For years, Pascoag Utility District, a public power utility serving 5,000 electric customers and 1,200 water customers in northwestern Rhode Island, wrestled with aging and fragmented software systems for billing and helping customers manage their electric and water use.

Today, by converting to National Information Solutions Cooperative's enterprise software solutions, Pascoag increased their credit card payments by forty-two percent over one year, while reducing their customer disconnects by an impressive thirty-four percent in only one year. How? Through leveraging technology and integration.

Pascoag's General Manager, Mike Kirkwood, said that the old systems were very cumbersome and staff had to perform all kinds of gyrations to make them work. That was frustrating and challenged the utility in reaching their high level of customer service aspirations.

Kirkwood and other Pascoag staff noted that the old systems made it time consuming to complete daily billing and other administrative tasks. It was also difficult to gather data and to communicate with customers.

In early 2013, the utility initiated an effort to replace the various systems with a single, integrated software solution that would provide customers with easy access to online information about their accounts and make it easier for them to pay their bills online. The new software would also help Pascoag automate communications to customers about outages, past-due bills and the like.

Desarae Dolan, Pascoag's supervisor of administration, said that after considering a half-dozen potential service providers, the utility zeroed in on the flexible, integrated package offered by NISC, which is owned by its electric cooperatives and other members.

Having a single point of contact at NISC to answer questions and address concerns significantly eased the implementation process, said Dolan. She added that NISC's customer service has been "by far the best I've ever seen"— a view echoed by Kirkwood and Harle Round, Pascoag's manager of finance and customer service.

Three-In-One Solution

NISC has helped Pascoag put in place a solutions package to improve customers' experience in interacting with the utility on billing, service hook-ups and disconnects and outages.

One core offering is SmartHub, which provides customers with real-time account access and two-way communication either online or via mobile devices such as Android or iOS-based smartphones and tablets.

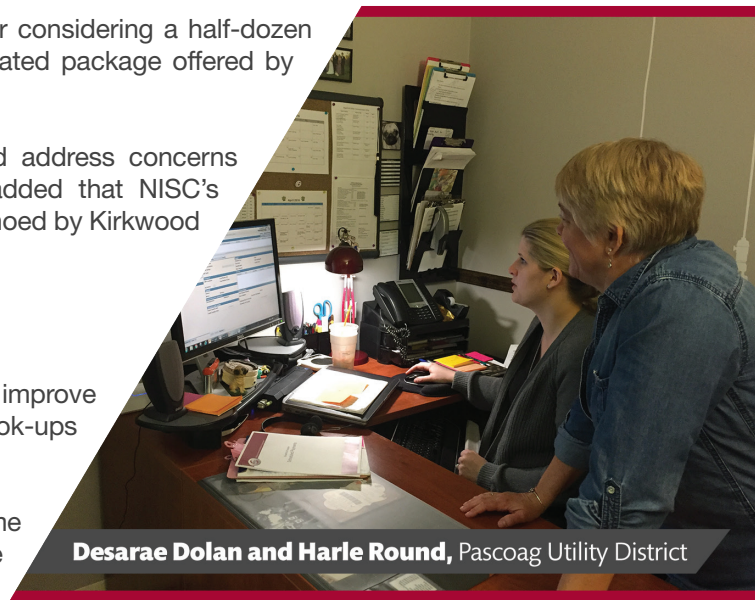**Desarae Dolan and Harle Round,** Pascoag Utility District

Round said SmartHub allows customers to make a one-time electronic bill payment even without registering. Customers who do register and set up an online account are able to pay their bills and monitor their electric and water use through their computers or mobile devices.

Customers also can set up recurring payments, receive paperless bill statements and sign up to receive emails or texts — via NISC's Messenger service — about outages, planned service disconnects for bill non-payment, and other important information.

A closely related solution is CallCapture — a comprehensive interactive voice response program that allows Pascoag to send phone messages to specific groups of customers — such as those that face disconnects if they do not pay their bills, or those in an area where electric or water service needs to be temporarily interrupted.

Pascoag schedules automated phone calls 48 hours in advance of pending disconnects to give customers a final opportunity to avoid being cut off. Disconnect days used to be stressful when staff had to call affected customers, said Round. Now these calls are made with the press of a button. Customers have a final opportunity to pay their bills, and staff can focus on other customer service functions.

Round and Dolan noted that implementation of SmartHub, Messenger and CallCapture has resulted in improved and quicker bill collection as well as a big drop in the number of disconnects.

Training and Support

Pascoag was concerned about the potential challenges of implementing an entirely new billing and customer-communication software.

"We knew there would be some fits and starts, and there were," said Kirkwood. "But NISC was always there to help us, and very responsive to our concerns." NISC's training for utility staff was also very good, he said.

Dolan attributed NISC's proactive support to the fact that it's a co-op owned by its members. She noted that the IT company's business model mirrors Pascoag's own community-owned public power status.

Pascoag is working with NISC to add two more elements to its integrated solutions package — MapWise and Outage Management. MapWise is a geographic information system-based solution that provides digital displays of the utility's distribution system with supporting data. This solution eliminates the need for crews to manage paper maps and helps them identify outages — and potential causes — as they occur.

The Outage Management system gives Pascoag crews the data they need to quickly and efficiently restore power. Because MapWise and Outage Management will be integrated with the other NISC solutions the utility already has, Pascoag will be able to notify affected customers, via email or text, about outages and restoration timelines.

Kirkwood said that the integrated solutions are making customer interactions easier and more productive, and as a result customer satisfaction has been on the rise. Customer service call volumes are down, billing is more efficient and with the new solutions, outage management will be optimized.

Before NISC, Pascoag was paying good money for bad service and customers and staff were frustrated, Kirkwood said. With NISC services, costs have not gone up significantly but positive results have, he added.

To learn more about NISC enterprise software solutions, visit NISC's website at www.NISC.coop.

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