

Guest Editorial



Sam Houston

ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE, INC.

TRUITT THOMSON PRESIDENT, SAM HOUSTON ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Have you ever felt like you're just a number to someone? It's a cold and impersonal way to keep track of customers in a database of other numbers. Maybe you get that feeling when you open a piece of mail addressed to "Postal Patron" wanting you to buy something. I opened an envelope the other day to find "Dear Zip Code. We care about you and value your business."

I'm Truitt. I've always been Truitt. I buy products I need from real live people whom I know and trust. Value, service and price are all important to me. I shop locally first because that's how you build a community. I want to be treated with respect and dignity, and be understood when I have a problem.

That's what I like about co-ops. They are interested in me...and they know my name. They take care of me without requiring me to know more about the service than they do. Co-ops see their members as a name, not a number.

The Sam Houston Electric Cooperative Board of Directors and employees are members, not a bunch of suits in a far away city. When we drive home, we pass the houses and businesses of the people we serve. We wave at familiar faces and sit with our members at ballgames. We see them in the store and at church, and we work in the community with them. That's strong motivation to give 100 percent in everything we do.

Our Member Services Representatives, Line Technicians and other employees work together as a team to satisfy members in a courteous, convenient and productive way. They remain committed to meeting the needs and expectations of the people they serve.

The day has come in parts of Texas

when electric energy is marketed to those in the deregulated market as so many other commodities are marketed today. The same poles and wires continue to deliver the power, but everyone in the deregulated market is able to choose who they want to buy electric power from. Investor-owned utilities are scrambling to add another number to the database in order to increase the bottom line and please their investors. This is the reason why the Sam Houston EC Board of Directors decided to "wait and see" how the deregulated market unfolds before making any decision to opt-in. Sam Houston Electric puts the needs of the members first and will not

opt-in to the deregulated market unless it is in the best interest of our members.

Co-ops were created by rural consumers on a unique business model that defines who they are and the values they operate by. Our goal is to deliver reliable electric service at the lowest possible cost. Our members are names, not numbers. After all, we live here too.



**The Cooperative
Philosophy:
You're a Name,
Not a Number**

A MEMBER SERVICES REP'S JOB IS NEVER DONE



Tina Reeves, MSR, Livingston



Genette Harrelson,
Member Services
Manager

When you call Sam Houston Electric Co-op with a question or stop by one of our offices with a payment, the person you talk to is a Member Services Representative (MSR). You may know yours by name and request him or her each time you call, or you might recognize their face when you drive through with your monthly payment. Regardless of which MSR you consider to be “yours,” all of the Member Services Representatives at Sam Houston EC are dedicated to serving the Co-op’s membership by helping answer questions and addressing any concerns.

The Member Services staff at Sam Houston Electric Cooperative is composed of 22 full-time phone representatives and 5 part-time cashiers. Member Services Representatives respond to customer correspondence, update and maintain account information in the customer database, as well as receive and process payments at

the cooperative’s offices in Livingston, Coldspring and Woodville. It’s a huge job, and it’s of the utmost importance. After all, it’s the job of the Member Services Representatives to keep our customers satisfied.

According to Tina Reeves, MSR at Sam Houston EC’s Livingston office for 20 years, “Some people think we have it easy...but they don’t realize there’s a lot to making it work. There are a lot of challenges to this job. All that aside, we like to help — that’s why we do it.”

Service Philosophy & Training

Every service call at Sam Houston EC is flanked by a “Good morning, afternoon or evening” and a “Thank you for calling.” That fact alone nearly sums up the customer service mentality at Sam Houston EC. Of course, there is a more formal philosophy. The written goal of the Member Services Department is to “meet and exceed customer expectations.” Furthermore, every

continued

MSR strives to do so professionally, expediently, accurately and in a friendly manner. Perhaps more important than the philosophy and its content is the fact that it isn't just lip service. To ensure these standards are upheld, Sam Houston EC's member services policy is reinforced with a rigorous training regimen.

