IT'S PERSONAL
Corporate citizenship takes on even greater meaning when employees play an active role in giving back to their communities. Atmos Energy, AGL Resources and Southwest Gas are just three examples of how employees at natural gas utilities are making a vital difference. **BY CAROLYN KIMMEL**
From providing meals to shut-ins and supporting military veterans to helping adults learn to read or earn a GED, natural gas utilities across the nation make philanthropic giving—of their money, their time and their compassion—a top priority.

“Giving back to the communities they serve is a critical part of what natural gas utilities do. They are true partners in the communities they serve and have long histories contributing time and resources to those in need,” said Dave McCurdy, president and CEO of the American Gas Association.

For many natural gas utilities, investing back into the community is instinctive because they consider themselves part of the community, not only because of the services they provide but also because many of their employees live in the communities where they work.

And for employees of natural gas utilities, giving back to their local communities isn’t just good business—it’s personal, and their hands-on work is helping transform their communities in ways big and small.

ATMOS ENERGY

The Power of Reading and Education
Since coming to America from Mexico in 2012, Abigail Ponce was determined to teach her children to never give up—a lesson she wanted to reinforce by modeling it herself.

The 30-year-old wife and mother of two children, ages 7 and 2, couldn’t speak English, so she jumped at the chance to attend Spanish GED classes at the Atmos Energy Literacy Center in Dallas with the help of an Atmos Energy Corp. scholarship.

“I wanted to set the example that no matter how difficult it would get for me at times and [even] when I wanted to quit, I didn’t. I want my children to grow up with the ‘I can do it’ attitude,” said Ponce, who tested at the Atmos Energy GED Testing Center and earned her general equivalency degree last May. Now she is enrolled at North Lake College in Irving, Texas, where she is working toward a social work degree.

“One hardship that prevented me from doing this before now was not speaking any English and being new to America. I received a GED scholarship, and I feel that it is a great opportunity to have been able to receive free classes to help me in moving forward. Having the test for free is very important and motivated me to continue to study and has helped me advance in continuing my education,” Ponce said. “I’ve been given the same opportunities as those who are born in the United States, to study and work in America.”

Rooted firmly in the belief that education enriches the quality of life in any community, Atmos Energy has invested sizable amounts of time, money and expertise into literacy programs that are educating and empowering residents to reach their fullest potential. In the Dallas-Fort Worth area, where Atmos Energy is headquartered, the utility partners with Texas A&M University-Commerce to operate the Atmos Energy Literacy Center at the Dallas West Branch Library and the Atmos Energy GED Testing Center in the downtown Dallas Public Library.

Employees get the opportunity to contribute, too: Atmos Energy employees are involved in volunteer efforts throughout the year both at the literacy and testing centers. “It’s been a dream to be able to connect with our customers one on one at the Literacy Center, so they can see Atmos Energy not only as their natural gas provider but as their friend as they acclimate to the United States,” said Celina Cardenas, manager, public affairs for the Mid-Tex Division of Atmos Energy. She handles Hispanic outreach for the division and teaches natural gas safety in the English as a second language classes. “I’m known as ‘the natural gas lady’ at the library. They know I’m at their disposal.”

Cardenas even tries to attend each ESL and GED graduation because she shares “an incredible sense of pride” with the graduates, she said. Their journey reminds her of her own family’s lineage—her grandparents came to the United States from Mexico and had to learn English and assimilate into a new culture—so she knows the determination it takes to succeed.

Since the literacy center opened in January 2013, about 1,000 adult learners and their children have enrolled in English as a second language, GED and citizenship classes.
classes. With an initial contribution of $50,000 and annual contributions since then, the company also donated computers and partnered with the university to bring in teachers for the program.

Meanwhile the Atmos Energy GED Testing Center operates approximately 30 hours a week, including nights and weekends. Since its startup funding of $75,000 for the testing center, Atmos Energy has donated another $100,000 in scholarships and enabled 46 GED graduates and 811 test takers since November 2014. Of those, 80 percent improved their English or increased one or more ESL levels based on post-test results.

“The results have been fantastic,” said Matt Robbins, vice president of human resources at Atmos Energy. “That’s the whole reason we do this. It empowers the community and provides people the education they need to achieve whatever they want to achieve.”

The literacy effort also helps Atmos Energy reinforce its natural gas safety messages as adult learners practice their reading skills using brochures that review natural gas safety. “In level one classes, I use natural gas vocabulary as a way to teach them English,” Cardenas said. “The upper level classes are a lot more conversational. I’ll bring in operations team members who will give live examples of how to maintain appliances or what natural gas smells like.”

