

Rachel Johnson ([00:07](#)):

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Rachel Johnson, the member relations manager here at Cherryland electric cooperative. And this podcast is a unique one. I am recording in my basement where I am physically isolating due to the covert 19 pandemic as I'm sure are many of you. And it's also means I'm having to record without my trustee sidekicks, Rob and Tony. But I, uh, I look forward to the time when we are all back together in the recording studio at Cherryland and recording our next, uh, energy podcast. But I did want to take a minute here today and just update you on some of our covert 19 response because our last update was prior to having confirmed cases in our area, which we do now have. And also before the governor of Michigan ordered her, I'm sorry, issued her stay home, stay safe executive order, which was on Monday, March 23rd. So just wanted to make sure you all know where we're at now and talk about kind of three specific areas are our core services, the services we were providing to our members, uh, our billing policies and some changes we've made.

Rachel Johnson ([01:09](#)):

And then the co-ops, uh, financial situation. So let me start with core services. Our lobby and drive through have been closed since March 16th and are likely to remain closed at least through the end of the current, uh, stay home, stay safe executive order, which ends on April 13th. So you should expect our lobby to be closed at least until April 13th. One thing I should point out is that while the governor did issue that stay home, stay safe order, uh, utilities and energy are designated as critical services. So we are still able to have our employees working, but we're just trying to make adjustments that keep them as safe as possible. Her call center is now operating fully remotely, so they're all at home. Um, but you can still call in between seven 30 and four Monday through Friday and talk to your favorite member service rep.

Rachel Johnson ([01:55](#)):

It's the same people. They just happen to be in their homes as opposed to in our office in Chron and our after hours call centers also still operating normally. As far as other, um, kind of billing services, you're able to do almost everything you could do with us in person at our, uh, drive kiosk in our drive through in Braun, which is open 24, seven. The only thing you can't do is pay with a money order, but you can mail a money order to us. We do still have a staff person in the office who's processing mail and processing payments. Um, but other than that you can call us and we can walk you through how to do pretty much anything either online or on the phone. Our staff also continues to work on engineering projects for our members and, and you know, looking forward into construction season and also we're handling any metering issues or anything like that that comes up.

Rachel Johnson ([02:39](#)):

Um, the, the biggest shift we've had is we've, we've decided to limit all of our line work to urgent needs and outages just to keep our, our line crews out of the field and isolated for now. Um, so while we have taken, uh, quite a bit action to keep our employees physically isolated, we also are really aware of the fact that what we provide in the community is a critical service. So I just wanted you all to know that for the most part everything is still happening for you. And if you need us, we're there. Um, and at the same time, if you see us out driving around, don't be alarmed. We're not violating gubernatorial orders. Um, we are, we are allowed to be out there. Um, but we do ask that if you see any of our members, I'm

sorry, our employees in the field, please don't approach them because we're trying to keep them as distanced as possible.

Rachel Johnson ([03:20](#)):

So the second thing I wanted to talk to you about is some billing policy adjustments we've made. Uh, I should start by saying we, we know that this is the beginning of a very difficult time for a lot of our friends and neighbors. We're experiencing layoffs and reduced hours and struggling to keep your businesses afloat. We get it. I get it. A lot of our employees are impacted by those very same things. And um, because because we're, we're neighbors and we live here too, we can't stress enough how sympathetic and empathetic we are to this situation and the impact it's having on our members. So we've made the decision to suspend disconnecting any accounts until May 15th. This applies to both business and residential accounts. We, you know, we're obviously continuing or encouraging people to continue to pay what you can just to help avoid having really big bills, kind of loose waiting for you at the, at the end of all this.

Rachel Johnson ([04:12](#)):

Um, if you are a residential member, don't forget that there are local providers of energy assistance and you may have never needed to use those before, but those resources are there. DHS, um, has a utility assistance available and, um, if that process or applying for assistance is new to you, please give us a call. We're more than happy to walk you through some of the rules and what you need to do and how to be successful there. But we encourage you not to wait. Um, as soon as you have a past due notice on your bill, you, you can start applying for assistance. So, so don't wait and, and uh, we're happy to help you just give us a call. The other thing that we are able to do is put together payment plans and we don't have like a set payment plan. Instead you give us a call and we'll kind of talk through your circumstance, what you can pay, when you can pay and try to figure out a situation that helps you, um, kind of manage your bill and pay it down over time.

Rachel Johnson ([05:01](#)):

So give us a call. I mean that's the big, that's the big takeaway is if you think you're going to have a problem paying your electric bill, just give us a call. The other thing I wanted to let you know is that we're waiving late fees starting with bills that print on April 8th for at least one billing cycle. So for at least a full month of billing. And then the third thing I wanted to touch on really briefly with you is just to acknowledge that the cooperative is not immune to the financial pressures that many businesses in our community are facing. And we are also not for profit and member owned. So financial issues that impact us impact the members who own us. Um, we expect to see a revenue impact. Many of our largest electric users are closed for now and we're not sure for how long.

Rachel Johnson ([05:44](#)):

Um, so we're, we're, our accounting team is working really hard to review ways to cut expenses and I just want to make it, make sure you know that we're trying to do that in a way where there will not be any undue impact on the services reliability we provide to you. But we know we need to make, um, to tighten the belt, if you will. Um, I don't know today what those cuts are going to be. We don't know today what those cuts are going to be or what the, how we're going to, um, adjust. But I wanted you to know that those are conversations we're having over the next few weeks and technology, that we are very aware of the fact that this is your cooperative and we take that responsibility seriously and we are going to do everything within our power to help control your costs.

Rachel Johnson ([06:24](#)):

Um, let me, let me wrap up by saying that this is an unprecedented time for our cooperative, our community, our country. And I know you all have a lot of things you're worrying about right now. I do too. And we just want you to know that your power doesn't have to be one of them. We've got you covered. We're doing everything we can to maintain critical services, to provide flexible payment options and to manage our costs for the members we serve it. If you take nothing else away from this podcast, take away this. We are prepared for this. We're making decisions with the best interest of our employees and our members in mind in a very complex and rapidly changing situation. But we're resilient. We've been through many, many, many storms before and, uh, we know how to handle this kind of pressure and we're committed to keeping our community committed to our community and doing our part to keep it safe, healthy, and connected. Um, and then let me just end by saying we know what it's like to be on the front line of a major storm. And I think I speak for both, for all our employees and our members. When I say that right now, our prayers and thoughts are going out to the first responders in the storm, our local healthcare workers,

Rachel Johnson ([07:40](#)):

you all the best of luck and stay safe and stay healthy.