To become a Member Services Representative, trainees go through a 10-12 week training period. It is only after completing this training that a new MSR is able to go into the call center to answer calls. In order to guarantee our members are well cared for, member services training includes coursework in communicating effectively, managing stress and teamwork. MSRs also go through field training that gives them a basic understanding of how electricity is delivered from the generation plant to our members' homes and includes



**Cody Barr, MSR,
Coldspring**

specific topics such as substations, new service construction, and outage troubleshooting. This kind of education provides MSRs with a better understanding of the electric

system and how it works, giving them the knowledge they need to communicate with members who call in with questions.

Consistency in the MSR training at Sam Houston EC is evident in the words and mentality of the reps themselves. In fact, each of the reps interviewed for this article listed almost the exact same words when questioned about the qualities needed to be a good MSR. They spoke of such qualities as, "being a good listener, compassionate and courteous... being friendly... having good organizational skills and a positive attitude."

These same qualities are among those topics addressed continually at training seminars planned and scheduled by Genette Harrelson, Sam Houston EC's Member Services Manager. Ms. Harrelson noted, "Our

MSRs have a tough job. Continuous training helps them learn to address situations and keeps them up-to-date on current issues within the Cooperative and the electric power industry."

Challenges on the Job

Putting the philosophy and training into practice isn't as easy as it may seem. The fact of the matter is that Member Services Representatives are the people our members call when there is something wrong.

Most people don't call just to tell the Co-op how great our service is and that everything is "hunky-dory," even though we at Sam Houston EC hope this is how our members feel most often. In actuality, most of the calls received by Member Services Reps are in regard to a billing question, a service request or an outage. Those situations in mind, it's not hard to understand that many times callers are upset, concerned or even angry when they contact the Cooperative.

"You have to learn not to take customer's heated comments personally... It's important to have enough perspective to know that they are angry at the situation and not at me," explained Sabrina Dosie-Watts, an MSR at the Livingston office.

Dealing with customers can be a challenge, but the most challenging part

of the job is handling the thousands of service calls during a power outage. Member Services Representatives are available Monday through Friday, 7:30 am - 5 pm, via phone or in person at any one of Sam Houston EC's offices. MSRs are also available during extended phone hours until 6 pm Monday through Friday, 8 am - 4 pm on Saturday and are actively on call in the event of a power outage. When an outage occurs, Member Services Reps are called in to answer the phones, take service orders and relay them to dispatch, where they are prioritized and assigned to Line Technicians.

When there's an emergency, the MSR Supervisor is notified. Then she calls in the personnel needed to staff the phones. Susie Eastepp, a Member Services Supervisor explained, "Even if it's 3 o'clock in the morning, the reps must get out of bed and come to work, even if it's in their jammies. It is just part of the job."



**Susie Eastepp,
MSR Supervisor,
Livingston**

Carole Chessire, an MSR at the Woodville office, added, "Working an outage is much different than a

WHAT YOUR MEMBER SERVICES REP CAN DO FOR YOU

Most people know to call a Member Services Representative in the event of an outage or with a billing question, but did you know your MSR can:

- Issue service orders
- Setup bank/credit card drafts
- Assign preferred due dates for billing
- Set up new customer accounts/process applications
- Take energy audit requests
- Set up even monthly payment plans
- Set up third party authorizations
- Take requests for meter testing
- Take orders for night lights
- Set up SamLink Internet accounts
- Provide information regarding SYCOM surge protection





Carole Chessire, MSR, Woodville

normal work day. It's one phone call after another. Some people will call back four and five times or until their service is back on. The longer the power is out, the more frustrated people get. I just try and explain to them that the outage has been reported and the linemen are doing everything possible to get the power back on as quickly as possible."

General Manager and CEO H.E. Striedel added, "It is almost impossible to know every situation and to project exactly when service will be restored."

During an outage the Member Services Department can receive as many as 4,000 or 5,000 telephone calls in a 24-hour period. That's a far cry from the average day, when they receive between 500-600 calls. It's in these instances that the staff relies heavily on the automated phone system, "The Member Connection." This system is excellent support to the MSRs, and Co-op members are encouraged to utilize it whenever possible.

