Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative

VALLEY REC

One of 14 electric cooperatives
serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

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Guest Column

'Tis the season for Members Helping Members and co-op gift certificates!

By Doug Roles, *Vice President of Member Services*

THE TURN of the calendar to November has people looking forward to the holiday season. Thanksgiving is just a few weeks away and, for many people, the day after means Black Friday and the start of shopping for Christmas. While the weeks ahead can be the most wonderful time of the year, for some families, the holidays can be a time of additional financial stress.

As a community-based not-for-profit cooperative, Valley Rural Electric (VREC) understands that many factors can impact the household budget. A sudden illness or change in employment can erode savings and make meeting financial obligations difficult. That's why we have a way for our consumers to lend a hand to other members facing financial challenges. Our Members Helping Members (MHM) program enables you to round up your monthly bill to the nearest whole dollar amount or add $1 to your bill. The extra revenue is then used to help struggling VREC members pay for their electric service. The MHM program also allows members to make a one-time donation in any amount or set up a recurring donation to the fund.

Members who need a hand up because of job losses, layoffs or other changes to income can apply for assistance through the program with a simple one-page application available at any of our offices or under the "Programs and Services" tab of our website, valleyrec.com. To donate to the program, just call us toll-free at 800-432-0680 or ask about Members Helping Members the next time you stop by an office to pay your bill.

To directly help a VREC member with an electric bill and get some Christmas shopping done, consider a co-op gift certificate. Gift certificates can be made out for any amount greater than $5. Senders can be identified or remain anonymous. You can order one using the form on page 15 of this month's *Penn Lines* magazine or pick one up at our offices.

While gift certificates or contributions to the Members Helping Members program enable folks to directly support VREC members, we'd also like to remind you about our Community Service Grant (CSG) program. Through the energy assistance component of the CSG program, members having difficulty paying their electric bills due to fire, illness, hospitalization or a death in the family can receive up to $500 in assistance. The CSG program is funded through unclaimed capital credits. Applications are available on our website or by calling our offices.

Thank you for considering these options to assist members or just brighten someone's day. We wish you a happy Thanksgiving and a wondrous holiday season. ☀

Getting connected

Internet options, speeds increase across rural areas

By Doug Roles
Vice President of Member Services

AVAILABILITY of high-speed internet is increasing in portions of south-central Pennsylvania as wireless providers grow their service with assistance from regional planning commissions and local government officials. Though there are still areas within Valley Rural Electric Co-op's service territory with no access to the speedy connectivity necessary for online schooling or working from home, planners and providers alike are optimistic about the outgrowth of broadband into the most remote rural areas.

Southern Alleghenies Planning and Development Commission (SAP&DC) has been working to bolster the efforts of wireless internet service providers (WISPs). Officials with the agency — which serves Bedford, Blair, Cambria, Fulton, Huntingdon and Somerset counties — say the commission has been eyeing ways to increase broadband service for several years and note the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted just how important being connected has become.

"We formed a broadband task force in 2018 because we have a lot of underserved areas," says Huntingdon County Commissioner Jeff Thomas, a SAP&DC board member who serves as the task force's chairman. "We started this process as part of our comprehensive plan before the pandemic. The pandemic really brought forward the need for broadband."

In 2020, the commission announced the formation of the nonprofit Alleghenies Broadband, Inc. (ABI), which is working to improve broadband infrastructure through public-private partnerships. Although ABI has received approval from the state Public Utility Commission to be a broadband provider, leaders of the nonprofit are more interested in ABI filling the role of a facilitator.

"We recognized there was a plethora of state and federal dollars available," says Brandon Carson, SAP&DC's director of planning and community development and ABI's executive director. "What was needed was a conduit for those dollars; that was the impetus for forming ABI.

"We want to leverage resources," Carson says. "We're well positioned to partner with private internet service providers to connect communities in some of the hardest-to-reach areas."

The effort to get broadband into outlying areas has been likened to the electric co-op mission of the late 1930s to bring central station service to rural Americans. The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association reports that hundreds of electric cooperatives are providing broadband or assessing the feasibility of providing service to more than 6 million households in co-op service areas that don't have access to high-speed internet.

Electric co-ops with the highest percentages of members lacking high-speed internet are among those most interested in offering broadband. Valley REC's eight-county service territory — which includes portions of Bedford, Blair, Centre, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata and Mifflin counties — includes a mix of areas with and without service but has multiple private providers working to fill in the gaps.

