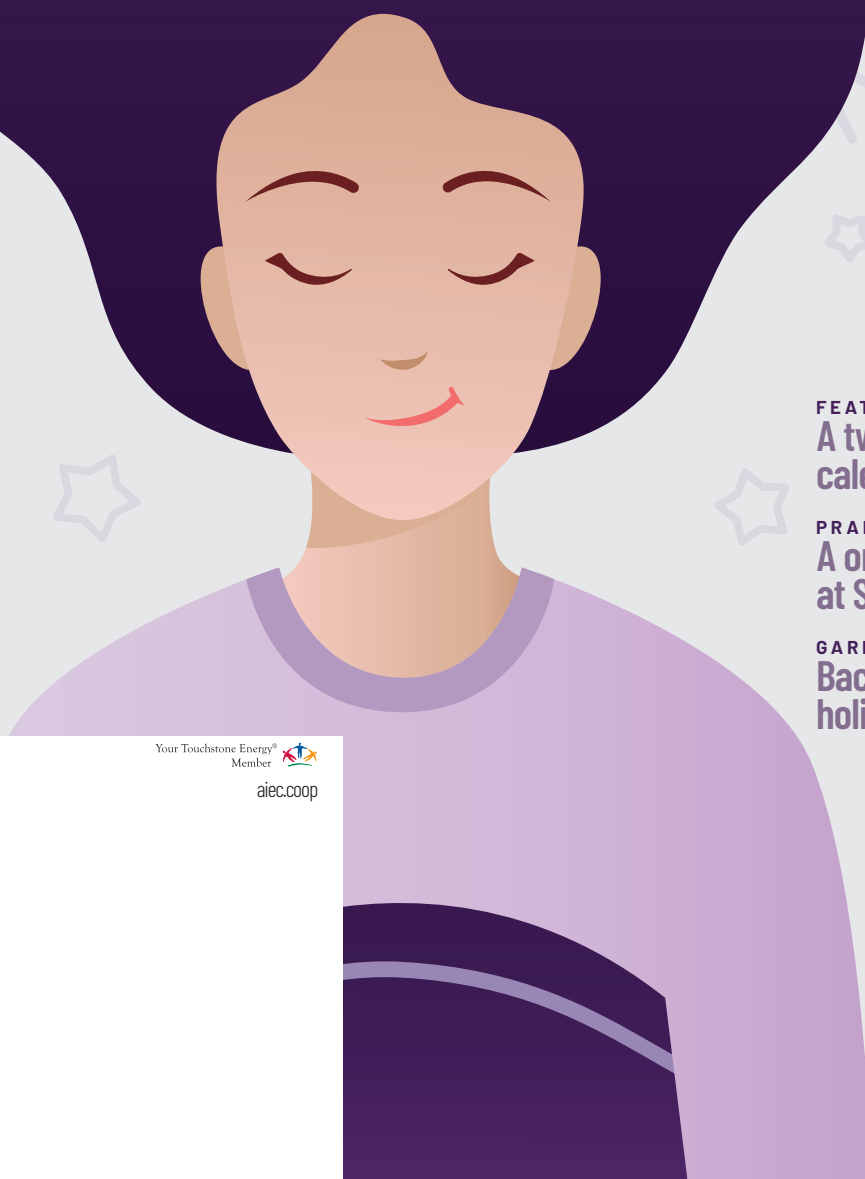


DECEMBER 2024

Illinois Country Living

SWEET DREAMS

Nonprofit provides beds to children in need



FEATURE

A twist on advent calendars

PRAIRIE TABLE

A one-woman show at Shorty's Kitchen

GARDENWISE

Back to our holiday roots

+
CO-OP
NEWS



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Eye Doctor Helps Illinois Legally Blind To See

High Technology For Low Vision Patients Allows Many To Drive Again



For many patients with macular degeneration and other vision-related conditions, the loss of central visual detail also signals the end to one of the last bastions of independence: driving. A Mascoutah optometrist, Dr. Marianne McDaniel, is using miniaturized telescopes that are mounted in glasses to help people who have lost vision from macular degeneration and other eye conditions.

"Some of my patients consider me the last stop for people who have vision loss," said Dr. McDaniel, one of only a few doctors in the world who specialize in fitting bioptic telescopes to help those who have lost vision due to macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, and other debilitating eye diseases.

Imagine a pair of glasses that can improve your vision enough to change your life. If you're a low vision patient, you've probably not only imagined them, but have been searching for

them. Bioptic telescopes may be the breakthrough in optical technology that will give you the independence you've been looking for. Patients with vision in the 20/200 range can many times be improved to 20/50 or better.

Macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness and vision loss in people over 50. Despite this, most adults are not familiar with the



A scene as it might be viewed by a person with age-related macular degeneration.

condition. As many as 25% of those over the age of 50 have some degree of macular degeneration. The macula is only one small part of the retina; however, it is the most sensitive and gives us sharp central vision. When it degenerates, macular degeneration leaves a blind spot right in the center of vision, making it difficult or impossible to recognize faces, read a book, or pass the driver's vision test.

Nine out of 10 people who have macular degeneration have the dry form. New research suggests vitamins can help. The British medical journal BMC Ophthalmology recently reported that 56% of patients treated with a high-dose combination of vitamins experienced improved vision after six months.

