

NAVAJO TIMES

DINÉ BI NAALTSOOS

THURSDAY
January 30, 2019

Changing lives year after year with electricity

BY DEENISE BECENTI

FORT DEFIANCE - The lives of a Navajo family will change by simply turning on a light switch in their home for the very first time.

This means the family now has electricity and the ability to turn on lights, plug in a refrigerator, install a furnace, or charge cellular phones.

It also means the family could potentially get water services because electricity is required to pump the water to their home.

Navajo Tribal Utility Authority knows this and that's why it's a company priority to do what's possible to make a positive change in the lives of Navajo families. It's all about the big picture and raising the standard of life.

"Navajo elders (former leaders) created NTUA because they knew their own utility would be dedicated to taking care of the people," said NTUA General Manager Walter Haase. "Each year we work to honor that principle."

2018 was no different. The priority remained the same as NTUA electric construction crews throughout the service territory connected 335 families to the electric grid. This was 74 homes fewer than in 2017 when 409 were added to the electric grid.

"Our goal is to get electricity to Navajo homes while keeping our electric rates affordable for our customers," Haase said. "Each year we do what we can with available funding."

Since 2008, NTUA has connected 5,213 homes. On average, that's about 521 homes per year. Some years had as many as 782 while others had only 256. Funding determines how many power lines NTUA crews will build to electrify homes.

Each project carries with it a

funding formula - which may include funds from chapters, the Navajo Nation, community development block grants and state or federal agencies. NTUA also contributes \$1.500 to connect each home.

From 2008-2018, the non-profit tribal enterprise has put \$7,819,500 of its own funds to connect more than 5,000 homes.

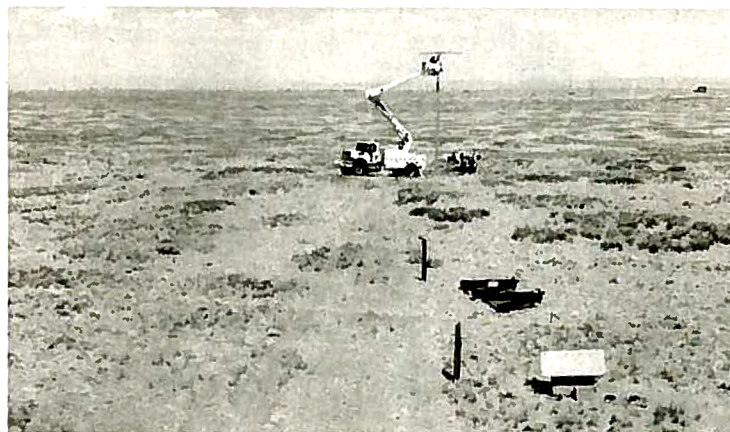
When Haase became NTUA general manager in 2008, he was advised there were 18,000 families without electricity based on tribal economic data. For Haase that was a starting point.

"It was hard to believe that there were so many families that did not have basic electric services," Haase said. "I knew we had to fix that and reduce the number of homes one by one, year by year."

Today, there are about 15,000 Navajo homes without access to electricity. The number reduces slowly because once electricity reaches the traditional homestead - younger members of the family either move home or decide to have a home of their own.

"In my years here I've come to understand and respect the deep ties to the land because family roots represent generations upon generations," Haase said. "When we connect homes, the elders are deeply grateful because their homesteads are where the younger members of the family are returning to raise their children."

It is almost the end of the January, one month into 2019. Already NTUA crews are preparing to start this year's construction projects throughout the service territory. This includes areas near Mexican



NAVAJO TRIBAL UTILITY AUTHORITY | COURTESY PHOTO

A Navajo Tribal Utility Authority electric line crew prepares to build a power line to an isolated homestead.

Water, Oak Springs, and Chinle.

While electric crew members begin to clear a path for a powerline, they know there's the goal at the end of each proposed project - a home where a family has been waiting patiently for electric service.

The crew also knows there are hundreds upon hundreds still waiting. Therefore, the work must continue.

Deenise Becenti is the government and public affairs manager for the NTUA where she's been working for 17 years.