Working with SAP&DC, Huntingdon County's Board of Commissioners released $500,000 CARES Act funding packages to the Huntingdon County-based Rural Broadband Cooperative (RBC) and to the Lancaster-based Upward Broadband. Both providers are delivering fixed wireless broadband through the use of radio signals and small dish receivers.

Rural Broadband Cooperative formed in 2019 and provides coverage in and

PHOTO BY DOUG ROLES

LEFT: Valley REC crews work to run an underground power line to a Rural Broadband Cooperative tower in Jackson Township, Huntingdon County, in December 2020. Founded in 2019, RBC serves consumers in Huntingdon and Mifflin counties.

PHOTO BY DOUG ROLES

LEFT: Eighth-grader Morgan Imes, center, takes a break from her homework to show off a photo of her calf, Dixie, wearing a baseball cap. Heather Imes, a Valley REC member in Reeds Gap, Juniata County, says their new Centre WISP broadband service enables Morgan and her brother, Banks, a sixth-grade student, to use their school iPads at home while she also pursues an accounting degree online. Reeds Gap is one of several areas in VREC territory to benefit from new broadband providers.

around Mill Creek Hollow, Stone Creek Ridge, Snyders Run, Piney Ridge, McAlevy's Fort and Shirleysburg. Local residents can enter their zip code into the co-op's website (ruralbroadband-coop.org) to find out if their home or business is within a coverage area. RBC also serves portions of Mifflin County.

"We service the whole Big Valley corridor all the way toward Reedsville," says Dwight Rittenhouse, an RBC founder and well-known local contractor.

RBC erected its first tower on Stone Mountain (north of Huntingdon) in November 2019. Since then, it has erected a tower in Jackson Township and another in Henderson Township and will be serving accounts in the Petersburg and Mooresville areas. RBC is also working with Sunoco and the Buckeye pipeline for use of a tower in the Hill Valley area.

"That will light up Orbisonia and into Blacklog," Rittenhouse, a Valley REC member, says. "Also, we're finding towers are not necessary if we have a pole in a good location."

He explained that the co-op is trying to follow a model of controlling costs by trading service with consumers for location of repeaters and other infra-structure. Rittenhouse estimates that half of Huntingdon County does not have broadband service, but encourages residents to contact RBC to talk about the feasibility of getting broadband to unserved areas.

"We got hills. We got valleys, and

you need to have line of sight," Ritten-house says. "I would say to anyone, if there is not service in your area now, get ahold of RBC and we will assist you. We can get a team together and see about serving your area with repeaters. This is why the co-op thing works, because one house can help another house."

Upward Broadband, also a Valley REC member, serves parts of Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Mifflin and Juniata counties. Tim Beiler, an Upward co-owner, says that new Upward customers are often surprised to learn that they can now have the same internet speeds as those in more developed areas.

"There's a certain level of disbelief from people, who formerly could only get 6 megabits who now can get 50," Beiler says. "'Thrilled' is the word that comes to mind. I think it's fair to say it's changing people's lives.

"The vast majority of our new cus-tomers are those who are out of town in the more rural areas," Beiler adds. "Most of those people are coming from not having access."

In the eastern portion of south-central Pennsylvania, SEDA-COG has assisted State College-based provider Centre WISP to secure grant and loan funds as part of a project to provide broadband service to portions of Mifflin and Juniata counties. The service uses a communications tower near Honey Grove.

"Basically, once you got outside of Port Royal and Mifflin, CenturyLink

had been the sole provider," says Juniata County Commissioner Mark Partner, who serves as president of the board of directors of SEDA-COG (formerly Susquehanna Economic Development Administration — Council of Governments).

Partner, a Valley REC member, explains that residents in his area pre-viously depended on the phone carrier for internet service. Fiber carries the signal to service boxes on utility poles, which then push it through copper wire to homes and businesses. The problem is that only so much data can be pushed through copper.

"The further away from the box, the worse the service would be," Partner says. "They're not putting fiber to the house."

Like other broadband providers, Centre WISP provides fixed broadband through small dish receivers at customers' homes.

"You have to have line of sight," Partner explains, "and a good majority of our folks have access to that. Juniata County, for being rural, is a little bit ahead of the curve."