While age is the most significant risk factor for developing the disease, heredity, smoking, cardiovascular disease, and high blood pressure have also been identified as risk factors.

Macular degeneration accounts for 90% of new legal blindness in the U.S. While there is currently no cure, promising research is being done on many fronts. "My job is to figure out everything and anything possible to keep a person functioning, especially driving," says Dr. McDaniel.

"Bioptic telescopes can cost over \$2,000," said Dr. McDaniel, "especially if we build them with an automatic sunglass."

"The major benefit of the bioptic telescope is that the lens automatically focuses on whatever you're looking at," said Dr. McDaniel. "It's like a self-focusing camera, but much more precise."

To learn more about bioptic telescopes or to schedule a consultation, give Dr. McDaniel a call. You can also visit our websites.

www.mascoutaheyecare.com

1-618-566-8899

Office located in Mascoutah, Illinois
Marianne McDaniel, O.D.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE



Illinois Country Living

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VOLUME 82, NO. 8

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Illinois Country Living is a monthly publication serving the communications needs of the locally owned, not-for-profit electric cooperatives of Illinois. With a circulation of more than 192,000, the magazine informs cooperative consumer-members about issues affecting their electric cooperative and the quality of life in rural Illinois.

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Illinois Country Living (ISSN number 1086-8062) is published monthly by the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712. The cost is \$2.88 plus postage per year for members of subscribing cooperatives and \$12 per year for all others. Periodical postage paid at Springfield, Illinois, and additional mailing offices.

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Beat holiday stress

Tips for a calmer season

IT MAY BE THE most wonderful time of the year, but the holiday season carries a high degree of stress for many. December often includes added pressures that may affect well-being, relationships, finances and other factors that contribute to anything but a merry and bright time.

Although it sounds obvious, the best way to manage stressors is to remove or avoid them as much as possible, which is easier said than done. An overbooked holiday schedule is not the only thing that can cause discontent, however.

As daylight hours become shorter, the rates of depression increase. This is called seasonal affective disorder, or SAD for short. If you are diagnosed with SAD, follow your doctor's advice. Options include light therapy, counseling and medication. Other factors can also affect mental health during the holidays.

Unrealistic expectations

These anxiety-producing thoughts and feelings can either come from external sources or ruminate in our minds. Outside expectations from family members, children, bosses, friends and others can leave you feeling like you are not enough or that you are spread way too thin. Internal expectations can push you to do more than is healthy or reasonable.

By reframing your thoughts and reevaluating your expectations, you can make your holiday

season easier. Know your limits for work hours, budgets or patience with specific people or situations. Practice polite refusals that you can use with others who pile on the pressure. Also, recognize that it is okay to have negative thoughts and feelings. That's normal.

Financial difficulties and debt

Financial stress is often paired with unrealistic expectations, and some go into debt for holiday gift buying and other expenses. Before allowing the holidays to become a financial burden, set a limit before shopping begins, track expenses, use cash instead of credit, and set aside money throughout the year as a holiday fund.

Loneliness and family issues

Memories of pleasant holidays or comparisons between your life and others enjoying the season can exacerbate loneliness. With so much focus on sharing time with others, people without positive familial or social connections can experience more sadness during the holiday season than during other times of the year.

If you are feeling lonely, create new traditions with friends, volunteer with an organization that helps others — such as serving food on Christmas Day — and get help if you need it by seeking counseling.

The holiday season may come with more stressors than at other times of the year, but self-care, tempering expectations, reaching out to positive people and sticking to both financial and time budgets will help you avoid a blue Christmas and instead focus on the warmth of the season. 📌



As Executive Director at Safe Electricity, **Erin Hollinshead** has a profound passion for saving lives through education. She holds a master's degree in public administration from the University of Illinois and a grad certificate in management of nonprofit organizations.

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*30% through 2032, 26% through 2033 and 22% through 2034



The gifts we take for granted

Sometimes gifts we give aren't wrapped in paper and bows. Because of help from Illinois Touchstone Energy cooperative line personnel, co-op members in Georgia, Kentucky and North Carolina have received light and hope in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

This holiday season, give thanks for the things we take for granted – family, friends and those who keep the lights on.



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DECEMBER CHECKLIST

Holiday travel safety tips

Inspect your car.



Ensure tires are inflated and carry jumper cables, as cold weather can drain batteries.

Pack an emergency kit.

Include a car phone charger, blankets, food and water, coats and a flashlight with batteries.



Check the weather.

Be aware of the weather before and during your trip to avoid winter storms.



Buckle up and slow down.

Increase your following distance to safely navigate slick roads and allow extra time to get to your destination.



U.S. Department of Agriculture officials, Illinois cooperative leadership and recipients of REDLG funding gather at Wabash Communications CO-OP in Louisville to recognize cooperative efforts to support and grow rural Illinois.

USDA recognizes Illinois' electric co-ops

More than \$11 million invested into rural Illinois

Electric cooperatives across the nation support the communities they serve. In October, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) honored Illinois' electric co-ops for their successes with the USDA's Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant (REDLG) program.