Children also receive coloring pages that reinforce the safety message. Especially in families where parents don’t speak English, it’s often the children who act as the conduit to deliver the safety message, Robbins said.

Atmos Energy also provides education on the road—literally—through a motor coach that serves as a mobile classroom to teach English as a second language and offer energy assistance to those in need, said Dan Alderson, director of energy assistance for Atmos Energy. Catholic Charities Fort Worth operates the bus in 28 counties, he said.

Meanwhile, at Atmos Energy itself, the company also provides educational assistance to encourage and aid its own employees in job-related formal education that could enhance their effectiveness in their present positions or prepare them for greater responsibilities in the future.

Through the Robert W. Best Education Assistance Program, the company’s tuition reimbursement program, about $1.4 million in reimbursements have been granted to employees in the last five years. The program is named for Bob Best, Atmos Energy’s chairman of the board and former CEO, who enabled hundreds of employees to further their education and advance their careers.

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AGL RESOURCES

Making an Impact Every May
This past May, at Loaves & Fishes Community Services in Naperville, Illinois, Nicor Gas employees sorted pounds and pounds of food, stocked shelves and helped clients choose their food. In return? They received hugs and tears of gratitude.

“You can see the difference it makes in the lives of our employees and their children. Personally speaking, my wife Elaine and I started bringing our son Michael, who is now 22, when he was 5 or 6 years old because it was important to us to teach him that we need to give back and we wanted him to understand that not everyone is as lucky as we are,” said Tom Kallay, director of community relations and economic development at Nicor Gas.

The volunteer effort is part of AGL Resources Inc.’s annual companywide Volunteer Week. In 2011, when AGL Resources and Nicor Gas combined, both companies brought a shared value of generosity of spirit, something they knew they wanted to continue across their suddenly much larger footprint, said Melanie Platt, AGL Resources executive vice president and chief people officer. Today, the company’s culture of volunteerism is embraced by employees based across the company’s utility footprint in Illinois, Georgia, Tennessee, New Jersey, Maryland, Florida and Virginia. They roll up their sleeves, get involved and complete projects to make a difference in their communities.

“AGL Resources Volunteer Week celebrates our commitment to volunteerism and highlights our desire to build and sustain vibrant communities,” said Platt. Environmental stewardship, energy assistance, community enrichment and education are prime areas of focus.

All told, Nicor Gas employees performed 20 service projects in 15 northern Illinois communities during the annual event, with projects benefiting organizations such as Habitat for Humanity of McLean County, Salvation Army Food Pantry, Northern Illinois Food Bank, The Conservation Foundation, Lake Katherine Nature Center and Botanic Gardens, Rock River Valley Food Pantry, the Manor at Hearthstone and Kendall County Food Pantry.

In Georgia, Atlanta Gas Light Co. employees in Jesup, Macon, Marietta, northwest metro Atlanta, Valdosta, Vidalia and Waycross all performed outdoor
cleanups at their various office locations and job sites, while in Conyers and Atlanta, employees supported Meals on Wheels by delivering hot food to seniors. A team of about 25 volunteers partnered with Keep Marietta Beautiful, a parks and recreation department project, to help spruce up Wildwood Park, a local park that had fallen into disrepair. Employees repaired and, in some cases, rebuilt wooden bridges and built steps to common areas to make them more accessible.

“We were overwhelmed with how much we could accomplish in one day,” said Kenny Horton, director of regional operations, Northwest Metro Region, Atlanta Gas Light. “Our employees really take the opportunity to make a difference in the communities we serve, and it provides them the opportunity to use their leadership skills because they do all the planning. They make sure we have adequate tools and materials, and they coordinate the teamwork skills.”

During other May Volunteer Week activities, Chattanooga Gas and Elizabethtown Gas employees participated in March of Dimes and Relay for Life health walks; Florida City Gas employees delivered meals to seniors in Brevard County and served lunch to seniors at a local senior citizen center in Miami; and Virginia Natural Gas employees took time out of their day to read to students at a local elementary school.

An internal investment companywide by corporate communications, human resources, community relations and senior management helps make the May effort a success.

“Having an opportunity to volunteer side by side with your CEO or senior leader makes them accessible, and accessibility to your leaders makes employees take pride and ownership of their work,” Platt said. “Volunteer Week brings us together in a way that being involved in the day-to-day work just can’t. At AGL Resources, our philosophy is that you don’t work for somebody; you work with somebody. Nothing makes that more readily apparent than volunteering alongside each other.”

Each leader owns their initiative by sending emails about the upcoming events and driving employees to a volunteer website to sign up. These actions encourage employees to join in and support the causes they are passionate about.

