

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([00:16](#)):

Welcome back to the co-op energy talk podcast. I'm Rachel Johnson, the member relations manager here at cherry land electric cooperative and our, uh, core mission here at cherry land is to provide member focused, safe, reliable, and affordable electricity. So today we're gonna focus specifically on what safe service looks like by talking with tray land safe director, Jeff puffer, Jeff, and I discuss not only how we help keep our crews safe, but also the trainings we do in the public to help make sure that our members and the first responders in the community know how to be safe around electricity. We also touch on a few important safety milestones that our employees have celebrated lately. And mostly just talk in general about why safety is such a core part of our mission and what we're doing to help promote that with cherry land safety program. So listen in is Jeff and I talk about safety. Well, thanks for joining us, Jeff, I'm excited to have you here because safety's such an important topic for

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([01:09](#)):

Us. Well, thanks for having me. It's, uh, always fun to sit down and have a conversation with you, Rachel, and, and talk about safety and what we do here.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([01:17](#)):

And Jeff and I are both big podcast fans. So this is also super fun, cuz we can kind of nerd out on being on a podcast together, cuz we're always sharing podcasts with each other that we like. So that'll be fun. So Jeff, just to kind of kick us off, can you just explain to our listeners a little bit about what you do here at cherry land?

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([01:33](#)):

Sure. I'm the safety director here at cherry land electric co-op and primarily my main focus is safety for our employees. That's that's where we start every day we come in and we oversee, we have 57 employees currently and it from field to office to lineman, to engineers, uh, our job is to, to make sure that they're doing their job safe. They have the gear, the equipment at the training and everything from a to Z to come in and, and leave home and, and see their families and, and do it safe.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([02:07](#)):

Jeff, one of the things I really love about how you talk about our safety program and what we do here is that you don't, it can be tempting to think just specifically about people who are in field jobs or really kind of in safety, sensitive jobs. But I love the fact that you think about it as a whole organization. So what, there might be people in the office who are doing things that are unsafe and, and the reason I love that is cuz safety is really kind of a core part of our mission for all of our employees. Not, not just some it's important to us that all of our employees have a safe work environment. So recently, speaking of our employees recently, we hit a little bit of a milestone. Can you talk about that a little

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([02:38](#)):

Bit? Yes. So, you know, there's a lot of metrics in, in the safety world, but I think the biggest one for, for us, or for myself is how long can we go before? There's a, an incident and specifically an incident where an employee has to take time off of work. That's a major accident or a major injury that's taken place. And recently we just crossed the two year threshold of not having anybody lose time or have to take work off because of an injury that has happened here at work. So that's a big one for us and, and we're pretty excited about that. And we just keep, you know, it's really tough to measure something that never happens. Right? Mm-hmm <affirmative> so when those accidents and those injuries, when they

don't take place, it's hard to, you know, put a gold star on that, but that's ultimately, uh, the biggest win we can have is, is nothing to report, nothing to measure.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([03:26](#)):

Yeah. That's kinda interesting, like in your, in the metrics you're monitoring, nothing is the best case scenario, right? Yeah. That's the home run, no accidents, no lost time. And I think it's really important to reiterate and you, and you said this, we've got all these different metrics we're tracking, but behind all those metrics are thousands and thousands of decisions being made every single day by our employees. I mean our employees have probably driven millions of miles. Oh absolutely. And those two years, and for those of you are paying attention back home, the traffic and traverse city is not getting better or less dangerous. And yet it's not, our employees are moving around our whole system and making smart choices in every single minute. And that's what drives those kinds of

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([04:04](#)):

Results in those decisions that we're making too. You know, we have OSHA, you have my OSHA, you have, you know, national organizations when it comes to safety, you have all these compliance and things that you're trying to do. But the one thing that I pride ourselves on doing here at cheer land is we listen to the individuals, the departments, we go and talk to them and say, Hey, what do you need specific to your job? What are you seeing on a day to day basis? Maybe you need some new equipment. Maybe you need new some new gear and in that hands on training. So we don't just let outside entities drive our safety program. We really pride ourselves in making that a two way, two way street and listening to departments and, and individual employees come to us. So hopefully that's, that's part of the, the, the prevention or the proactive, nothing to, to measure

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([04:49](#)):

