



BRIEF

Utility industry groups push for first responder status for workers amid COVID-19 crisis

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Dive Brief:

- The electric utility industry wants its workers to be designated as "first responders" during the novel coronavirus pandemic, according to the heads of the American Public Power Association (APPA), the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) and the industry group for investor owned utilities, Edison Electric Institute (EEI).
- During a Wednesday webinar hosted by the Energy Bar Association, the leaders of the three groups discussed the need for better access to personal protection equipment (PPE), cleaning materials and tests for the novel coronavirus. The nationwide shortage of PPE and tests "certainly puts more risk on our system than we'd like to bear," APPA CEO Joy Ditto said.
- Thomas Kuhn, EEI's CEO, also told the webinar that he wrote Jerome Powell, head of the Federal Reserve, to ask the central bank to purchase short-term debt from Tier 2 companies, which covers most utilities, not just the top tier companies. "This tool will keep our debt down, and our rates low," he said.

Dive Insight:

The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Safety Agency designated

several kinds of utility workers as essential in March, but achieving a status similar to that of healthcare workers would allow them more access to protective and sanitizing equipment.

The groups are working with the Electricity Subsector Coordinating Council to address supply chain issues for PPE, testing and cleaning materials.

As storms and other natural disasters threaten reliability and cause breaks in the system, the groups have all been using mutual assistance programs, deploying utility workers to where they are needed most to restore power. However, those workers need access to testing and protective equipment, being exposed to more risk by traveling, according to the Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA).

"Under a mutual aid situation, utility workers should continue following the same safety guidelines and protections as they would otherwise during the pandemic," while taking into account any potential environment changes of going between a big city and a more rural area, James Slevin, UWUA president, told Utility Dive. "We are aware of crews working under mutual aid in the Northeast but they're contractors in the area. We haven't heard of any out of town crews at this point."

According to UWUA, utility sector workers also need the first responder status to do their jobs in the event that stricter travel limits and roadway restrictions go into effect, to continue efforts under mutual assistance programs.

The sector is "forced to be innovative" about personal protective equipment, Ditto said.

The time it takes to sanitize between rotating crews is also an issue, according to NRECA CEO James Matheson. He wants access to machines that can speed up cleaning of a control room to 20 to 30

minutes, helping sanitize areas quickly between rotating crews.

Kuhn said EEI's partners at DOE helped the industry group get the assistant secretary of Health and Human Services on a call last week, to explain how critical electric service was to hospitals. According to Kuhn, HHS agreed the sector needs PPEs and testing, particularly in control rooms.

But the shortage of PPE and coronavirus tests has "began to break and it's been terrific," Kuhn said. The work is needed as more field crews get back out to prepare for the oncoming summertime demand peaks and maintaining the system.

The three association leaders also highlighted some of the financial challenges for the sector and how they're addressing them.

Ditto also mentioned ongoing discussions with partners at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the North American Electric Reliability Corporation and the Environmental Protection Agency, "giving us the breathing room to deal with this crisis." APPA and others have seen deadlines pushed back on the state and regulatory level to allow for the utilities to prioritize their COVID-19 response.

One way to respond to the crisis has been to suspend power shutoffs for customers, which many states, municipalities and utilities have done. However, utilities have also seen lower funds coming in from their monthly customer billing, and smaller utilities operating on tight budgets are threatened by this, Matheson wrote congressional leaders last week.

EEI, along with industry groups for water and gas utilities, has asked the Federal Reserve to expand the types of companies that qualify for short-term loans under the "Commercial Paper Funding Facility," which would help large companies to meet payroll needs and pay for other aspects of their operations while customer billing

is inconsistent.

EEI has also reached out to the New York Fed and the Philadelphia Fed, with the support of labor unions, Kuhn said.