Over the past four years, Illinois' electric and communications co-ops have utilized more than \$11 million in REDLG funding for projects that benefit businesses, healthcare facilities, fire departments and more.

The event highlighted how a cooperative approach enables rural communities to thrive, from supporting local businesses to funding public safety projects. Attendees included co-op leaders and local business owners who have benefitted from REDLG funding.

Mary Warren, business programs director for USDA Rural Development, emphasized the cooperative nature of the REDLG program, which unites electric and communications cooperatives, local governments and lenders to support local business development.

"We have a successful program, especially here in Illinois," said Warren. She added that Illinois consistently ranks in the top five states for REDLG's effective utilization.

Betsy Dirksen Londrigan, administrator for the USDA's Rural Business and Cooperative Service, praised the Illinois Rural Development team for their work. Londrigan, who has witnessed the program's impact at both state and national levels, expressed admiration for the way Illinois co-ops have utilized REDLG resources.

"Illinois is near the top in almost every program," said Londrigan, adding that Illinois stands out for how it partners with cooperatives, banks and communities. "There are so many groups that are not taking advantage of the programs that Rural Development has to offer."

Attendees like Tamara Phillips, manager of Norris Electric Cooperative, shared stories illustrating the impact of REDLG. Phillips recounted how her cooperative received a \$2 million loan through the program, enabling them to build a new office while ensuring responsible use of co-op funds and not imposing a financial burden on its members.

"This program really helped us ... and we've been very thankful to be able to help several of our members [through the program]," Phillips said. "It's great to see the

Continued on page 8

Sudoku

by Myles Mellor and Susan Flanagan

To solve the puzzle, each row, column and box must contain each of the numbers 1 to 9. Level: Medium

Solution on page 33.

8				9	4			1
	7	2	1				5	9
			3					
		7	9	4	6			
	4						1	
			5	1	3	9		
					7			
7	5				9	6	2	
4			8	2				3

IL ENTERTAINMENT CORNER

Some favorite Christmas movies are set in the state of, you guessed it, Illinois – and the different films appeal to a variety of tastes. Chuckle at Kevin's antics in "Home Alone" (PG) and sip some eggnog along with Clark, Uncle Eddie and the rest of the Griswold family in "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation" (PG-13).



For a racier holiday, laugh along with the ladies of "A Bad Moms Christmas" (R), or keep it traditional with "The Christmas Chronicles" (PG), starring Kurt Russell and Goldie Hawn as Santa and Mrs. Claus. Other fun watches on the list include "Christmas with the Kranks" (PG), featuring Tim Allen, Jamie Lee Curtis and Dan Aykroyd, and "Fred Claus" (PG), in which Vince Vaughn portrays St. Nick's troublemaking brother. For binge watchers, there's also "Office Christmas Party" (R), "The Princess Switch" (PG) and "Surviving Christmas" (PG-13). 📺

"USDA" continued from page 7

way everybody pays back and gives through the community."

Craig Sondgeroth, president/CEO of the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives, applauded the program's role in financing community projects and helping rural Illinois prosper. "As president of the statewide association, I try to encourage other co-ops to utilize this program."

Both Warren and Londrigan expressed optimism about the future. "It takes everybody doing their part to make this program a success," Warren said. Londrigan added that she hopes to showcase Illinois' approach to REDLG as an example for co-ops nationwide. 📺

Griffin named CEO of EnerStar Electric



After a nationwide search, the EnerStar Electric Cooperative board of directors appointed Angela Griffin as the co-op's new chief executive officer, effective Nov.

1. She succeeds Dave Clinton, who officially retires at the end of the year. Clinton joined the co-op in 2018 as chief financial officer and served as CEO since 2022.

Griffin has more than 35 years of experience in the co-op sector. Throughout her career, she has served on numerous local nonprofit boards. She currently serves on the board of directors for the Paris Economic Development Corporation.

A graduate of Indiana State University, Griffin has held various positions at the co-op, particularly in member services and communications. In 2016, she completed the National Rural Electric Cooperative's Management Internship Program and has since participated in ongoing co-op training at the state and national level.

"I take great pride in our local co-op roots, our dedication to the communities we serve, and the co-op member-owners," Griffin said, adding that most of the co-op employees live in communities that the co-op serves.

Griffin explained that the electric utility is rapidly evolving. Alongside this transformation, the co-op has experienced several changes, including many employee retirements. She credited the strong management team under Clinton's leadership for leading the cooperative through this period by focusing on developing a long-term strategic plan.

Griffin emphasized that the co-op's members can rely on its core values. "Safety, stability and member service will always be our top priorities," she said. 📺

EnerStar Electric Cooperative



Co-ops care Thousands of socks donated to those in need

Coles-Moultrie Electric Cooperative employees and members collected more than 3,200 pairs of new socks during October as part of National Cooperative Month. One Stop Community Christmas is a collaborative effort by local organizations to help families in need during the holiday season. The program serves residents of Coles, Clark, Cumberland, Douglas, Edgar, Moultrie and Shelby counties. 📺

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Where is it?

The winners of the October hidden object contest were Julie Brenemar of Norris Electric Cooperative and Beth Gebhardt of Western Illinois Electrical Coop. Congratulations! Your ICL campfire mugs have been sent.