Partner himself subscribed to the Centre WISP service this spring and in September signed up for broadband cellphone service. He says residents who now have high-speed service "are just blown away" with how much better their speeds are. Valley REC member Heather Imes of Reeds Gap is one of those recent subscribers, signing up about a year ago.

"I jumped on board. I was the third person to get set up," she says. "There's no comparison. I can be on my com-puter doing schoolwork, the TV can be on, and the kids can be doing their

Getting connected

(continued from page 14c)
schoolwork; and it all works."

Though the number of rural residents in south-central Pennsylvania with high-speed access is growing, those still without service can feel left behind on the wrong side of the digital divide. In 2019, using $50,000 of funding from the Appalachian Regional Commission, the SAP&DC task force conducted a survey of residents in its six-county area. The percentage of respondents who did not meet the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) standard of broadband service (in counties within VREC's service area) were: Bedford, 45%; Blair, 29%; Fulton, 43%; and Huntingdon, 41%.
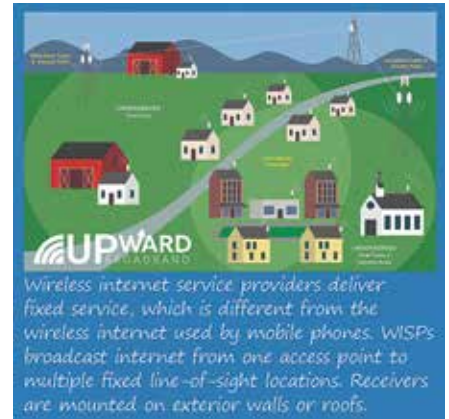
The FCC standard for broadband service is 25 megabits-per-second (Mbps) download and 3 Mbps upload. For perspective, 8 megabits make a megabyte, and 1 megabyte would be roughly equal to the size of one large digital, full-color photo. ABI says that its potential providers have to offer download speeds of 100 Mbps and 20 Mbps for upload. Many rural residents without broadband service use digital line subscriber (DSL) service, like in the Reeds Gap area. DSL phone/internet service offers a top download speed of 25.3 Mbps, but that speed can quickly decrease because bandwidth is shared with other local consumers.

ABI developed a three-tiered strategy for identifying and deploying projects. Tier 1 areas are identified as being underserved but having towers in place to support the expansion of fixed wireless service. The gap there, Carson says, is lack of funding for the purchase and installation of the necessary equipment, but the opportunity is that broadband service could be in place within 12 months. ABI is working on Tier 1 projects now using American Rescue Plan funds in partnership with county boards of commissioners.

Tier 2 describes areas lacking broadband access and towers or areas where towers exist but are at capacity or are cost-prohibitive for leasing space to service providers. It's anticipated Tier 2 projects will take 18 to 24 months for service because infrastructure has to be built.

ABI recently submitted an application requesting $20 million in funding through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's Broadband Infrastructure Program. The initiative has $288 million available for broadband deployment. The funding, if secured, would be used for the con-