Your Friend, the Member Services Rep

Sam Houston EC Member Services Reps will do anything they can to help a member. In fact, the MSRs interviewed for this article all expressed the fact that they like interacting with people. It's one of the things they like most about their job. "I like to talk to people. I like to interact with the customers. Sometimes it's really rewarding, especially when you get a pat on the back," said Susie Eastepp.



Sabrina Dosie-Watts, MSR, Livingston

day she took a call from a voice she recognized. Sabrina and the caller figured out through conversation that the caller had at one time been a patient at the clinic where Sabrina had previously worked. Sabrina helped work out some financial details for the customer who ultimately told her,

Sabrina Dosie-Watts is fairly new to the Cooperative; she's been a Member Services Rep for nine months. Before she came to Sam Houston EC she worked in the healthcare industry. One

"You took care of me at the doctor's office, now you can take care of me at the light company!" Sabrina shared, "It made me feel really great and gave me a sense that what I am doing is worthwhile and appreciated."

These kinds of stories aren't at all uncommon. In fact many of the Service Reps at Sam Houston EC have several customers that specifically request to speak with them when they call. Tina Reeves gave an example, "They trust me. A lot of people prefer to talk to the same person. We're kind of like a friend; they want to chat a few minutes. We're there to listen and they feel comfortable with us." That said, Member Services Reps hope their customers understand that they don't always have time to talk for too long. Part of their job is to be efficient and take care of as many people as possible each day.

In addition to being good listeners and doing what they can to address the various situations that come through their department, Sam Houston EC Member Services Representatives work hard to understand those they serve. Truth is, they do more than provide service. They also genuinely care about their customers' situations and needs. Patrick Walton, an MSR in Livingston, shared, "One thing we try to be sensitive to is that there are a lot of members on a fixed income. We have to understand their needs and their financial limitations."



Patrick Walton, MSR, Livingston

It's this kind of concern coupled with a sound philosophy, good training and a great staff that sets Sam Houston EC apart from its competition. Sam Houston Electric Cooperative serves more than 48,000 member-owners, but not one of them is treated like a number. It's been said time and again, but it's true: Sam Houston EC member-owners are friends and neighbors. And that's exactly how they're treated.

THE MEMBER CONNECTION IS YOUR AUTOMATED "MEMBER SERVICES REPRESENTATIVE"

When you call Sam Houston Electric, our automated phone system answers the call. We at Sam Houston EC understand that many people prefer to speak directly to a friendly person when they call our offices. However, the technology of our automated phone system, the Member Connection, actually enhances our ability to serve you.

Here's how:

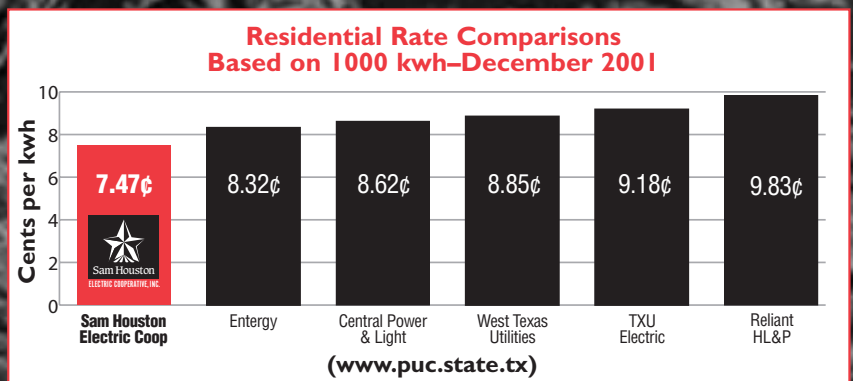
- The Member Connection can handle about 2,000 calls an hour. That's equivalent to the work of 30 Member Services Reps
- The Member Connection allows our customers to make billing inquiries or report an outage 24-hours a day; thereby making Sam Houston EC accessible anytime, day or night.
- In the event an outage occurs when our offices are closed, the system can begin taking calls immediately. In the meantime, service reps are able to get to the office and begin staffing the phones in person. This system function helps speed up the restoration process.
- The Member Connection generates outage reports and delivers them electronically to our dispatchers, who immediately send line technicians out to identify the cause of the outage and begin repairs.
- The Member Connection is part of the Cooperative's commitment to keep costs down and provide timely service.