November's deviled egg was hidden amid sprinkles on page 29. Winners' names will be drawn, and they will be notified. Visit Illinois Country Living on Facebook after each month's deadline for a closeup of the object's location and winners' names.

It's time for a new hidden object search. In honor of Christmas, be on the lookout for Santa's famous red hat. The symbol can vary in size and will never be on this page, a lettered page or in an ad.

Entries must include your name, address, name of your electric co-op (nonmembers are also eligible), and the page number and location of the symbol. Visit icl.coop/hiddenobject and fill out the entry form (also found under Contact Us on the website) or mail a postcard or letter to Illinois Country Living, Hidden Objects, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712. We will NOT accept entries via phone call or email.

All entries for that month must be received by the 15th. Only one entry is allowed per household every month. If multiple entries per household are submitted, only the first will be considered. Winners' names and the symbol's location will be published in each month's issue of Illinois Country Living. 📍

Congress poised to take action on key co-op issues

While most of the attention in D.C. is focused on President-elect Donald Trump and the new Congress taking power in January, the current Congress has time to act on crucial legislation affecting electric co-ops in its final "lame duck" session until Christmas.

"There's still a lot on the table before the new administration and new Congress take office — including the Farm Bill, disaster relief and funding the government at the very least," said Hill Thomas, NRECA's vice president of legislative affairs. "It's still to be determined what exactly the appetite will be for taking action. A lot will be dictated by what the president-elect wants and what happens in the congressional leadership elections — both for caucus leaders and committee chairmen."

Key co-op issues that the 118th Congress could take up in its final weeks

Farm Bill: This five-year bill — set to expire at the end of 2024 — is full of programs that are essential to co-ops, including funding for broadband, electric infrastructure and rural economic development. The House and Senate have struggled to reach a consensus on a bill, but it's still possible for something to happen in the final weeks of Congress, even if it's just extending current funding levels for another year.

Disaster relief: After the devastation caused by hurricanes Helene and Milton throughout the Southeast, an emergency relief bill is expected to be lawmakers' top priority. Congress is looking at the possibility of providing billions more in aid to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which reimburses electric co-ops for the cost of rebuilding their systems, and the Small Business Administration, which provides disaster loans.

Federal government funding: With government funding set to expire Dec. 21, lawmakers have several options: pass individual appropriations bills, agree on one big spending bill, or extend current funding levels into next year and let the new Congress deal with the budget. At stake are dozens of important co-op priorities, including funding for the Rural Utilities Service Electric Program to modernize infrastructure and the ReConnect program to bring high-speed internet service to rural communities.



National Defense Authorization Act: This sweeping defense bill could help the more than 125 electric co-ops that serve military bases and installations by making them eligible for the first time to receive funding from the Defense Department's Defense Critical Infrastructure Program, which would help co-ops make their systems more resilient. The bill, which is viewed by both Democrats and Republicans as must-pass legislation, could also serve as an important legislative vehicle to add on other co-op priorities, Thomas said.

Permitting reform: NRECA and its members have been urging Congress to pass a permitting reform bill that would make it faster and cheaper for co-ops to get federal approval to modernize their systems or simply manage vegetation around power lines. It also could limit legal challenges that further delay the permitting process. Thomas said NRECA will be watching closely to ensure that any permitting reform bill eases bureaucratic burdens on co-ops without imposing new government mandates on them. He said NRECA would oppose any proposals to give government agencies — such as the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission — more authority over co-ops.

Looking ahead to the new Congress, Thomas said that NRECA is well-positioned because the association has long maintained good relationships with lawmakers of both parties. "Any new Congress and new administration create new opportunities and new challenges," he said. "Some doors close, and some doors open. We need to be well-placed to walk through the open doors and barge through the closed ones if we need to." 📍

Erin Kelly, NRECA

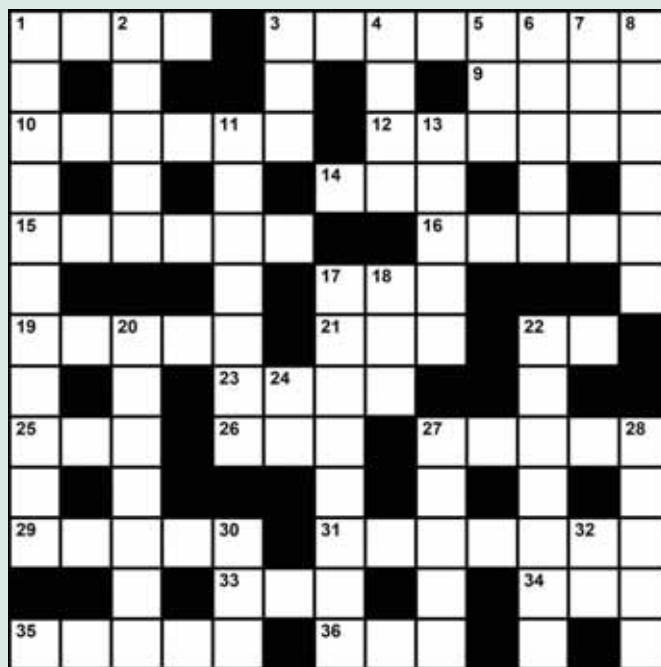
Across

- 1 It's usually at the top of the Christmas tree
- 3 Christmas lights in cases
- 9 Direction indicator
- 10 Tree adornments
- 12 Number of pipers piping in the Christmas song
- 14 "All over the world" singers, for short
- 15 Sweet bakery buy
- 16 Event locale
- 17 Gardening tool
- 19 "In the ____ midwinter, frosty wind made moan"
- 21 Include in a recipe
- 22 Alongside
- 23 Come to shore
- 25 ____ fire
- 26 E-address ending
- 27 Couples
- 29 Drops white flakes

