Since it first grabbed headlines with its initial outbreak in China, coronavirus has been top of mind for people around the globe. We’ve gotten good advice on how to control it in our personal lives—wash your hands, stay home if you’re sick, limit your travel—but what should utilities do? How should you prepare for the effects of coronavirus on your utility contact center, your utility credit and collections policies, and your external communications?

For the most part, utilities aren’t really communicating about the virus. And few have a plan for how to respond if COVID-19 spreads in their community. The one example we were able to find on social media was from Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD). It talks about how to get the facts on the disease (figure 1).

**Figure 1: On its Facebook page, NPPD reassures customers about coronavirus**

> NPPD says it has “response plans in place to help detect, prevent and control the spread of infectious diseases” such as COVID-19.

Your customers want to know what to expect from you if their community gets sick. Your employees want to know what to do to prepare for potential impacts. Google Trends reports that the top five questions related to coronavirus in the past week were:

- What is the coronavirus?
- How do I prepare for the coronavirus?
- How many people have died from coronavirus?
- How many cases of coronavirus are there in the US?
- How did the coronavirus get started?
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You’re used to helping people prepare for disasters such as hurricanes, fires, and earthquakes. And you’ve seen improvements in customer satisfaction when you manage these communications well. Coronavirus is no different. Alleviate your customers’ worries and have at the ready answers to their most critical questions, such as:

- What can I do to control my energy bill if I have to spend more time at home?
- How is my utility making sure that hospitals in the area won’t lose power during an outage?
- How can I afford my bill if I can’t work due to a coronavirus outbreak in my community?

You also need to consider how an outbreak will impact your internal operations.

**What effects might a coronavirus infection have on your call center?** Your contact center employees need to know how to react to increased absenteeism, changes in call volume, and strains on limited resources. How will your pared-down staff process ramped-up customer requests?

**What shake-ups might occur to your credit and collections processes?** Credit and collections will get messy if the customers who are most likely to be energy insecure are the most likely to be affected by the virus.

**How will you communicate about COVID-19 and your utility’s operations?** Customers will want to know that you’re coordinating with local health officials to ensure safe, reliable power.

In the coming weeks, we’ll publish reports on these topics. Members of the E Source Utility Customer Care Service should check their weekly alerts.

To make sure you’re notified, select “contact center” in your email alerts.

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