

## **Electric Cooperatives, More Than Just Energy**

"Oakdale Electric Cooperative strives to enhance the quality of life for our members, while exceeding member expectations." An electric cooperative's vision should be not only to meet the consumers' needs but to go beyond their expectations. While Oakdale's mission is to provide excellent energy services, other aspects like safety, environmental stewardship, commitment, and communication should also hold great value.

One subject of safety not often taught to adolescents in driver's education is what to do when a car meets an electric pole. Electric cooperatives are presumably the most knowledgeable about these situations and take the initiative to inform the public about what to do. A high-quality, informational video or article is all someone needs to save themselves from a life-or-death circumstance like this. A few days before I attended the 2021 WECA Youth Leadership Congress in July, I remember looking over the schedule for the two days to come. I was surprised to see a driver's safety video prepared for Wednesday. When the films were introduced, I realized that I had no idea what to do if I crashed into an electric pole. Learning about jumping out of the car with both feet while avoiding contact with metal and shuffling away made me feel much more prepared if anything like that were to happen, not only to me but to someone around me as well.

According to [noaa.gov](https://www.noaa.gov), environmental stewardship is defined as: "The responsible use and protection of the natural environment through conservation and sustainable practices to enhance ecosystem resilience and human well-being." This idea can be enforced by carpooling, recycling, or walking instead of driving. Responsibly taking care of the environment will be what saves our planet from further pollution. Not only should we avoid contamination for our health, but also to give back to our home, Earth. In my first year of high school, I was lucky to participate in an outdoor camping program called "Challengescape" despite just moving to the area. Challengescape is: "an outdoor educational organization for Middle and High School students in the New Lisbon, Wisconsin school district". Its mission is to aid individuals in building

relationships and understanding nature on a different level. We learned how to safely set up a camp with tents and fire, as well as how to properly respect the environment we utilized. We always made sure to pick up any trash we saw, even if it wasn't ours, and leave our campsite cleaner than we found it. When we go canoeing in the rivers or streams, we collect any trash we find on the bottom and dispose of it in proper bins. I learned on the trip this year that Oakdale Electric Cooperative sponsors Challengescape which falls into a cooperative's goal of environmental stewardship.

Improving the work of an electric cooperative can help strengthen a community. Spreading awareness about safety issues such as hitting an electrical pole with your car or more efficient energy solutions promotes a communicative relationship between members and the cooperative. When I talked with my friends after the leadership congress was over, I realized that none of us knew what a cooperative was or what to do if we hit an electrical pole. While it was good that we learned during the congress, I believe that there should be a better way to deliver information so that everyone could have access to it. Posting it online, specifically social media, to appeal to adolescents would be a good start. Cooperatives should continue encouraging individuals to assume leadership roles in their communities or workplaces. The congress was a great opportunity for teens to gain experience in that subject. Co-ops could also make it a mission to improve the relationship between workers and owners. The environment should support communication and cooperation to boost the overall growth of the business. I've found that an individual's surroundings influence the outcome of a goal considerably. A welcoming place with positive mindsets can ensure better results. However, if a person is placed in an environment with a pessimistic attitude, it can hinder growth.

Aside from providing energy to rural areas, an electric cooperative's contribution to its community encourages overall learning. Experts from a co-op have the opportunity to share their knowledge and wisdom with their members. This could be teaching safety, respecting nature, and positive character traits such as good leadership, communication, and commitment.

Some of these aspects may not have anything to do with electricity, but they are lessons that people can use throughout life. Moving forward, I plan to use the skills shown to me through the WECA Youth Leadership Congress to improve the lives of not only myself but those around me.