

# Learning to Serve

By Gary Wollenhaupt

**W**hen it was time to re-organize the utility's customer service department for the city of Georgetown, Texas, Kathy Ragsdale drew on her years of experience and the strategies she learned in the American Public Power Association's Customer Service Management certificate program.

Ragsdale, who has since transitioned to head the utility's conservation program, knew changes needed to be made in the customer service department, which she managed at the time. She applied what she learned in the certificate program to help her support the case for investments in advanced metering infrastructure, a new billing system and reorganizing the meter readers into the customer service department.

As part of the course requirements, Ragsdale completed a business plan that outlined the utility's strategy for improving its customer service offerings.

"The plan did help us justify it within the department and to the staff," Ragsdale said.

The APPA Academy's Customer Service Management Certificate Program was launched in 2006 to help train customer service representatives, managers and supervisors in the major aspects of customer service that relate to public power utilities. About 60 people have attended the program and 10 have completed all requirements for certification.

The goal of the program is to help public power utilities deliver a high level of customer service, according to Ursula Schryver, APPA vice president, education and customer programs.

"The program is designed to educate customer-service professionals to ensure they have a foundation in providing quality service and also managing a customer service department at a public power utility," she said.

The week-long program features classes that provide an overview of the utility industry, customer-service operations, management and leadership techniques, customer-service technology, and credit and

collections.

"Most of the people in the class knew a lot of this already, but it helped put a name on what you did and a structure to it," Ragsdale said. "We went over the different management styles and focuses within the department and the pros and cons of each of those."

The initial overview class is important to give everyone in the class a frame of reference for how customer service functions fit in with the overall operation of the utility.

"All of these people are not necessarily new to the job but it's a way to make sure they understand everything they need to know to provide customer service at a public power utility," Schryver said.

Wallace Barron, an experienced utility veteran and industry consultant, usually leads the program. The sessions are highly interactive, with classmates sharing questions and solutions for common customer-service issues.

"When we talk about an issue, they will hear about what's going in different areas of the country from other utilities," Barron said. "That's powerful as we get a dialogue going on in the classroom."

The attendees find value in learning from their peers facing similar challenges.

"The give-and-take of energetic classroom discussion was immensely helpful in developing new ideas to improve customer service operations at my utility," said Jackie Pratt, marketing and customer care manager for Shrewsbury Electric and Cable Operations in Massachusetts.

Pratt attended the program because her utility was planning to merge the marketing and customer service departments. She wanted to prepare for adding customer service functions to her existing responsibilities managing the marketing department.

"It was important for me to begin my new role as marketing and customer care manager with the fundamental customer service management business know-how that only APPA's program could provide," Pratt said

To receive certification, attendees must complete the class, pass an online exam and submit a service department assessment or business plan within two years of attending the first course. To maintain the certification, participants then must complete 20 hours of continuing education every two years through APPA courses or other resources.

Completing the business plan may seem like a daunting task, but it can be a very useful exercise. There's a format to follow and a guide to writing a useful plan.

"If you walk through the steps just like they taught in the book, it works out well, although you do have to put a lot of thought into it," Ragsdale said.

Those who've attended the course find it valuable for them and their utility.

"I really think we improved the level of customer service," Ragsdale said.

Pratt found it so valuable that she has recommended it to other people at her utility.

"I was so satisfied with the program that I recently sent my customer service supervisor to the course," she said. ■

Information on the Customer Service Manager Certificate Program is available at [www.APPAAcademy.org](http://www.APPAAcademy.org) or by contacting Ursula Schryver at [uschryver@publicpower.org](mailto:uschryver@publicpower.org)