Cause, and, and I, when you were talking, Ima this like the successes, partially our employees making smart choices, which we're helping them to do by giving training or listening, when they say here's a situation that I think that, you know, there's a risk, but the other piece you, you talked about equipment. I mean, I think that we do a really good job of not just providing good equipment, but also taking care of our equipment. So when you think about again, we'll pick on trucks on the road. Well, yeah, you can make a bunch of smart choices, but if the wheels fly off, you're still gonna probably be in a lost time accident. And again, we have mechanics that are every single day, making sure that our equipment is safe or you, I mean, I'm sure you have a hundred different equipment. Examples. Our people have to inspect their equipment regularly. That kind of

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([05:28](#)):

Stuff, correct? Yes. Yeah. They spend a lot of time in and when they can come to their supervisor, their manager and say, Hey, we would really like this new piece of equipment and we provide that for them. There's a, buy-in automatically right there. So now they, they, they want to take care of that equipment. They wanna make sure that they're doing the safety checks on that and they're reporting anything that, that could be a safety hazard because it's a mutual agreement. You know, we, we came together, so there is buyin and that that's a big piece of safety as well is if, if, if you buy into what we're doing and it's just not a top down, push it on your, your throat type relationship. That that's the key. Right.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([06:08](#)):

Well, and what you're describing is a culture, right? Like a culture where employees are empowered to ask for what they need to identify issues. Um, but I, and I think it, that is worth noting because a lot, it, one of the things I, and you can probably speak to this more than I can, but I think sometimes safety programs can struggle to get that right balance where people have the, um, the, the ability to say, Hey, this happened or here was this kind of example of a near miss that could have been an accident and learn from it without necessarily having to fear that there will be penalties or punishments because of it.

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([06:41](#)):

Absolutely.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([06:42](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Something that I think we should, that you and all of our employees at cherry land should be really proud of. So I, I think the, the takeaway here for our listeners is just to reiterate that at cherry land safety is a really high priority. We're talking about it all the time. It's top of mind all the time. And you know, I think, I think Jeff, I speak, I don't wanna speak for you, but I think I speak for all of us when I say like, it is important to me every night that our employees are going home to their families, right. We, yeah, we get together, we meet their families. We care about that.

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([07:10](#)):

So, and, and just one more thing to add on that, you know, Tony, our, our general manager, he's all in, on safety too. Mm-hmm <affirmative>, and I, I firmly believe in any organization, you have to spend money where it counts and where it makes a difference. And Tony has allowed us to do that. You know, we don't waste money here at Cheerla, but we definitely spend the money where it makes a difference in any successful organization. You're gonna see that trend. You wanna be successful in a certain area. You have to put the money and invest that, that money and the time. And Tony has given that to us.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([07:38](#)):

You have to put resources into the things that matter. Correct. Absolutely. I agree with that. So I wanna shift just a little, because one of the things I think might be interesting for our listeners is the work we do to educate the public about how to be safe around electricity. And that's something we do free. It's just a service to our community because we do know, because we think it's important again, because safety's a priority, but also, cause we wanna make sure that, um, the members of our community know how to be safe around electricity. So can you just maybe, and I, and I, and I'll, I'll just say we have kind of two different audiences we like to get in front of when it comes to our safety messaging. And, and maybe you can start by talking about the training we do for first responders in the community. Yeah.

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([08:12](#)):

First responders is, is a very big, obviously when it comes to electrical safety, it's a very big concern for us. We wanna make sure we're doing our part to get them educated because obviously they're the first ones on scene. When it comes to a carpool accident, you have down lines. Sometimes when we have storms, these first responders are, uh, first ones on down lines and setting up perimeter barricades. So what we do is we reach out to local fire departments and EMS, and we offer a, what we call a hotline demonstration. It's a trailer that has a bunch of equipment poles and, and wires and, and equipment of that we can energize and we go through different scenarios with them. And we also talk about, you know, what to do when you have a energized line on a vehicle with somebody trapped inside, or what do you do when you have a, uh, excavator who has dug into some of our underground lines.

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([09:07](#)):

And we work through these scenarios and we have some stuff that we, we, we found is, is pretty common that they see, and we try to get around as much as we can to, to these, um, you know, fire departments. And, and, and then also what we do is we ask them, what are you guys seeing? Mm-hmm <affirmative>. And we try to tailor our content to what they're seeing, cuz trends change. You know, what they were seeing five years ago may not be exactly what they're seeing today. And, um, that it's really just, you know, what can we do for you and what are you seeing? And, and then we go from there and, and, and get them the, the training and education that, that they can take and apply.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([09:43](#)):

And I, how do you think you guys maybe, maybe in front of 10, 10 or so fire departments a year, does that sound about right?