- 31 December celebration of African American culture
- 33 Savings account, abbr.
- 34 Corn serving
- 35 Scrooge was one
- 36 Meat often served at Christmas

Down

- 1 Christmas song, 2 words
- 2 Cherub, e.g.
- 3 Dieters' units, abbr.
- 4 Christmas carol
- 5 Night before Christmas
- 6 Black bird
- 7 Compass point, abbr.
- 8 One who ships a present, say
- 11 What stars do
- 13 Cherished
- 17 Jewish festival
- 18 Strange



20 Sweet Christmas drinks

22 One of Santa's reindeer

24 Promotional piece

27 Sacred hymn

28 Neck warmer on a cold Christmas night

30 Round Table title

32 Airline, briefly

Solution on page 33.

2025 CALENDAR

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7-8 Lunch with Santa on the Train

MONTICELLO
Experience a train ride, a visit with Santa and a kid-friendly sack lunch

For more information, a complete listing of events or to submit an event, visit icl.coop/datebook.



Old Capitol Holiday Walks

DECEMBER

4-21

Explore the downtown area of Illinois' capital city on Wednesdays and Saturdays through Dec. 21. The annual event combines festive cheer with Illinois history. Visitors can enjoy an ice rink, performances on the Old State Capitol Plaza and a meet-and-greet with Santa Claus. Many downtown businesses will be open for holiday shopping.

Dec. 4, 7, 11, 14, 18 and 21, 2024: hours vary

● Downtown Springfield

Admission: free

downtownspringfield.org/holiday-walks

A Night in Bethlehem

DECEMBER

7-8

Hosted by Flora Church of the Nazarene, visitors are invited to take a stroll through Bethlehem when Christ was born. Meet Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, Roman guards and shop owners and hear their stories. Following the tour are optional craft activities for children and treat bags.

Dec. 7-8, 2024: 6-8 p.m.

● Flora Church of the Nazarene, 12 Parsons Lane, Flora

Admission: free

618-662-2337 or floranazarene.org



Galesburg Community Chorus Holiday Concert

DECEMBER

8

The Galesburg Community Chorus performs Karl Jenkins' "Stella Natalis." The composition celebrates different aspects of Christmastide in 12 movements, conveying the Christmas message of peace, goodwill and compassion.

Dec. 8, 2024: 3-4:30 p.m.

● First Presbyterian Church, 101 N. Prairie St., Galesburg

Admission: \$15 for seniors 65-plus, \$20 for adults and free for students
309-299-4090 or galesburgcommunitychorus.org

Country Christmas

DECEMBER

14

Get into the holiday spirit at Shenandoah Riding Center with crafts for kids and wagon rides. Santa and Mrs. Claus will hand out gifts and read heartwarming stories. Warm up after a wagon ride at the hot chocolate bar. Lead lines on horses and ponies can be reserved for an additional fee on a limited basis, so book ahead.

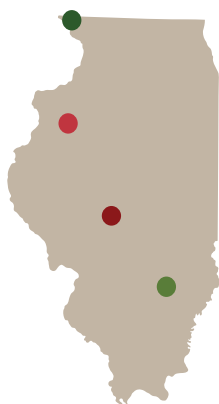
Dec. 14, 2024: 10 a.m. to noon

● Shenandoah Riding Center, 2000 Territory Drive, Galena

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Lead lines \$20 per child; reservations required

815-777-9550 or shenandoahridingcenter.com





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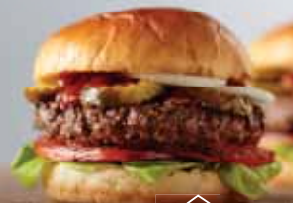
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Gifts that pay off with year-round safety

DURING THE HOLIDAYS, MANY turn their attention to gift giving, and while the shiny, trendy and pricey gifts may make a big splash, practical gifts can leave lasting impressions. What's more, they can really make a difference by enhancing safety and improving security.

While these gift ideas may not be the most exciting, here are a few practical presents that can make a real difference in helping to reduce safety risks year-round. What is a better gift than ensuring the safety of loved ones?

Smoke detectors

Most of us have at least one smoke detector in our homes, but experts say that's not enough. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) recommends a working smoke detector be installed in every bedroom, on every level of a home, and in hallways outside of sleeping areas. And, if smoke detectors are more than 10 years old, they should be replaced.

Carbon monoxide alarms

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a colorless, odorless gas created by incomplete consumption of fuels like gasoline, wood, natural gas, propane, oil, coal or methane. The gas is highly toxic, so having CO detectors outside of sleeping areas and on every level of a home improves overall safety.

