When Easley Combined Utilities decided that it was time to optimize office and in-the-field efficiencies and improve customer service, they wanted to focus on two areas — communicating with customers during power outages and making power restoration more efficient.

It was time to leave behind the old mainframe computer and vintage green-screen terminals — and their miracle-working in-house programmer was retiring.

Easley is an electric, water and sewer utility in northwestern South Carolina. Founded more than 100 years ago, the public power utility provides electric and water services to approximately 14,000 customers and sewer services to about 10,000.

After evaluating several vendors for their efficiency and customer service improvement venture, utility leaders decided to partner with National Information Solutions Cooperative, a member-owned information technology company. The partnership offered a cost-effective, user-friendly platform that "could do everything" including accounting, customer care and billing, and operations support, said Joel Ledbetter, the utility general manager.

Outage Management with Better Reporting and Tracking

Given the value the utility places on uninterrupted electric service, the priority was to establish an integrated outage management system that quickly alerts utility crews of outages, helps them assess the likely causes and remedies and lets affected customers know how soon power will be restored.

Before the NISC platform was installed, utility staff used to get calls from customers who had lost power. When the outage was widespread, many customers got busy signals and the utility's ability to assess the extent and cause of the outage was impaired and delayed.

Now, said Ledbetter, incoming calls from customers with outages can be received either by utility staff or CallCapture, an interactive voice response system in the NISC suite of software solutions. Affected customers also can use their smartphones to notify the utility of outages through the SmartHub portal.

Easley Combined Utilities foremen and linemen are notified by text messages as the customer outage reports come in, and the outages are plotted visually on the Outage Management and Mapping System. That helps crews quickly identify outage causes, which in turn helps foremen assess where to send crews and what equipment and tools might be needed on their trucks.

As crews go about their power restoration tasks, Ledbetter said, they use Android-based tablets to access information, provide status updates and track any new outages that may be occurring.

Ledbetter said that in early March a severe thunderstorm with high winds knocked out a couple of circuits and left 1,200 customers without power. Incoming calls from nearly one-tenth of customers typically would have overwhelmed utility staff but CallCapture and SmartHub enabled all outage reports to be received. The resulting texts to utility foremen and linemen helped crews jump into action with a clear understanding of what work needed to be done, and where.

Efficient Crews, Informed Customers

The new approach "has been very well received by our crews," Ledbetter said. He added that customers appreciate being notified by phone, email or text of when to expect the power back on and can track restoration efforts in real time through an online map.

Enhancements are about to be implemented. The utility is in the process of rolling out smart meters that will be integrated with NISC's Meter Data Management System. If power to any of these new smart meters is interrupted, the meters will send signals to the Meter Data Management System, Easley Combined Utilities crews will be notified and the outages will be plotted on the Outage Management and Mapping System.
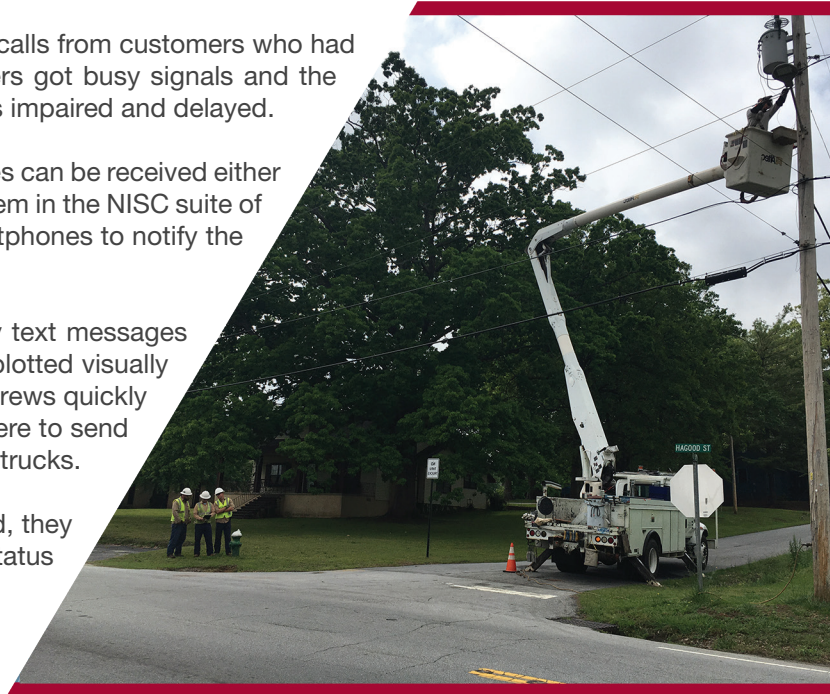
Full Integration, Vendor Support, Low Cost

The NISC platform is helping to integrate the utility's data and functions — accounting, customer care and billing, and operations support — in a seamless way, said Ledbetter and Andy Sevic, finance manager at Easley Combined Utilities.

For example, customers can use the SmartHub portal to notify the utility of outages and also to access information about their electricity use and pay bills. Easley Combined Utilities can use CallCapture and the Messenger service to notify customers about billing issues or planned electric or water service outages for repair work.

"We've also been impressed by how much NISC invests in research and development," and by how closely the company works with member utilities and electric cooperatives in developing new services as the electric industry evolves, said Sevic.

He noted that, as a small utility, Easley Combined Utilities previously faced challenges in keeping up with the wide range of services offered by Duke Energy Carolinas, the large investor-owned utility that serves surrounding areas. With the NISC platform, the public power utility can now provide many of the same services.

Working with NISC also has helped the utility's bottom line. The utility pays NISC a reasonable monthly subscription fee. "We don't need to have someone on staff to program computers. We save on merchant services fees," said Sevic. With CallCapture, SmartHub, and Messenger, there is less need for administrative overtime.

When customers have questions, it's easy to find the expert who can answer, Sevic added. "One-on-one help is always available."

Ledbetter said customers have come to expect a higher level of customer service and a wider range of utility offerings — new ways to pay bills, keep track of their electric and water use, and stay informed about service interruptions. Now, even small utilities can meet those expectations economically.

For more information about NISC enterprise software solutions, visit NISC's website at www.NISC.coop.

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