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([09:49](#)):

Yes. You know, once COVID has kind of died down, uh, I believe we've done six so far this year. Okay. And we're halfway through the years, so we're close to that

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([09:58](#)):

Quarter. I nailed it. Yeah. No, but it's what it, what, and to your point, what's, what's really cool is we already have this really strong, um, relationship to our first responders because a lot of times they're, they're on scene at something we're on our way to, right. Mm-hmm <affirmative> they get called on a carpool accident or in a major storm event. A lot of times they'll sit and monitor electric lines on the ground until we can get there. And so it's clearly really important to maintain those relationships. And it's not, we wanna go home safe, but we want them to go home safe at the end of the day,

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([10:26](#)):

Too. Yeah. And also it's an opportunity for cherry land to get out there and talk to them and say, okay, when we, we arrive on a house, fire or structure fire, what can we do? What can you, some information I can take back to our first responders, our linemen, and give to them so they can be safe on your scene. How do you want them to stage their vehicles? And, and just, you know, it's a two-way street once again, that's kind of how we do things here. It's not just us feeding information. We're trying to get out there and, and see what we can do better on our end. Yeah.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([10:54](#)):

I it's such, like I said, it's something I think probably most of our listeners and most members of the public don't even realize that we do, but it's such an important piece of our safety program that helps improve the ability for all of us to collectively to respond to emergencies in our community. Yeah.

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([11:09](#)):

And it, it also has a ripple effect too, because a lot of our departments for fire departments around here they're volunteer. Mm-hmm <affirmative> so they have other jobs. So they may take what they learn from that demonstration or that training and take it to their job or to their family. So that's the intent there too, is we want that ripple effect and, and continue to pass a word on things that can keep people safe in, in emergencies situations, or even just general day to day things like working on your house.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([11:33](#)):

Yeah. And speaking of ripple effects, we've started to get requests to do these kinds of trainings for other entities that maybe we had hadn't historically thought of, uh, like fire departments come to top of mind, but we just did one for a landscaping company. I know we've done one for Elmer's in the past. Mm-hmm <affirmative>, as we have more and more infrastructure underground, the people who might interface with it on a regular basis, right. Are, are changing. So tell us a, tell us a little bit about, about that.

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([12:00](#)):

So once again, we try to tailor our content towards what they're gonna use. We, you know, we try to keep it around an hour. So I don't want to talk about house fires and carpool accidents to a landscaping company. So what we do is we take a look at what are you guys doing on a day to basis? Well, obviously they are doing a lot of underground digging, uh, installing things around, um, ener uh, energized equipment, like our transformers and poles. So we go into the weed, um, what they're seeing and how to handle. Now, you have a normal situation where you go on a job and everything looks fine. And then you back a vehicle into one of our poles and you see something break, what do you do now? There's two different situations. And, and we try to train them and work 'em through that, what to do.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([12:42](#)):

And I, and I feel like I, we would be remiss if we didn't stop here and point out if you are ever doing anything involving landscaping or digging in the ground, you should call mystic absolutely eight one for mystics. And basically what they'll do is they'll let anyone who has infrastructure in your area know, and they'll all come out and flag it so that then you can safely dig or the contractor you've hired can safely dig. And again, that would be something we're making sure landscapers even know about that. So if they show up on a site where they know they're gonna be doing work underground, and it hasn't, no one has done that yet, they know they can say, we can't safely do this work yet. We need to go ahead and call in a, a mystic. So, excellent. Uh, so we, like I said, audience is, uh, first responders, community groups that we think could really, um, come into contact with our system and then the other audience we love to get in front of. And they're awesome. And so fun is kids. So can you talk a little bit about the programs that we do in schools?

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([13:32](#)):

Yeah. The, the sky is the limit with, with working with kids. You know, we've worked anywhere from preschool age, all the way up to seniors in high school and, and people that are attend or kids that are attending CTC. And once again, we'll tailor our content and our presentation towards, you know, what, uh, what the audience needs and what they're, you know, what they're gonna hear and, and try to give them a couple of takeaways. So we've attended career days, mm-hmm, <affirmative>, uh, in Kingsley and here in traverse city. And sometimes it's more about what's it like to work at cherry land, but we also try to all, you know, kind of layer in some safety into anything that we do, because if they're not gonna come and be a lineman, at least a takeaway, they're gonna go home with some sort of safety component component, uh, from that conversation or that presentation. But yeah, you know, we've, we've talked to, you know, from, from preschool all the way up and there's, I can't think of a, a phone call that we've said, no, we won't come and, and, and give you a presentation. And it is always seems to be, uh, fairly well received and we get good feedback based on, you know, how we're delivering that information.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([14:36](#)):