Local fire departments in the U.S. respond to 80,000 CO incidents each year. The NFPA also recommends that fuel-burning heating equipment and cooking appliances

be professionally inspected annually to reduce the risks of malfunction and detect structural problems early.



Extension cords

They are not all created equal. Extension cords are subject to wear and tear and are never recommended for permanent use. Brittle and cracked plastic can indicate heat damage, and exposed wires or frayed connections increase risks of shocks, shorts or fires.

According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, an extension cord that's hot to the touch is a good indication that it's not designed to safely do the job. Consider giving an assortment of extension cords designed for indoor or outdoor use, and before you buy, look for the label of a nationally recognized testing laboratory like Underwriters Laboratories (UL), CSA-International (CSA) or Intertek (ETL).

Arc fault circuit interrupters

Arcing and sparking are among indications that a home's electrical wiring needs service. Arc fault circuit interrupters (AFCIs) can help address electrical fire hazards before they occur. Properly installed by a licensed electrician, AFCIs can often replace circuit breakers in an existing electrical panel box. The Consumer Product Safety Commission recommends that the work be completed by a qualified electrician, because the installation involves working inside the electrical panel box, which carries current even when main circuit breakers are turned off.

Ground fault circuit interrupters

GFCIs, for short, are designed to help prevent shocks. Older homes may have just one, typically in an area where electric outlets are relatively close to a water source. But over the years, the National Electric Code has been amended to require their use for outdoor outlets, in attics, bathrooms, garages, kitchens, crawlspaces, and near laundry or utility sinks.

GFCI outlets should be tested monthly. Although they can last 15 to 25 years, some will malfunction in five years or less. While they can continue to carry current, once they lose their ability to mitigate shocks by immediately closing off current, they should be replaced. A licensed electrician can do the job quickly and professionally.

Any of these gift ideas will offer peace of mind for the giver and the receiver, and they'll reduce risks throughout the holidays and improve safety for years to come. 💡



Derrill Holly writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives.

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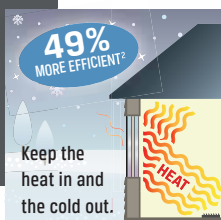
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Be a star

Check the label when buying new appliances

IT'S THE HOLIDAY SEASON, and the days are growing colder. You may be considering ways to stay cozy while also managing home energy use. One of the best ways to make your home more energy efficient is by choosing products with the ENERGY STAR label. But what exactly does that label mean, and how can it benefit you?

How products earn the label

ENERGY STAR is a program created by the U.S. Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to help consumers identify energy-efficient products that save money and reduce environmental impact.

Products that earn the ENERGY STAR label must meet strict guidelines for energy efficiency, performance and cost effectiveness. Here's how the process works:

- 1. The product must be more energy efficient than typical models.** This helps you save on energy bills by using less electricity while still providing the same performance.
- 2. The product must be tested in EPA-recognized labs, following**

standardized procedures. These tests ensure the product meets all energy efficiency and performance requirements.

- 3. Once tested, the product's data is reviewed by a third-party certification body to verify it meets the set standards.** This ensures that only the best products receive the ENERGY STAR label.

Even after a product is certified, the EPA conducts "off-the-shelf" testing on random samples of ENERGY STAR products to ensure they continue to meet the required standards. If a product fails to meet the performance requirements during verification testing, it can be disqualified from the ENERGY STAR program. The EPA has clear procedures for handling such disqualifications to maintain the integrity of the label.

Speaking of labels

Whether you're upgrading your refrigerator, replacing light bulbs or purchasing new electronics, the blue ENERGY STAR label is your assurance that the product has passed all energy-efficiency tests. It's easy to spot and can be found on


products ranging from small electronics to major appliances.

Many large appliances, such as washing machines and clothes dryers, include a yellow Energy Guide label that provides estimated energy use. Comparing these labels can help you determine how much you'll save with an ENERGY STAR appliance compared to a standard model.

While ENERGY STAR products can cost more upfront, the energy saved over time will often cover the difference. They help reduce your household energy consumption, which could lower utility bills.

Why it matters

As a member of an electric co-op, choosing energy-efficient products benefits not only you but also your entire community. When co-op members use less energy, it lowers overall electricity demand, helping to stabilize rates and reduce costs for everyone.

As you shop for appliances, electronics or other home equipment this holiday season, look for the ENERGY STAR label. These products are a simple and effective way to save money and lower energy use. To browse products that have earned the ENERGY STAR label, visit energystar.gov. 



Jennah Denney writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives.



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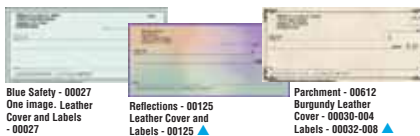
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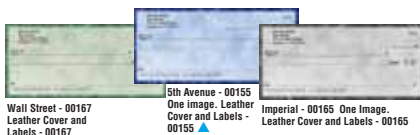
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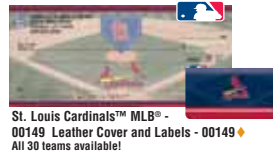
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Let's get smart

Insights on buying smart appliances

SANTA ISN'T THE ONLY one who makes an appearance as the year nears its end. Retailers start trumpeting deep discounts on home

might use once a year, ask yourself if it's worth the extra cost.