Throughout Volunteer Week, the company also uses a variety of internal researched organizations in the D.C. area that would be a good fit, selecting the Armed Forces Retirement Home, the National Center for Children and Families and So Others Might Eat, or SOME.

“We had a positive response from employees. We had about 23 employees signed up for our off-site volunteer opportunities, and we looked forward to the donation opportunities in December,” McCurdy said.

At the Armed Forces Retirement Home, a premier retirement community for America’s military veterans, AGL employees donated clothing, toiletries, baseball caps, sweaters, gloves, hats, holiday decorations, music, videos and more to the residents.

AGA staff also made donations to the National Center for Children and Families, which serves poor, disadvantaged, abused, neglected and/or abandoned children and their families, and volunteered time at SOME, an interfaith community organization that provides food, clothing, health care, counseling and other services. —C.K.
communications vehicles to promote activities and motivate employees by sharing stories from the week’s events and operating an employee volunteer website focused on everything related to individual and corporate giving.

**SOUTHWEST GAS**

**Building Lives Up Everywhere**

Every year, Nicholas Miller and a team of about 15 co-workers sift through three dozen or more unique opportunities to help out in the communities served by Southwest Gas Corp. through *Blue—Building Lives Up Everywhere*, its employee volunteer group.

From these suggestions submitted by employees, the team selects four large events to focus on companywide and two smaller team-building events specific to *Blue* team members.

Southwest Gas’ culture of giving is a cornerstone for the company, which serves nearly two million customers throughout Nevada, Arizona and Southern California. Through *Blue*, employees in the company’s five divisions—northern Nevada, southern Nevada, central Arizona, southern Arizona, and Southern California—volunteer their time with a wide variety of local charitable causes.

Southwest Gas’ employees get excited about volunteering, as evidenced by the many suggestions they make to the *Blue* team, said Miller, who chairs the group. “It’s 100 percent voluntary as to whether you want to participate, but we’ve done events that lasted almost nine hours and had 50 to 60 employees show up. It’s just great to work hard for someone else and achieve a goal.”

Southwest Gas employees put in thousands of volunteer hours annually in ongoing philanthropic efforts that find them manning seasonal holiday events like the Magical Forest in Las Vegas; helping children pick out donated shoes through the Goodie Two Shoes Foundation, also in Las Vegas; or helping to renovate the homes of local senior citizens in need through a volunteer partnership with Rebuilding Together Southern Nevada, in which Southwesterners have participated for the past 21 years.

One of the volunteer events that inspires Miller the most is the American Legion Post 149 Rock the Troops Poker Run, a motorcycle-centered fundraiser, the proceeds of which go toward scholarships for deceased veterans’ children. Southwest Gas employees help with registration, food and other parts of the event.

“My dad was in the Air Force, and I serve in the Army Reserves,” Miller said. “Anytime you have the opportunity to give back to someone who is willing to sacrifice their life so we can continue to provide the opportunities we have in America, that’s something great to do.”

This year, one of the *Blue* team’s volunteer efforts hits even closer to home. Employees are raising money for and donating man hours to an organization that promotes car seat safety awareness. The initiative was named for one of its own employees.

The Car Seats for Christy Foundation was started by a couple of Southwest Gas employees after their co-worker, Christy Barnhart Hebert, was killed in a car accident in 2004, according to Miller. Both of her children, who were in car seats, survived.

“Christy is still very near and dear to people here at Southwest Gas,” Miller said.

The utility also gives back in many other ways. Fuel for Life, the annual employee giving campaign, drew more than $1.4 million in pledges to local charities in 2015. Through Energy Share, customers may donate to those less fortunate through their monthly bill. Southwest Gas also runs Renew, a weatherization and appliance replacement program for seniors in need, and embraces growing opportunities for local businesses with Supplier Diversity, a business program that creates opportunities for businesses owned by minorities, women, disabled veterans and LGBT entrepreneurs, and Fuel Good, Southwest Gas’ corporate giving arm.

Although the *Blue* team is just one component in the Southwest Gas Community Care suite of programs, it’s a special way for employees to make a real difference. “We live in the community; we don’t just work there. Our folks are driving everywhere, meeting people and seeing the needs,” said Miller, an analyst in the business technology support department who has served on the *Blue* team for more than nine years. “When we can help, the reactions are often not in words, but in what you see on people’s faces—sometimes tears, sometimes smiles because someone cared to help in tough situations.”

Southwest Gas has partnered with Rebuilding Together Southern Nevada for more than 21 years, helping to repair the homes of local seniors in need.

*Photo courtesy of Southwest Gas*