And when you do the school programs, you, you have kinda like a tabletop little electric system. Sorry. You can probably describe it better than I can, but a, a demonstration system that you use for

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([14:46](#)):

Those. Yes. Yep. We have a, what we call a tabletop demonstration and it has kind of a, a small scale with a house and power lines and a substation. And we can actually even energize that and we can make some arcs and sparks with some scenarios on, on, on what, you know, what we're trying to talk about. That's always a good, uh, good show and tell, and then we'll bring Lyman in, you know, we'll bring a couple of linemen in and we'll show 'em the gear that they wear. And we'll talk about the training and talk about all the, the safety things that they have to go through to do their job. And we'll always kind of layer some, some safety.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([15:20](#)):

So all, all kinds of co-op careers and safety. And after the, um, safety demos with the schools, it's always really fun cuz the kids always send us these, thank you. Notes are so hilarious. I still have one in my office from the first kids demo I ever went on like a decade ago for those who are keeping track at home. But anyway, it's they like drew a picture of that tabletop with the, like the little people that are, that are in it being electrocuted <laugh> and basically were like, thank you for coming to our school and electrocuting little people. And I was like, okay, I don't know that you actually got the right takeaway, but kids absolutely love it, cuz it is so interactive and you're right. We have the ability to bring in lots of different pieces, careers, safety, and also science, how electricity works, how the system is built, how electricity moves through the system.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([16:03](#)):

So it's just a really, really good module and, and kudos to you and your team for all that you've done to develop it. So if anybody is interested in those trainings, there's information on our website, the primary contact for that is Megan Gerard, but just go to our website and you will find, uh, op options to have us come in and do a safety training for you. So we've talked about the types of training we do. I wanna kind of shift now to talk about for our audience, like what are kind of the top things you want them to know about staying safe around power lines. If we were sitting at our annual meeting now multi-generational audience of the public, what would be the top couple things you would wanna talk to them about in terms of being safe?

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([16:41](#)):

Two takeaways that I would like for our listeners to know, you know, when things are normal, you are, let's just give you an example here. You're gonna get on your roof. Okay. And you're gonna go up there and you're gonna do some gutter. Cleaning. OSHA says stay 10 feet away from all power lines. Okay. Overhead power lines. So when you're climbing that ladder, are you 10 feet away? If you have a tool in your hand, it means the tool is 10 feet away. Not just your arm from whatever is in your hand, extended out. That's very important because you know those electrical lines, um, we, that 10 foot rule has been made for a reason. And that's because somebody got hurt. Mm-hmm <affirmative> they were within 10 feet. So that's take away. Number one, stay 10 feet away from those when you're on your roof. The second one be when things are not normal. When storms hit, when things are broke, a broken pull, a wire down 25 feet away, stay 25 feet away. That's two car length, approximately let that be the closest. And we could get into the weeds on step potential and touch potential, which I'm not gonna do. But

those are the two major things. When things are normal, overhead, stay 10 feet away. And when things are not normal, stay 25 feet away.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([17:53](#)):

So two pieces I've seen on both those that I think are worth unpacking. The, when things are normal scenario and stay 10 feet away, I'm amazed at the number of people who assume the entire system is insulated. And I get that all the time when, when I'm out well, but it's fine because those are insulated, right? And I'm like, mm, no, no, not, not really. Right. So absolutely. I, I think that is a, is a really important thing for people to understand you, you, you do not make assumptions about the insulation on whether or not the part of the system you are on is insulated is that's

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([18:22](#)):

A better way of saying that. Correct? And to that point, nothing, we treat there is nothing insulated mm-hmm <affirmative> for our line to actually go and work on that. They have to do a series of steps to go and de-energize and test in ground. And they still wear their protective equipment when they're handling that. So there's no scenario or what I'd ever tell somebody. Yeah. You can go ahead and touch that it's insulated. That's not true. And, and that is definitely a myth.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([18:48](#)):

There you go. And we busted it right here on co-op energy talk, let it be noted. Uh, so the other interesting thing, I, and I have actually seen, seen this and had to have conversations with members about it. You talk about the storm scenario and the 25 feet away. Generally people get that right? When the storm hits, where we start to see people making unsafe choices is when it's a storm where it's taking us a while to get to them. Mm-hmm <affirmative> people start to eventually assume, well, that's not electrified. So now I can drive over it. Now I can walk. I mean, I, I, I was literally on a storm. I was out on the east side of traverse city and there were people standing on top of an electric line. Now it had been down for a day and I said, don't do that. And they said, but it's down. So can you talk through why we tell people, even if it was not electrified, even if they have reason to believe it's not electrified right now, why do we still tell them to stay 25 feet away?

