

Corporate Peer Discussions Utilities & Energy Industries Response During COVID-19 **Summary of Best Practices on Corporate Response**

Virtual convenings held on April 6 (Utilities) and April 20 (Energy), 2020

Convening Organizations: ACCP, CECP, COF, and POL

Association of Corporate Citizenship Professionals (ACCP), Council on Foundations (COF), Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose (CECP), and Points of Light (POL), which collectively represent more than 400 of the most socially and environmentally responsible global companies, are joining forces to support leaders of corporate purpose and to advocate for the field by convening dialogue on relevant solutions and to share best practices. While some companies are still assessing their response, we have already seen hundreds of corporations respond to the COVID-19 crisis with courage and determination. Their leadership sets an example for the sector to follow. In the sessions on the Utilities and Energy Industry Response During COVID-19, 19 member companies participated.

Key Themes and Best Practices

The Utility and Energy industries sit at an important position at all times, but especially now during mass quarantine and social distancing efforts. They provide essential services for all residences and have some segment of workers who need to service their territories and therefore cannot work from home. The key themes and best practices that follow provide a snapshot of the efforts to serve their employees, customers, and the community.

Protecting Workers & Serving Customers:

- Utility and energy companies are ensuring workers in the field are safe and have necessary PPE.
- Some companies are providing customer assistance programs, waiving penalty fees and suspending disconnection for those experiencing financial hardship due to COVID-19.
- Realizing that employees have additional family demands at this time, some companies are providing additional time for dependent care.

Virtual Volunteerism:

- April is National Volunteer Month, and a time of year when many companies ramp up their service events. Employees have a passion to respond to the crisis by using their innovation and passion for good; some are asking for virtual opportunities and others are self-mobilizing, such as using 3D printers to make masks. The mental and emotional benefits of volunteerism are powerful in this time of social distancing.
- It is also Earth Day, which lends itself to big hands-on volunteer events which are now canceled. Providing kid-friendly projects are especially popular with so many families with children home from school.
- Virtual volunteerism can provide safe opportunities to volunteer in areas such as capacity building, financial capability work, thanking donors, fundraising, digital transformation, tech infrastructure, mobile resources, visiting with elderly virtually, etc. IT workers can help nonprofits and educators adjust to virtual learning.
- Many companies are providing employees with lists of curated virtual volunteer opportunities, drawing from resources such as Points of Light's list of [resources for virtual volunteer opportunities](#).
- While virtual volunteerism isn't new, it is a dynamic area that is developing rapidly. Local volunteer opportunities have been well-received as a meaningful opportunity to make an impact. To that end, corporate volunteer teams across regions are sharing knowledge and best practices with each other.

- Many employees, working from home and seeing immediate needs in their community, have a desire to help neighbors, family, or their local community; in response, some companies are removing the 501c3 requirement for service time so that employees could use their Volunteer Time Off (VTO) time flexibly.

Grantmaking for Immediate Relief

- In line with the [Council on Foundations Pledge](#) signed by many funders in light of COVID-19, many companies are reaching out to current grantees to shift funds to direct operating support and accelerating funding. If companies agreed to sponsor an event, they are maintaining that commitment.
- Most Utility and Energy companies are focusing on supporting partners in their geographic areas.
- They are accelerating funds to groups with urgent needs, such as those working in food security or homelessness or worker displacement, but many are also relaxing the requirements on grant funding for partners in secondary areas like the arts and culture, whose programming has been disrupted.
- One company is working with Meals on Wheels to ensure the most vulnerable populations are reached.
- Another company is supporting the United Way to scale up operations to manage the volume of calls to the local 211 emergency line which connects people with a network of partners across the state.
- Many companies are encouraging employees to donate to nonprofits and increasing the corporate match to nonprofits addressing the COVID-19 pandemic (matches are increasing, in some cases to 3:1).
- For those companies that have extra N95 masks or other PPE, they are seeking to donate to hospitals; others are contributing to funds to groups like Project Hope supporting health workers on the front lines.
- One provider with facilities located in Navajo Nation, which has been ravaged by the crisis, has committed masks, sanitizer, and grants specifically to that area which has specific needs.