Next, think about any smart devices you already use in your home. Make sure they're compatible with the smart appliance's operating system, so you can get all the benefits you expect. For example, many of these appliances are engineered to work with voice assistants like Amazon Alexa, Google Assistant or Apple's Siri. Incompatible systems might limit your ability to use the features that are important to you.

Is your home's infrastructure ready to handle the demands of a smart appliance? Depending upon the model you choose, it might require any-

internet, make sure you think about privacy and security. Research the manufacturer's privacy policies and security features to ensure that data — like your voice commands and shopping habits — don't fall into the wrong hands. Making sure the manufacturer takes your privacy and online safety as seriously as you do is a smart strategy.

For most, the biggest downside to smart appliances is a higher price tag than their not-so-smart counterparts. However, price is just one factor in the cost of any appliance. When you consider the long-term value smart appliances deliver — whether in energy savings, helpful conveniences or improved reliability — most will save you money over their service life. In addition, smart appliances may be eligible for rebates and tax incentives, so ask your retailer what's available.

What's ahead for smart appliances in the foreseeable future? The marketplace is starting to see the integration of basic artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities that can make smart appliances provide better service, greater reliability and lower energy needs. As these AI-fueled systems become more common, your refrigerator might know your habits so well that it can generate a shopping list for you. Your dishwasher could adjust its operating cycle to better clean your family's uniquely dirty dishes.

There was a time when appliances changed little from decade to decade. Today, products advance more quickly than ever before, and we can expect to see more big changes ahead. Fortunately, today's smart appliances give you a way to start using the technology that will make you the envy of your neighbors as it makes your life easier. 💡



PHOTO COURTESY OF KINDEL MEDIA, PEXELS

When searching for smart home technologies, focus on the features you'll use most, rather than the flashy bells and whistles that aren't specific to your needs.



Business writer **Scott Flood** has worked with electric co-ops for more than four decades to build knowledge of energy-related issues. He writes on a variety of energy-related topics for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

appliances. That's great if you've considered replacing some of your home's tired appliances with one of today's "smart" models. Before deciding to buy a smart appliance, take time to get smarter about what they offer and what you need.

Begin with an honest look at how you live and consider the role your current appliances play in your daily routine. Would the capabilities of a smart appliance make your life easier? For example, if you frequently forget to start the laundry or your dishwasher, Wi-Fi enabled appliances with remote start capabilities may save you time and trouble. But if you're thinking about stepping up to a smart appliance because it has a cool feature you

thing from a basic internet connection to a home Wi-Fi network to provide the operation you expect. Some smart appliances may require Bluetooth, Zigbee, Z-Wave or other systems for connectivity. Others have the ability to receive software updates via Wi-Fi. Having access to the right technology ensures your system will function correctly and be able to handle updates as they become available.

Repairs to smart appliances can be expensive, so be sure to consider the warranty. Generous manufacturer warranties demonstrate the company's confidence in the quality of its products.

Finally, because most smart appliances are connected to the



A very merry Weihnachtsmarkt

Edgewood Farm hosts German Christmas Market

By Lisa Cherry

FOR FIVE YEARS, THE Morfeys family — Chad, Kristin and their six children — called the small town of Kaschenbach, Germany, home. It was their last duty station before Chad retired from the U.S. Air Force. When the family returned to the U.S., eldest daughter Mikayla embraced a mission of her own — to bring a festive German tradition they experienced to their new community in rural Illinois.

Before leaving Germany, Chad and Kristin purchased an old bed and breakfast on Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative lines, sight unseen, in Atwood. “It took about three months to get all of our things, so we [slept] in sleeping bags on the floor,” says Kristin. It was then, she adds, that Mikayla first shared her idea of hosting a German Christmas Market.

German Christmas markets date back to the Middle Ages. Known as a “Weihnachtsmarkt” in the German language, these open-air winter street markets typically feature entertainment, food and a myriad of handmade items for sale.

Kristin and Chad, then occupied with the never-ending to-do list that comes with owning a large, dated home, were initially against it. Mikayla, however, was not deterred. “She’s been begging us for years,” Kristin laughs. In fact, it wasn’t until the family witnessed a “sign” that her wish came true.

Previous neighbors had put up a large fence, “an eyesore,” according to Kristin, and the new owners agreed. “My daughter [said], ‘That’s it. If that fence comes down ... we’re going to

build a Christmas market.’ We’re like, ‘No, no, no, no,’” Kristin says. “Two weeks later, a storm came through, and the entire fence had fallen. So, my daughter got her dream, and she spent a year just planning, organizing [and] getting vendors.”

The Morfeys planned for 500 guests the first year, so they had to scramble when 3,000 people showed up. Mikayla, detail-oriented and high energy, says they didn’t let the challenges get in the way. “My mindset the entire weekend [was] ‘make it happen,’” she adds.

This year’s multifaceted market boasts more than 30 vendors, selling everything from crafts to gourmet food and skincare products, toys, decor, clothing and jewelry. Local musicians will perform, with special guest Olivia Minogue, a former contestant on “The Voice.” Other elements of the market include a live nativity scene, kids’ activities and visits with Santa and Mrs. Claus. Food trucks will also be onsite.