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([19:36](#)):

Correct. So here's where the, the problem with that whole, um, assumption when an electric line falls down, if our system is operating properly, there's protective devices that will operate open up and de-energize that line. So if somebody was to step on that, it would be dead and it would not be energized in theory and design. That's how it should operate. But here's where that theory falls apart. Generators mm-hmm <affirmative> everybody today has a generator. And if that generator is just plugged into an outlet and it has not been fed or wired in properly through a transfer switch, what that can do is the, the power that that generator is making goes into the house. And it goes through the transformer and transformers work both ways. They reduce the voltage. But when they, when you have a small generator feeding a transformer, it steps it up. Mm-hmm <affirmative> and now you have 7,000 volts because on that line that you're standing on, because somebody just turned that on. Yeah. So it's called backfeed it's um, it's a very, very big concern with our linemen. Mm-hmm <affirmative> once again, we'll de-energize and ground, but we still wear protective equipment when we were handling down lines. So that, yeah, definitely that needs, it's not normal stay 25 feet away and keep it simple.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([20:54](#)):

Yep. Yeah. And it, and it's, and like I said, it's just something I've we see it so consistently. And I understand people's brains are telling them, well, this thing that it's not getting electricity from the power company, I know that now. But to your point, we don't have control over what everyone is doing in their homes. So perhaps the next time one of our listeners is in that scenario, they should, they should decide how much they trust their neighbors. <laugh> correct. And their neighbor's electricians

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([21:15](#)):

<laugh>, you know, and just to add on to that one, one more, one more thing, communication line. So your cable, your coax cable, that could be in a storm scenario that could be down the power lines look fine, but around the corner, a mile down the road, that same communication cable could be wrapped around an energized power line. Mm-hmm <affirmative> you just don't know. So treat every line. Don't try to distinguish between cable and cherry lands lines and charters lines. Don't just stay away from my midst. It's not normal. Stay 25 feet awake, call somebody, you know, call us and we'll get to, if it's charter, we'll, we'll call charter for you. We just need to make sure that somebody gets there and makes that safe.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([21:54](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. Because again, the number one goal for us, we, we recognize the dangers that come with working and, and existing around electricity. And we just wanna make sure that everyone, our employees are members. Our fellow first responders are equipped to make smart choices, cuz one, one wrong choice in one moment can change a, a life for a family forever. And, and we wanna make sure that that people are thinking about that when it comes to interacting with our

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([22:20](#)):

System. Yeah. That's very well said, you know, just electricity doesn't you can't see it here at smell. It we've heard that is media plugs out there. So that's true. And keep that, you know, you don't, you don't get a second chance when making a bad decision. So

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([22:33](#)):

Make smart choices in, uh, and I'll just reiterate this as we kind of are, are wrapping up here, but we are, this is our priority. So if there is something that you are seeing on our system, or if you are in any doubt at all, give us a call and we will get someone over there to your home or business who has the expertise to make it safe and to help, um, help work through whatever that hazard is. Is there anything else that you wanna leave our listeners with today?

Jeff Puffer, Safety Director ([22:57](#)):

Um, just, just to kind of reiterate what you said. We love getting out in the community. We love speaking with, with anybody that wants to listen, quite honestly, <laugh> and at a higher level, we have so many smart people, you know, I'm not just talking in the state in the country that that are, are the best at their job. So whatever it is, when it comes to your service from cherry land, give us a call. We can get an answer for that. If it's safety, if it's designed, if it's engineering, we can, and we're a phone call. We're not, we don't, it don't take you two hours to get a of somebody. We, we are very good and we pride ourselves on getting back to everybody and, and getting those answers. And once again, give us a call if he wants us to come out and do a safety demo. Yeah.

Rachel Johnson, Member Relations Manager ([23:39](#)):



That's and that's a perfect takeaway. And I'll just reiterate, when you said earlier, we have 57 employees, every single one of them lives in this community. We're your friends and neighbors, and we just wanna take care of our community and keep it safe. So thank you so much, Jeff, for taking the time to sit down with us today and talk through not just our safety program, but also how we can use it to benefit the community. Well, thanks

Speaker 3 ([23:57](#)):

For.