



FLORIDA'S PUBLIC POWER UTILITIES: *Looking Through the Eyes of Their Customers to Better Meet Their Needs*

by John Egan

Community-owned electric utilities across Florida are stepping up their efforts to improve service to special populations like Florida's large swaths of seniors and non-English speakers, and for lower income customers, those with medical needs and many more.

According to the 2020 U.S. Census, more than 50 percent of central Florida residents are Hispanic or Latino — a large portion of which does not speak English as their primary language. Language can simply not be a barrier to providing excellent customer care, so Kissimmee Utility Authority (KUA) and the Orlando Utilities Commission (OUC – The *Reliable One*) beefed up their Spanish-language service offerings.

OUC has made many changes to better assist customers who speak Spanish, according to Michelle Lynch, the utility's director of corporate communications. Those changes include:

- Nearly 30 percent of customer service agents are fluent in Spanish
- The creation of [Espanol.ouc.com](https://www.espanol.ouc.com), a mirror site of [OUC.com](https://www.ouc.com)
- Proactive storm and overdue bill alerts to be offered in Spanish starting this summer
- An interactive voice response (IVR) system providing assistance in Spanish
- Electronic newsletters, communications and advertisements in Spanish
- Translation of news releases and social media posts into Spanish

- Proactively pitching stories to Spanish-language media (print and TV) with Spanish-speaking spokespersons and subject matter experts

In addition, OUC, Florida's second largest public power utility, which provides electricity to over 267,000 customers, also offers the Google Translate tool on [OUC.com](https://www.ouc.com) to ease the navigation for customers who speak a language other than English or Spanish.

KUA, which serves approximately 90,000 customers in Kissimmee and surrounding areas, offers Spanish-language support for all interactions with customers, said Tiffany Henderson, the utility's director of corporate communications. That includes the call center, lobby, cashiering, on [KUA.com](https://www.kua.com) and live chat.

"All KUA communication channels deliver a Spanish translation including KUA news releases, social media, advertisements and publications," she continued.

"In 2022, for the first time, our annual student art calendar was also printed in a bilingual format and our annual hurricane guides are also printed in both languages," Henderson

said. "In addition, customers soon will have the option of choosing which language they prefer to receive their bills."

Language Barriers Not the Only Challenge

Customers who communicate in languages other than English are not the only challenge facing Florida's municipal electric utilities. What about those who do not use technology, whether because of language, age or other reasons?

The City of Tallahassee this past spring rolled out voice ID, which allows customers to access their accounts over the phone simply by using their voice. The service, now available in English, with a future deployment in Spanish, makes it easier for customers to do business with the city without having to locate their account number or remember an account password.

"This next-generation technology [is already] being used by banks and credit card companies," explained James Barnes, chief customer officer for the City of Tallahassee.

"We are totally changing the way we engage with customers," Barnes continued.

"You can't communicate with customers in the same way as you did before the pandemic. We started looking into voice ID before the COVID-19 pandemic, but we accelerated our work on enhanced customer contact during the pandemic."

Voice ID is a convenient, simple and secure biometric technology that allows customers to access their City of Tallahassee accounts faster with the unique sound of their voice. Barnes said a customer's unique voiceprint enables an authentication process that is fast, secure and easy to use. "Voice ID is more convenient than traditional methods and effectively protects a customer's identity."

Voice ID is part of a multimillion-dollar investment in technology that Tallahassee is making to upgrade its customers' experience. The city is in the process of upgrading its customer information system and meter data management system so that customer service agents will be able to answer customer questions faster, he said. The city has also scheduled upgrades to their phone app and website.

Later this year, Tallahassee plans to roll out options where customers can pay their bill or ask general questions via Amazon's Alexa service, the cloud-based voice-activated service that enables millions of people a more intuitive way to interact with the day-to-day technologies they use.

Unbanked and Low-Income Customers

Across the nation, about 34 million households representing about 27 percent of the population had trouble paying their electric bill or kept their residence at an unsafe temperature in order to minimize energy bills in 2020, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA).

Job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic and the "Great Resignation" likely drove up the number of energy insecure households.

Roughly 12.7 percent of Florida households were at or below the poverty line of \$25,926 for a family of four in 2019, the U.S. Census reported. Job losses, both voluntary and

involuntary, have worsened household poverty since the start of the pandemic in March 2020.

One way Florida's community-owned electric utilities support their low-income, energy insecure, elderly, infirm or other vulnerable segments of their customer base is by offering discounts, special programs, extended payment arrangements, medical alerts, emergency energy assistance and more. Florida Public Power utilities ramped up their activities during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide relief to their most impacted customers.

But prepaid metering is a program that goes deeper than that by empowering customers to make conscious, smaller, more frequent, pre-use purchase decisions about their electricity. Prepaid metering consciously involves customers in their energy-use decisions, and that additional hands-on engagement educates customers about how their energy use impacts the monthly bill.

Prepay metering has been controversial in some areas, where critics challenge it as a form of redlining. But utilities that offer that program say customers who pay for electricity in advance tend to embrace the program because it is built around their needs. They feel respected and empowered.

Some portions of customers are unbanked — they pay their bills and conduct their personal business on a cash basis. For example, bartenders collect cash tips each day. At the end of the week, many of them are either paid in cash or their employer is willing to cash their paycheck. It's entirely possible that some percentage of workers in a cash economy simply don't have a bank account.

And cash has a way of disappearing fast. So, in 2014, OUC introduced its Power Pass prepaid metering program. More than 15,000 residential and small business customers are on that program today.

