



# **Valley Electric Association COMMUNITY INVESTMENT Grassroots Ambassador Program**

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION:**

Valley Electric Association (VEA) is proud of its grassroots Ambassador program and what it has accomplished. The Ambassadors are VEA members who want to be super informed and educated on the day to day operations of VEA, as well as its future. These members want to make a difference in their community and support the goals and objectives of VEA by participating on committees and attending quarterly meetings. They give us feedback on VEA initiatives and program activities.

## **CORE PURPOSE:**

VEA was faced with a tremendous communications challenge within the community several years ago. Rate increases, virtually no presence within the service territory and an overall lack of communication had unsettled the membership and built up antagonism toward the cooperative.

After coming on board as the new CEO approximately four years ago, Tom Husted and the VEA staff approached the board with a plan to form a group of members to serve as an extension of the staff within the community. The overall purpose would be to utilize the vast knowledge and experience of the entire membership through an exchange of ideas in collaboration with this group. The Ambassador program has been overwhelmingly embraced. It numbers 250 members and is continually growing. There is representation from each of VEA's six districts.



## **IMPACT:**

The Ambassadors have become the face of VEA. They are easily identified within the community by their signature green polo shirts. Their voices are heard and they realize that they are making a difference in the community.

The Ambassadors understand VEA's core values and guiding principles and there is a tremendous amount of trust and mutual respect built through these relationships. They are a conduit to the community and respected by their peers.

In continuing with the values and principles of the cooperative, the Ambassadors have structured themselves into specific committees to best utilize their talents and to impact specific programs efficiently.

1. **The Bylaw Committee** was created because the Ambassadors recognized the negative impact imposed by requiring the membership to vote at meetings only in person, especially when the meetings were volatile and unproductive. Whenever a quorum was not present, issues could not be resolved. The Ambassadors on the bylaw committee reviewed the bylaws, and then presented the proposed changes to the full Ambassador membership and to the Board of Directors for approval. The bylaw change was approved by the board and the membership, where as in previous years it had failed. The Ambassadors were very instrumental in this bylaw change passing and they will continue to review the bylaws and proposed changes and modernize them as needed.

2. **The Conservation and Renewable Energy Committee (CREC)** have been instrumental in assisting VEA staff in answering the demands of the membership to move forward in solar energy programs, especially the domestic solar water heater (DSWH) program.

After intensive investigation, VEA concluded that objective hard data (outside data of the DSWH sales industry) was all “rule of thumb” for this type of program. And technically, installing and using DSWH would likely be a challenge for many people, at least in the beginning. Also, the financial aspect of DSWH for VEA was not clear cut. Therefore, preparatory to a full-blown DSWH program, VEA opted to start a DSWH pilot program.

The committees reviewed the costs, created objectives, and chose the system that was put in place. VEA has utilized SCHUCO, a German solar water heater manufacturer for the DSWH pilot program; TWACS meters for the monitoring equipment; and MARATHON energy efficient water heaters.

Cooperative Research Network (CRN), which helped fund much of the pilot program collected, analyzed and documented the information. They have supported our efforts and the efforts of the Ambassadors. They realized what this pilot program could achieve and the CRN consultants continue to compile the data and have created calculator tools that other cooperatives can utilize, as well as other information that will be beneficial to utilities throughout the country.

They also assisted VEA with implementing our current Solar Water Heating Program. They have taken tours of specific products and assisted us with researching every avenue of this program. They chose Rheem as the manufacturer and also reviewed the business plan for the program. They have given us invaluable information and suggestions that have helped make this program a success!

In addition to being instrumental in the formulation of the DSWH program, several individual Ambassadors are also enrolled as participants. This is beneficial in that information about the structure of the project may be shared as it progresses.

They have created the Energy Awareness Poster Contest that was very successful and incorporated the ‘Our Energy Our Future’ campaign into the schools. The first year we had over 600 posters and last year we had over 1100 posters. It helps teach the students and teachers about renewable energy and energy efficiency.

They also will be focusing on weatherization for seniors, low cost no cost energy conservation ideas and educating our members on what they can do to lower their electric bill.

They also give us information on new technology or information they would like us to explore in more detail related to energy efficiency and renewable energy.

**3. The Finance Committee** works with the VEA board of directors and staff to understand financial conditions and considerations for the cooperative. They periodically meet with NRUCFC (National Rural Utility Cooperative Finance Corporation) and the auditor to receive and understand information regarding VEA's financial stability. A recent meeting with Dan Kessler, NRUCFC Regional Vice-President, provided information on the topics of global warming, financing, technology and communications. The Ambassadors are now able to relay that information to others in the community. The Finance committee is very instrumental in providing opinions and suggestions regarding our financials. They are also a huge part of the Solar Water Heating program, as they reviewed the financials and assisted VEA with specific funding options, such as utilizing Renewable Energy Credits. They also serve as a sounding board on various issues affecting the cooperative's financial position.

