

The line that connect us

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by *Michaele Duke*

We flip a light switch and the lights come on. Doesn't seem like much until the power goes out. On October 8, Williamsburg County experienced a disastrous storm Hurricane Matthew. It left tens of thousands of citizens without power and many frustrated Santee Electric Cooperative members. That being the case, The News went behind the scenes of the co-op to find out how the system works.

Santee Electric Cooperative Manager of Community Relations Adrel Langley provided a tour of what could be described as a mini city located in a parking lot to the right of the facility. The facility housed, fed, and provided other amenities for over 200 workers from as far as Kentucky as they worked to bring power back to the thousands of customers left in the dark. "This storm sat on top of us for 12 hours," said Langley. "It took total advantage taking out nearly all our power lines." Santee Electric is the largest cooperative east of the Mississippi. The cooperative has 2,005 square miles of service territory, many of which are located in fields and swamps, which makes it difficult to access power lines.

By mid-week workers who were housed in hotel rooms as far as Georgetown were forced to give up their temporary living quarters for pre-booked customers. This prompted the cooperative to call in Storm Services, LLC, which provides around the clock state of preparation to support transient groups wherever needed. "We had everything booked from Sumter, to Santee, to Manning, to Lake City," said Jay Kirby, Manager of Marketing for Santee Electric. "On Thursday, October 13, after we exhausted lodging options and faced with bringing in another 150 workers to Santee Electric, the only real option was to engage Storm Services."

The operation includes six 18-wheelers provided sleeping quarters for the 216 men. Each of the 36 bunks has a sliding curtain to provide some level of privacy. A tractor-trailer located behind the living quarters houses a laundromat and showers.

Outside the rig workers can take advantage of a huge sink that offers them a place to shave. Also on site is a mobile trailer equipped with everything needed to prepare three hot meals every day.

Langley said statewide managers oversee the entire operation. "They aggregate all those resources into a computer system. This shows them all the resources in all the other states and alert them to whatever co-ops need assistance." She went on to explain why power could be out at one house while the neighbor's house remains on. "You have to work on the larger lines first," said Langley who compared the system to a home's breaker box. "If you turn the main breaker on, that's like turning a substation on. Then you turn the single breakers on and those go to each room in your house. Some rooms in your house could not have power but all the other rooms around it do."

Co-op member Susan Tomlinson was thankful for the sacrifices of the men who worked 16-hour shifts to restore power. "They worked very hard to get power back on for the people in Williamsburg County by working overtime and leaving their families," said Tomlinson who lives in Greeleyville. "Being without power from Friday until Wednesday makes one feel very blessed with things we take for granted." With enough power lines to reach California and back and facing a mountain of logistical hurdles to restore power to its members, Santee Electric Cooperative met the challenges head on.



Sheryl and Dennis Reas prepare three hot meals a day for workers staged at Santee Electric Cooperative on Sumter Highway. The pair work for Storm Services, LLC., which provides around the clock state of preparation to support transient groups whenever needed.



Watch a video walkthrough of the Santee site
https://youtu.be/5_wpd4pFWHE