If you prefer, you may press "0" at any time to bypass the automated system and speak directly to a Member Services Representative.

In December Sam Houston EC's rates were as much as 32 percent lower than other residential providers

Through December 2001, Sam Houston Electric's members have benefited from decreased rates. Rates dropped about 10 percent in September and October; another 6 percent from October to November. Rates held steady in December as we headed into the coldest months of the year.

Once again, Co-op membership really pays. In fact, as of December, Sam Houston EC's rates were 32 percent lower than Reliant HL&P and 11 percent lower than Entergy's.



In the Event of an Outage, Dial-up and Tune-in

Sam Houston EC is committed to keeping members informed when electric service is interrupted due to severe weather. While our trained line technicians are working hard to restore lost power as quickly as possible, members can help by dialing-up and tuning-in.

REPORT THE OUTAGE

Help us locate the source of the outage. Never assume someone else has reported the problem. Call the 24-hour Member Connection phone service line in your area:

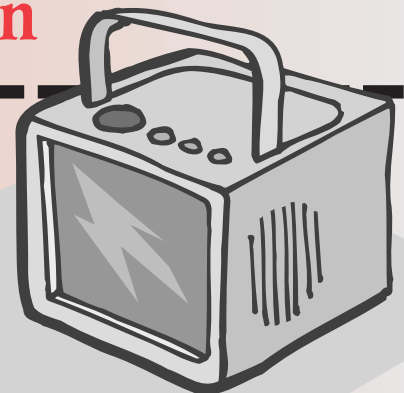
Coldspring: 936-653-5400
Livingston: 936-327-5711
Woodville: 409-283-8251
Long Distance: 1-800-458-0381

Automated reports are received and processed immediately; however, if you feel it is necessary to speak with a Member Services Representative, you may do so by pressing "0" at any time during the call.

BE PATIENT

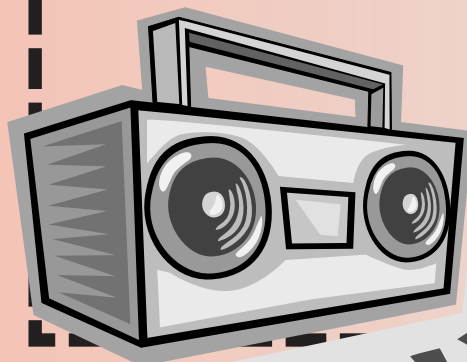
Problems vary and so does the time it takes to restore your power. We thank you for your patience during these difficult times. Rest assured, we are doing everything in our power to restore yours.

EMERGENCY BROADCAST RESOURCES



Tune-in to TV and radio stations that broadcast in your area. While we may not know the answer to all your questions right away, the following stations have agreed to provide information in the event of a major power outage.

Beaumont	Conroe	Houston	Liberty/Dayton
KMBT-TV ABC 12	KVST-FM 103.7	KHOU-TV CBS 11	KSHN-FM 99.9
KBTB-TV NBC 4		KPRC-TV NBC 2	
KFDM-TV CBS 6	Diboll	KRIV-TV FOX 26	Livingston
KIOC-FM 106.1	KAFX-FM 95.5	KTRK-TV ABC 13	KETX-FM 92.3
KKMY-FM 104.5		KIKK-AM 650	
KLVI-AM 560		KIKK-FM 95.7	Lufkin
KTFA-FM 92.5		KILT-AM 610	KFXL-LP-TV FOX 30
KYKR-FM 95.1		KILT-FM 100.3	KTRE-TV ABC 9
		KTRH-AM 740	KRBA-AM 1340
			KSFA-AM 860
		Huntsville	KTBB-FM 107.7
		KUST-FM 99.7	KYKS-FM 105.1
		Jasper	Silsbee
		KTXJ-AM 1350	KSET-AM 1300
		KWYX-FM 102.7	
			Woodville
			KWUD-AM 1490



ReMember This

“Do-Not-Call” List Taking Subscribers Now

**Texans Can Stop Telemarketing
Calls for \$2.25**

Are you tired of being interrupted at the dinner table just to answer a telemarketing call? To stop receiving annoying telemarketing calls, you can now subscribe to a “do-not-call” list.