**4. The Legislative Committee** has gone above and beyond the call of duty, especially when Senators Clinton and Reid visited Pahrump. They stepped up to the plate and were able to ask both Senators specific questions that directly related to VEA, and those questions directly resulted in action being taken by both Senators. The Ambassadors lobby both state and federal legislators by telephone, email and writing letters on specific utility issues.

They have been working with VEA's contracted lobbyist who has given them invaluable information and when we need a call to arms, we will be contacting this group to assist us with specific energy issues at the legislative level.

**5. Scholarship Committee** - We have had several requests to expand the scholarship program for our youth. We typically pull a scholarship applicant's name from a hat to choose the recipient. The Ambassadors have come forward to offer specific suggestions for questionnaires to accompany the scholarship applications. They have also revamped this program.

We created new scholarships and the Ambassadors make the students work for it. They created new criteria and judging for the entries. They also change the essay portion of the application each year. For example, this year we gave the students names of those in the community who were doing renewable energy and energy conservation, several Ambassadors volunteered for this. They contacted those members and wrote an essay on what they were specifically doing within those parameters. The names were then blacked out and the committee chose the winners through a scoring process, not knowing the students name or what district they were in. We also made it paperless this year, so everything was done on-line to save costs internally. It continues to be a successful program.

6. **Charitable Foundation** - We have also implemented an *Operation Round Up* program to assist those in the community in need of funds for specific projects. On many of the cooperative.com listserves we have seen many comments regarding choosing a committee and the details of who you choose and the overall process of implementing the program. We have the answer. We have spoken to our Ambassadors and they feel this is an amazing program. Many of our Ambassadors are on the Board of Directors for the Charitable Foundation.



**ADDED VALUE TO COMMUNITY:**

Ambassador Accomplishments:

- **Acquiring**-They have acquired information about each VEA department and how they may work together towards a common goal. This is helpful within the community when they are networking with each other and are asked specific questions.
- **Learning**-They learned how VEA purchases power and how it is different from other cooperatives in the U.S. This is particularly important as VEA is very unique in the fact that it purchases the majority of its power from the open market. The Ambassadors understand what an undertaking this is and how it impacts them. They are able to communicate this with other members. VEA provides a quarterly, online newsletter to the Ambassadors with current, pertinent energy information to share with the general membership at every opportunity.
- **Researching**- CREC is researching wind and other solar alternatives for the service territory to better enhance our commitment to community. The world is changing and our Ambassadors realize that. They come to us with suggestions and opinions regarding what they are hearing within the community regarding new products on the market or to share their knowledge on alternative energy. They are not only the liaisons within the community but the eyes and ears of what the “hot” topics are and what we might want to be aware of. For example, there was a new gadget out on the market that claimed it could lower your power bill 50%. This company sent a mass mailing to several of our members. We had over 25 calls from our Ambassadors informing us of this product and if we knew anything about it. They were concerned that the members in the community would not understand what it was and that we should help educate them, so they did not get caught up in purchasing a product that had no real significant value. We were thankful so many of them cared enough to contact us regarding this product and we took care of the issue promptly.
- **Understanding**-Understand VEA’s future business plans. The Ambassadors attend meetings to become educated on VEA and what we are doing to ensure the reliability of power for the future. They can express this information to their peers, so there is no doubt that what we are doing internally will benefit the entire membership.

- **Structuring**-Created an Executive Committee made up of two Co-Chairs and one Secretary. They were elected by the Ambassador group, so there is a liaison with whom they can communicate. This idea was borne by the Ambassadors at one of their meetings. They decided that there should be an Ambassador group that they could contact with suggestions and opinions and that group could meet regularly with VEA regarding those items. So far, it has worked very well.
- **Recruiting**-Recruit new Ambassadors, as they did at this year's annual meeting. They recruited over 50 new Ambassadors, handed out promotional items and networked with those that attended the meeting to discuss what becoming an Ambassador is all about. They feel strongly about what they have achieved and want others in the service territory to have a voice and participate, so they too can be informed of how VEA operates and protects its membership by being good stewards.

The cooperative has realized a significant improvement in community relations through this grassroots Ambassador program. The Ambassadors not only exhibit support and respect for the decisions of the board and staff but also provide assistance in every aspect of communication process within the community in a positive and productive manner.

The Ambassadors care about this cooperative and know that their opinions and suggestions matter and that they can make a difference within the community.