Employee Assistance Funds (EAFs):

While companies are first looking to help employees by connecting them to relief through government programs and measures available through the core business, EAFs are being activated for COVID-19. EAFs allow a company to make a grant to individual employees in order to alleviate personal hardship. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, some companies are:

- **Expanding eligibility and accessibility** of EAFs by waiving requirements for employment for more than 1 year. Companies are also providing flexibility by waiving documentation requirements for grants of \$500 or \$1,000 and by creating a weblink rather than intranet application, for example.
- **Increasing available funds:** with more demand for assistance, companies are seeking to add funds by making corporate donations into the fund. While being sensitive of asking too much of employees at this time, some companies are running a donation drive for employee contributions into the fund and matching those funds (or increasing the match). Some companies also allow for donation of unused Paid Time Off (PTO) into the fund, valued at the day rate of that employee's salary.
- **Relief Grant Amounts:** The most common cap cited was \$1,500 per employee for the COVID-19 program. Within that, there may be varying tiers of support due to an employee's situation. This amount is likely based off of the federal relief checks of \$1,200 person and is lower than employee relief caps most commonly cited on the calls for natural disasters, which typically max out at \$5,000.
- **In-House or External:** Companies can either manage the Employee Relief Funds internally or use an outside vendor. While there are many vendors, the most commonly cited vendors on the peer-to-peer calls were [E4E Relief](#) and [Emergency Assistance Foundation](#). The primary reason why companies decide to outsource the management of these funds is to rely on the expertise in the complexity of the funds and minimize the administrative burden on staff. Using a third party also eliminates the risk for self-dealing for corporate foundations. For those companies that manage the funds in-house, it can be a full-time job for a team of 3-4 people to process requests, in partnership with HR.

Company Press Releases

- [CenterPoint Energy Foundation announces \\$1.5 million COVID-19 Relief Fund](#). The fund will include \$1 million in direct contributions, as well as up to \$500,000 in matching gifts for employees' contributions to qualifying 501(c)3 organizations. See more at:
- [Exelon, ComEd Donate \\$2 Million to Illinois COVID-19 Response Fund](#). This donation adds to the more than \$1.15 million Exelon Corp. and its family of companies previously donated to national and local relief organizations in the communities they serve. Previous donations include \$250,000 to the United Way of Metro Chicago and the Chicago Community Trust's COVID-19 Response Fund to support their efforts to provide essential services during the pandemic. See more at:
- [NRG Energy, Inc. Pledges \\$2 Million to COVID-19 Relief Efforts; Support Directed to First Responders, Community Relief Funds, and Teachers](#).

Educational Resources

- Several companies have online educational resources by grade level focused on STEM Education. These STEM-based energy lessons are aligned with state educational standards and can be used by educators.

Longer-Term Support

- Companies are considering the next phase of support and putting together a strategy for ongoing requests when communities are recovering and rebuilding from the impacts of COVID-19.
- Some companies have decided not to review new requests until markets begin to stabilize or are on hold until the end of May.
- Some companies have received permission from their Foundation Board to utilize funds from their Endowment, which they rarely do but believe that these are extraordinary times.
- Companies are looking to the summer internships and preparing for the possibility of needing to provide virtual opportunities.
- With some forecasting reduced revenue, companies are considering what reductions in funding may need to look like for 2020 and 2021.

COVID-19 Resources from each partnering organization:

- ACCP: [COVID-19 Resources for Corporate Citizenship Professionals](#)
- CECP: COVID-19 Resources [Recap for CEOs](#) and [Recap for CR Leaders](#)
- COF: [COVID-19 Resource Hub](#)
- POL: [COVID-19 Action Plan](#)