices or to the home of a lineworker or other co-op employee. In either case, the approach was far from ideal.

"Sheriffs didn't really care to be doing that because if a bad storm hit—they had other things to worry about," Oelkers reflects. "And a significant outage meant a lineman on duty and his spouse could be overwhelmed with the number of calls coming in."

At the outset, CRC's pioneers hoped medical monitoring and home security services might finance the after-hours program. "But as CRC got up and running, we found more and more things it could provide to us," says Oelkers. "We soon outgrew the ability to fund it through personal medical response and home security services."

CRC offers call center, home security and medical response monitoring, substation video surveillance, and commercial and industrial account services, notes President & CEO Chris Holt.





Dave Oelkers, CEO of Wisconsin's Riverland Energy Cooperative, says founding electric co-ops had a simple goal—making sure consumers could reach a live person during emergencies.

Growing for tomorrow

Today, CRC members pay for service packages that include Overflow, Customer Care, and Energy Dispatch.

Co-ops using Overflow generally rely on CRC only to answer calls when volume exceeds their capacity to do so.

With Customer Care, CRC takes phone calls and produces outage tickets while the co-op conducts its own dispatch of line crews. "But under Energy Dispatch, we handle a co-op's outage calls and send out line crews," Holt stresses. "We also stay in communication with line crews, tracking their progress and safety." Approximately 87 percent of CRC members subscribe to Energy Dispatch.

"Historically, larger cooperatives were more likely to handle their own calls, but that seems to be changing," Holt mentions. "Co-ops are looking at their costs and finding it cheaper to consider CRC than adding personnel or paying for a third or weekend shift."

Home security and medical response monitoring now make up only 10 percent to 15 percent of CRC's business. However, the cooperative remains one of just a few firms to achieve the Five Diamond rating of excellence from the Central Station Alarm Association.

A new offering—video surveillance of substations to deter metal theft—has proven popular. "Motion detectors trip cameras, which then record a short clip," Holt explains. "Our central station views that clip and, based on what actually took place, will contact local law enforcement."

In addition, CRC partners with cooperatives on systems tailored for large commercial and industrial members. Riverland Energy, for example, serves a large egg producer.

"CRC keeps watch on the poultry houses for any loss of water pressure or rise in temperature," Oelkers points out. "The environmental monitoring has enabled us to build strong ties with a key account."

By the middle of this year, CRC will offer text messaging capabilities, letting co-ops apprise consumer-members via cell or smartphones of an upcoming bill payment or the status of an outage. In turn, consumers will be able to text their hometown co-op—via CRC—when the lights go out simply by typing in a short code.

Farther down the road, Holt envisions a system that will automatically pull up a consumer's account information as a call comes in, ping his or her meter, and route the call based on the signal received. "If the meter shows power is flowing, the call might be sent to a co-op representative who specializes in billing issues rather than outages," Holt concludes. "The important thing for our member co-ops to know is that we're going to evolve and continue investing in technology that helps them address new consumer and industry demands while providing the human interaction they've come to expect." ■