OUC's experience mirrors other utilities that have offered prepaid metering to their customers: Electric usage has gone down

about 8 percent to 10 percent, and customer satisfaction has gone up because customers are able to do business with their utility how they want.

Explained OUC's Lynch, "OUC Power Pass is a pay-as-you-go or pay-in-advance program for utility services so they can avoid deposits, late fees and a monthly bill. Statistics have shown that pay-before-consumption programs result in a reduction in electricity and water usage as customers become more aware of how much they consume."

Customers can check electric and/or water usage daily using the OUC Power Pass portal or receiving consumption alerts via text, email and/or phone. Customers can put as many funds or as little as they like on their accounts.

OUC Power Pass at a glance:

- No fees or deposits: late fees or disconnection/reconnection fees
- Flexible purchasing opportunities: daily, weekly or biweekly payments
- Provides complete customer control over energy use and costs
- Encourages energy conservation/awareness

Lynch said one of OUC's most impactful programs for special populations is its Empowerment Zone program, which is helping revitalize neighborhoods in the 32805 ZIP code, one of the most economically disadvantaged areas within OUC's service territory. Together with several agencies, including the City of Orlando, OUC is working to help families build better lives by bringing jobs, pre-apprenticeship opportunities, educational programs, mixed-income, energy-efficient housing and more.

"The Empowerment Zone is huge for us," Lynch said. "It's where the largest number of disconnections occur and many of those who live in that ZIP code make less than \$34,000 a year, on average."

Like most utilities, Tallahassee and KUA suspended their in-person home energy audits initially during the pandemic. Those

utilities resumed over the last year or so and are in high demand. During those free walk-through audits, technicians can check, and sometimes install, energy-saving devices like compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs) and weatherstripping, change HVAC filters and inspect the caulk on windows to ensure proper sealing.

In addition, some utilities offer rebates to offset the cost of a home's energy efficiency upgrades. For example, KUA offers rebates to their residential customers for insulation upgrades, duct/leak repair, smart thermostats, heat pump replacement and hybrid electric water heater replacements.

Being a Good Neighbor

People of a certain age remember when neighbors used to look out for each other. Being a good neighbor meant you shoveled the sidewalks or checked on your elderly, infirm or absent neighbors before and after a tropical storm or hurricane. When a family went on a vacation, a neighbor would mow the vacationing family's lawn. Maybe you shared lawn equipment or power tools.

KUA calls its bill round-up program the Good Neighbor Program. Under the Good Neighbor Program, customers and employees can increase their utility payment to the next full-dollar increment to assist their fellow community members, which can include low-income residents and those simply experiencing a challenging time. KUA matches all contributions dollar for dollar, effectively doubling the available assistance. During the pandemic, the utility also made an additional \$100,000 payment to the fund.

"More than 7,500 customers are enrolled in the round-up program and that number continues to grow daily," Henderson said. "The fund raised \$82,881 and assisted 312 customers during KUA's 2021 budget year."

OUC offers Project CARE, a utility bill assistance fund supported by the utility, its employees and customers, to customers needing utility payment assistance. OUC contributed \$2.6 million to this program during the pandemic. The fund



is administered through the Heart of Florida United Way's 211 program. Since 1994, OUC, its employees and customers have contributed more than \$6 million through a process where OUC matches donations 2 to 1 and provides lump-sum contributions during times of crisis such as 9/11, the 2008/2009 economic downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the spirit of being a good neighbor, Tallahassee has an interesting program. Under its Helping Hands program, customers who provide a doctor's note confirming their limited mobility can have their trash cans brought to the sidewalk so the city's sanitation crews will empty them during their regular curbside pickup routes.

Chief Customer Officer Barnes said the program has been operating since 2009.

"When the city enacted curbside trash pickup in 2008, we realized that some people don't have the ability to take their refuse or recycling cans to the curb," he said. "The Helping Hands program supports the elderly and those customers with limited mobility at no cost."

Tallahassee also offers a premium concierge service. For \$49.93 a month, it will roll a customer's trash cans to the sidewalk weekly. No doctor's note is needed, and you don't have to have limited mobility or be elderly.

Roughly 500 customers are on that concierge program.

Barnes said the city's very successful Neighborhood Reach program selects income-qualified areas for walk-through energy audits and direct installation of energy-saving devices. He said it can take six to eight weeks to conduct a complete door-to-door canvassing and improvement of all the homes in the selected neighborhood.

The Neighborhood Reach program, launched in December 2010, has upgraded more than 9,500 homes, resulting in approximately 6,300 megawatt-hours of saved electricity per year, Barnes said. Participating households have reduced their electric bill by about \$640,000 per year. Through this program, Tallahassee has provided more than 2,000 ceiling insulation grants, more than 2,000 HVAC repair grants, more than 300 hot water leak repair grants and at least 250 duct leak repair grants totaling more than \$1.2 million in financial assistance.

"Homes in low-income neighborhoods tend to have less weatherization and therefore higher electric bills," he said. "The Neighborhood Reach program has touched more than 30,000 homes since it was introduced in 2010. It has built tremendous goodwill and improved our customer satisfaction scores because people see the value of what we do. For those customers, we're no longer just the utility, we are *their own* utility company."

"We believe in engaging our customers on many different levels because our customers are our owners," Barnes continued. "If you are not engaging with your customers on a regular basis, then in times of need you'll not have a relationship that will allow you to make difficult decisions together. [You'll] be in a world of hurt."

Like many community-owned utilities, Tallahassee often works in partnership with charitable, human service, and other non-profit agencies. "There's power in partnership," Barnes said. "Any initiative we have is strengthened when we go to the community with a trusted partner." ■