

The Council of Rural Electric Communicators (CREC) is pleased to offer this series of easily digestible tips from decades of experience in critical communication. Effective outage communication starts long before the storm is on the horizon. Here are some recommended steps for preparing for, during and following up after outages. In addition, CREC has developed [“Always On: Engineering Strategic Communication to Strengthen Member Relationships.”](#) a report and suggested framework for engaging members through strategic communication. You may find this report helpful to review and learn more about the roles and network of relationships referenced in this document.

BEFORE A POWER OUTAGE

ALWAYS ON ROLES: LISTENERS • MANAGERS • TECHNICIANS

- ☞ Have your list of municipal and media contacts up-to-date and ready to go so you can communicate with stakeholders regularly.
- ☞ Establish relationships with your operations team. Make sure they have your contact information.
- ☞ Learn about your electric system: How many poles does your system have? How many substations? Where are they? Do your substation names indicate a geographic area of your service territory? What kind of maintenance cycles, right-of-way, and protection devices does your system employ?
- ☞ Engineers, during down time, can provide a lot of information about what the co-op is doing to improve power quality - this can be useful during widespread outages.
- ☞ Utilize automatic notices of outages (based on threshold criteria) from your Outage Management System.
- ☞ If you have an outage map, learn how to glean the critical details from the map.
- ☞ Determine messaging thresholds (what specific number or type of outages trigger what specific types of communication).
- ☞ Determine the best communication channels to reach your various member audiences. Phone announcements for incoming callers? Website? Social media? At what point are news releases called for? Emails for internal communications?
- ☞ Adopt or delegate responsibility for crafting messages and pushing information to appropriate channels. Prepare plug and play message templates ahead of time to be able to respond quicker during outages.

AFTER A POWER OUTAGE

ALWAYS ON ROLES: LISTENERS • MANAGERS • INNOVATORS

Follow up to hear what members have voiced to dispatchers, call takers, and line crews.

- ☞ Were there regular complaints about messaging?
- ☞ What questions did members have about outages?
- ☞ What were members angry and frustrated about?
- ☞ How effective was your internal communication (especially between departments)?

Provide consistent positive communication about the outages and restoration efforts.

- ☞ Use pictures from various sources to illustrate the challenges line workers faced.
- ☞ Use quotes from both management and line workers. With more perspectives you'll reach a larger audience. Thank members for their patience; thank emergency services personnel; thank crews from other co-ops; thank contractor crews for their assistance.
- ☞ Use data from outage maps, if available, to flesh out details about the total number of members impacted and the damage caused to your system.

Use what you learned to develop effective plans for future outages.

- ☞ Use your post-storm research to update messaging as necessary.
- ☞ Be willing to push for changes to enable your communication team to more effectively reach members.
- ☞ Considering the answers to after-storm discussions, brainstorm ideas that would address the concerns of members, line workers, other managers, and employees.

DURING A POWER OUTAGE

ALWAYS ON ROLES: ADVOCATES • ARTISTS • LISTENERS

Once the outages begin (or even sooner, based on some types of forecast storms) member communications should begin. The times below are estimates, based on the type of outage and its severity.

Hour 1:

Members want to know that you are working on the outage and the general cause of the outage. They may ask about repair times, but they will understand if it is too soon to have assessed the damage.

Hours 2-3:

Members want to know: is the outage going to last overnight? Until morning? It can be helpful to lend perspective if the outage event affects more than one co-op. For example, "Tens of thousands across the state are without power," if true. Give general areas where crews are working. Give the times for the next outage updates.

Hours 4-6:

Get increasingly specific about the list of damage areas. Share where line crews are working and where you expect them to head next. If there is any possibility the outages may stretch into the next day, say so. If the damage is especially bad in some areas, identify those areas. Give the times of the next outage updates.

After Hour 6:

If progress is being made and repairs are going well, provide more specific areas where repairs are being made (street by street if possible, depending on the

communication medium). If widespread new damage is still occurring, it's time to start planning for longer-term outages. Advise members with medical conditions to make plans accordingly. Include safety messages about staying away from downed power lines and other safety concerns. Provide information about mutual aid crews and other assistance coming to the area. Give updates at regular intervals and tell members what those times are. Remember to include a wider audience during prolonged outages. Your local emergency management agency, area shelters, the Red Cross, local legislators, and others will want to be informed as outages continue, especially when the outage will last several days.

Prepare to tell the story

- 🗣️ Use pictures! Encourage the operations group to take images and share them with you. Get out in the field when it is safe (but make sure to stay out of the way of the restoration efforts).
- 🗣️ "Bird dog" scouts go ahead of line workers to assess damage. Encourage them to take and share pictures with you of the damage and of line workers making repairs.
- 🗣️ Listen for memorable quotes from linemen, members, weather professionals, and others.

Serve as a communication channel from members to managers

- 🗣️ Especially during long-term outages, be sure to pass the tone and basic content of member comments to the management team, including areas of concern that members voiced.
- 🗣️ If possible, provide potential solutions to members' concerns: shelter locations, medical assistance availability, warming stations, etc.

POWER CRITICAL COMMS OUTAGES QUICK READ

CRITICAL COMMUNICATION is an information exchange so essential and foundational that it has an outsized impact on the network of relationships sustaining an electric cooperative. It differs from crisis communication, in that it doesn't involve an emergency. It does, however, involve issues close to the core of a co-op's relationships. Learning from each critical communications experience will help you to improve in the future.