Thanks to Texas House Bill 472, also known as the Texas Telemarketing Disclosure and Privacy Act, the Public Utility Commission (PUC) is creating a statewide “do-not-call” list for people who want to stop telemarketing calls to their homes.

You can place your name, residential phone number and address on the PUC “do-not-call” list through one of three different methods:

- **Online**—www.texasnocall.com for instant registration. The site is available 24/7.
- **By Phone**—call toll-free 1-866-896-6225 to an automated voice attendant system.
- **By Mail**—request an application from TEXAS NO CALL, P.O. Box 313, E. Walpole, MA 02032.

The fee of \$2.25 allows subscribers remain on the “do-not-call” list for three years. You may pay the subscription fee to the PUC by credit card or by mailing a check or money order with a completed registration form to the above mailing address. The “do-not-call” list is administered by the PUC and not by Sam Houston Electric. Questions and payments should be directed to the PUC via the methods listed above.

Inclusion on the “do-not-call” list may not eliminate all telemarketing calls. Debt collectors, charities and non-profit organizations are exempt from the law. Telemarketers who violate the law are subject to penalties up to \$1,000 per violation. More information is available on-line at <http://www.puc.state.tx.us>

Safety Matters

“Live” Power Lines Can Be Deadly

Many people don't know that you don't have to touch a live wire to receive a harmful or even deadly electric shock. Truth is, just touching something or someone that is in contact with a live wire can electrocute you. Sam Houston Electric Cooperative encourages you to remember these safety precautions and take steps necessary to ensure you and your family's safety.

Beware of Overhead Hazards

You may think that as long as a power line is not broken or on the ground, it is not a hazard. Fact is, many materials such as aluminum or even wood can conduct electricity from an overhead live wire through your body and kill you. Be sure that rakes and other outdoor tools, aluminum ladders, antennae, or sailboat masts never come in contact with power lines.

Think Before You Dig

Just because you don't have overhead power lines doesn't mean that you don't have to worry about electrical safety outdoors. Sam Houston EC maintains over 98 miles of underground power lines and some are buried only about 18 inches underground.

If you're digging near an underground cable and break it, you could be electrocuted! At the very least, you could cause an inconvenient power outage and may be liable for a stiff fine if you fail to call about the location of possible underground utilities where you are digging. So don't take any chances. Before you pick up your shovel, call Sam Houston EC for information about where underground lines run.

Steer Clear of Downed Power Lines

Downed lines can be caused by a variety of factors, including a car hitting a pole or severe weather. If you see a downed power line, do

not go near it or attempt to remove anything in contact with it, because it may be live. To prevent anyone from being injured, stay nearby to warn others to keep away from the downed line. If you're inside a car that's in contact with a downed line, stay inside. Otherwise, you could receive a serious electric shock. If you have a cellular phone, use it to call for help. Never drive across a downed power line.

Have Trees That Grow Near Power Lines Trimmed

Trimming trees around power lines will lessen the likelihood of branches falling on power lines in the event of a storm. But remember, this is not a job for someone who's not trained. Contact a Sam Houston EC Member Services Representative at 1-800-458-0381 to ask about our tree-trimming service or hire a professional.

Don't Touch Someone Who is Being Shocked

What do you do if a live power line shocks someone? The first rule of thumb is never touch someone while they're being shocked. Do not try to separate the victim from the power source; even wood containing moisture or grease can conduct electricity through your body. Call 911 for help immediately and report the incident to Sam Houston Electric at 1-800-458-0381.