Wireless internet service providers deliver fixed service, which is different from the wireless internet used by mobile phones. WISPs broadcast internet from one access point to multiple fixed line-of-sight locations. Receivers are mounted on exterior walls or roofs.
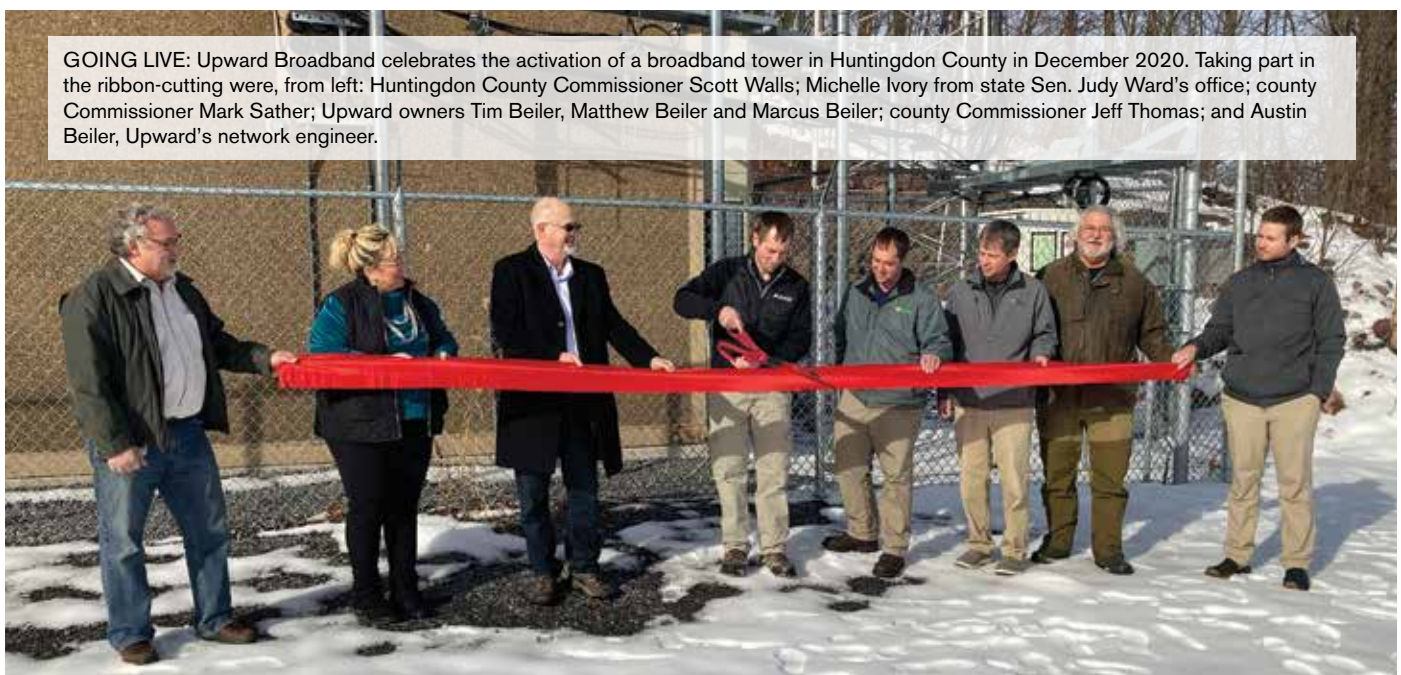
struction of 30 new communications towers in Bedford, Fulton and Huntingdon counties. ABI would coordinate with its partners and contractors to build the towers and then share management costs with private wireless internet service providers.

Tier 3 projects are ones in which the solution involves stringing fiber, the wired connection of customers to the service provider. Thomas and Carson say ABI is in the early stages of developing a high-level, bird's-eye view, of design work for wired (fiber) connections.

"It takes time, especially to build infrastructure," Thomas says. "But we really have, I think, a solid plan in place." ⚙

GOING LIVE: Upward Broadband celebrates the activation of a broadband tower in Huntingdon County in December 2020. Taking part in the ribbon-cutting were, from left: Huntingdon County Commissioner Scott Walls; Michelle Ivory from state Sen. Judy Ward's office; county Commissioner Mark Sather; Upward owners Tim Beiler, Matthew Beiler and Marcus Beiler; county Commissioner Jeff Thomas; and Austin Beiler, Upward's network engineer.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

Safety and education

Valley Rural Electric Cooperative (VREC) offers a variety of electrical safety and energy-efficiency presentations suitable for school and civic groups. In this photo, VREC President & CEO Rich Bauer demonstrates safety around power lines to a group of fourth-grade students. For more information, contact the co-op at 800-432-0680.

Valley REC accepts American Express

In addition to Visa, Discover and Master Card, we are now accepting American Express for bill payment by credit card. There is no additional fee for paying your electric bill with a credit card, in person or online.

If you make your monthly payments using checks, please remember not to paper clip, tape or staple bill stubs and checks together. Doing so slows our processing. Additionally, please remember to use blue or black ink. Using a lighter-colored ink may cause our scanners not to read some information.

As always, if you have a question or concern about your monthly statement, give us a call at 800-432-0680.

- ✂ -

Happy Holidays!

A gift of _____ has been applied to your account with Valley Rural Electric Cooperative.

From: _____

Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.
Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative

Jump start your holiday shopping

VALLEY REC GIFT CERTIFICATES make great gifts for the co-op members on your list.

To purchase one, complete the information below. If you'd like to surprise more than one person, please list the names, addresses and amounts for each on a separate sheet. Then mail this form with your check or money order for the total amount to: Valley REC, P.O. Box 477, Huntingdon, PA 16652-0477.

After we receive your payment, the co-op member's account will be credited in December with the amount you've specified. The certificate may be mailed directly to the recipient, or it can be sent to you for personal delivery.

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