

Building Connections at Work and in the Community

by Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS

Once a year, the staff in the human resources department at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) in Arlington, Virginia participate in a community service activity as a prelude to the department's annual, one-day retreat held the next day.

Most recently, the team spent an afternoon at the Arlington Food Assistance Center, where team members sorted food donations, placing unexpired items in crates and disposing of expired food items. The activity allowed remote and on-site team members to engage in person and complete a project that would benefit the local community.

The activity is just one way that NRECA employees can choose to give back to their communities.

NRECA is a trade association that supports more than 900 private, consumer-owned, not-for-profit electric cooperatives in the United States. With more than 700 employees, the association has offices in Arlington, Virginia; Lincoln, Nebraska; and Madison, Wisconsin.

The organization helps its employees get involved through programs that include volunteer paid time off (VPTO), a "Concern for Community" week, Employee Engagement Committee events and departmental programs. "We have a commitment to volunteering and supporting volunteering," said Elizabeth Perry, CEBS, the association's senior director of total rewards and HR systems.

Volunteer Paid Time Off

Employees can earn up to three days of VPTO annually for contributing their time to nonprofit organizations.

NRECA maintains a list of approved organizations, but employees can request an addition by submitting documentation, including proof of an organization's nonprofit status and a summary of its mission. "A wide gamut of organizations



National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) employees gather for a photo at a recent volunteer project.

are included," said Stephanie Abram, benefits manager.

Employees can volunteer during the evening or on weekends and earn eight hours of VPTO for every 24 hours of volunteer time they log. Less than 10% of employees used the benefit last year, but Abram and Perry want that number to increase as awareness of the program grows.

The association has a new human resources information system (HRIS) that lists the VPTO as a category alongside other PTO programs, boosting its visibility, Perry explained. Previously, "you kind of had to know that the policy existed, and you could apply for it," she said.

Departmental Efforts

Many of the departments within NRECA organize their own service opportunities, including the HR department. NRECA's communications department has volunteered at an area park to assist in removing litter and invasive plants. Other departments, such as finance, have volunteered at an affordable housing nonprofit to put together snack bags for students participating in after-school programs and summer camps.

Concern for Community Week

NRECA's Employee Engagement Committee organizes an annual "Concern for Community Week" that provides multiple opportunities for employees to give back, whether through fundraising efforts or on-site service activities. NRECA employees raised over \$46,663 during the Concern for Community Week in 2025. The total included \$39,102 in cash donations and the remainder was in-kind giving, such as volunteer hours and food gathered for a canned food drive.

In the past, the week often focused on fundraising for charities through raffles or auctioned gift baskets. Those events were popular, but the committee has begun placing a greater emphasis on gathering employees together to volunteer, Perry said.

In 2025, activities included collections of donated items, assembling care packages for children with complex medical needs, preparing meals for families experiencing homelessness, or hosting events. A selection of food trucks visited the headquarters one day, and a portion of the proceeds from food sales went to a children's hunger organization. Finally,

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A NRECA employee sorts donations as part of one of the association's volunteer projects.



Volunteer opportunities at NRECA help employees make connections in the community and with each other.

employees assembled packs totaling 8,000 pounds of apples for the Arlington Food Assistance Center.

At the Lincoln office, employees completed similar community service activities. Examples ranged from hosting a bingo and ice cream social at a local assisted living center to donating school supplies to local classrooms and participating in a backpack assembly for children in need.

“The idea is to really embody the concern for community principle, whether that’s giving to a charity or giving back from a volunteer perspective,” Perry said.

Abram and Perry estimated that anywhere from 40-60% of employees are participating in some form of volunteer activity through all the available options.

Reflecting NRECA Principles

NRECA’s volunteer programs are reflective of concern for community—one of seven principles espoused by NRECA’s member cooperatives, Perry said. “Our member cooperatives are highly involved in their communities,” she added.

This means that volunteer opportunities are a strong reflection of the organization’s culture.

“People naturally, generally want to give back, but I would also say my experience of NRECA’s culture is one that people are highly cooperative, want to collaborate, will do anything for you,” Perry said. “They want to help you. So,

then the next extension of that is being a volunteer, being of service to others.”

Volunteering “helps employees feel more a part of the organization, more connected to their colleagues and more fulfilled because they’re doing something outside of their normal duties that’s contributing to the local community,” Abram said. “For the folks who are newer to the organization, it’s also a great way to meet people. Whether a department or the engagement committee is hosting an event, it’s a good way to meet people outside of your team,” she added.

Engaging Remote Workers

Most NRECA employees split their time between working from home and in the office, but following the pandemic, the percentage of the workforce that is fully remote has increased to about 15% to 20%.

“We’ve been very deliberate as we have come back from COVID-19 to engage with those employees, make sure that they feel included, and make sure that they have opportunities,” Perry said. Sometimes there isn’t an option for remote employees, but “as we saw with Concern for Community, where it used to really be an in-person-only offering, they deliberately expanded to offer more virtual opportunities to ensure remote staff had the option to participate and be included.”

Advice for Others

For organizations interested in starting a volunteer program, Perry suggested looking at where employees might already be volunteering and finding ways to support it so the effort doesn’t have to start from scratch.

For example, in the past, NRECA departments were directed to assemble gift baskets that would be displayed in a central place where employees could view them and place bids. That switched to an online auction as more employees began working remotely during the pandemic. The committee has since moved away from the auctions, although they may return. “They’ve taken that direct feedback and then morphed those programs over time and, honestly, got a lot more creative,” Perry commented.

Abram advised that flexibility is key for successful volunteer programs. “I’ve worked for a few different organizations that have had volunteer programs, and the setup has been different at each one. I think the biggest benefit to these programs is that they allow employees time to engage and build relationships with colleagues they may not otherwise work with,” she said. “If you’re considering starting a new program, get some feedback from staff on what they want and what’s important to them. To some, it might be paid time off, to others, it might be having the flexibility to volunteer during work hours.”