Mikayla, a case worker for Cunningham Children’s Home, jokes that the market is her other full-time job. “Everyone really enjoyed it ... that meant the world to me. It made it worth all the hard work and stress,” she says, adding, “We couldn’t have done it without the community, without our sponsors, without people volunteering.”

As for the future of the market, she says her mission remains intact. “[I’m] hoping to do this until someone tells me I can’t,” she laughs. “I’m young and spry — let’s keep going.” 📍

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SWEET DREAMS

Nonprofit provides beds
to children in need

By Les O'Dell

AT FIRST, WAYNE LEHMANN did not believe what the speaker was saying. Attending a presentation not far from his home in Watseka, Lehmann heard the man say there were dozens of children and teenagers in his community sleeping on floors because they didn't have beds. Lehmann was shocked by the statement.



Above: Tri-County Electric Cooperative employees and family members help the Salem chapter of SHP build beds for children in the area.

Left: A young child receives a new bed from the Watseka chapter of Sleep in Heavenly Peace.

After the speech, he pressed the speaker for more information. The presenter, the volunteer head of a chapter of Sleep in Heavenly Peace (SHP), a national not-for-profit organization, told him he was certain that there were kids without beds in the Watseka area.

Lehmann did his own research and discovered an estimated 3% of youth nationwide do not have beds. In talking to school officials in Iroquois and Vermillion counties, he learned the need might even be greater. “I talked to some schools, and they told me there are as many as 25% of their students who need a bed,” he says.

In response, Lehmann and other volunteers started their own chapter of Sleep in Heavenly Peace about three years ago to address the need. “Our objective is to discover the kids ages 3 to 17 who are without a bed and then fulfill that need,” he explains. “We build beds and supply not only the frame, but also the mattress, the blankets, the pillows, the whole thing. That way they go from the floor to the bed.”

True to what Lehmann first heard, there has been a need. “It might be surprising that in about three years, we have put out more than 200 beds,” Lehmann says. “It surprises a lot of people.”

Nationally, Sleep in Heavenly Peace started in 2012 and now has more than 350 volunteer chapters,

including more than a dozen groups in Illinois.

It’s all about meeting basic needs, explains Diana Higgins of the La Harpe chapter, which serves about a 50-mile radius of the Hancock County community. “What we do is provide beds for kids — twin-size, bunk beds or whatever the family needs, and they get it all free of charge, delivered to their home, assembled and set

idea. We have so many kids falling asleep in school because they don’t have their own bed.”

Since getting their chapter rolling in 2021, Higgins and other volunteers have delivered 317 beds, with other youth in the region still waiting. She says the circumstances vary as to why children or teens do not have beds of their own. “We’ve delivered some to foster care situations, we’ve delivered to grandmas who have taken the kids in, we’ve delivered to women who have left domestic violence situations and took nothing with them. Plus, there are people who are just down on their luck.”

According to Sleep in Heavenly Peace, more than 5,200 kids across the country are waiting for beds. Since its launch, the organization has delivered more than 200,000. “It is humbling to think of the thousands of volunteers, donors and sponsors who have made this accomplishment possible. I still remember the smile on the face of the little girl who received the first SHP bed — a smile that has been duplicated 200,000 times,” Jordan Allen, executive director of Sleep in Heavenly Peace, shared in a press release. “Though we have a long way to go to end child bedlessness, this accomplishment tells me it is possible.”

To fulfill needs, chapters coordinate everything from applications and bed-building events to fundraising,



up, ready to go,” she said. “The goal is to get kids off of the floor, off of pallets on the floor, out of sleeping in car seats or with mom and dad, on the couch, whatever. We want to give them a good night’s sleep so they can be more productive in their day.”

Higgins says she has been taken aback by the need. “We talked with some people in the K-12 school system who told us, ‘You guys have no



PHOTO COURTESY OF SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE



inventory and delivery. Applications for beds are received through the organization's website and distributed to local chapters, where volunteers work to meet the need.

"Being a nonprofit, we're solely reliant on donations, whether that is people giving us pillows, money so we can buy mattresses or sponsoring a build so we can get lumber," Higgins explains. "The average cost of a bed is \$200."

The beds — both twin beds and bunk beds — are wood, designed to be both easy to build and long-lasting. Each bed is branded with "SHP," and all are treated with a vinegar-based solution that gives the wood some color and helps to repel insects. Mattresses are purchased by local chapters from the national organization through a partnership agreement with a mattress manufacturer.

Higgins says companies and organizations often sponsor large events where several beds are built at once. "We need volunteers, because when we have a bed build,

we'll build 30 beds," Lehmann explains. "We need about 40 volunteers to do that. We also need volunteers to deliver and assemble the beds in kids' homes."

Often, civic organizations or work groups get involved in the bed-building events. Such was the case for a team member from Tri-County Electric Cooperative a year ago. "We were looking for something to do for National Co-op Month last October, and we found Sleep in Heavenly Peace to be a great way to serve our area," explains Director of Member Services Lynn Hutchison.

She says a number of employees participated in a build for the Salem chapter, which covers Clinton, Jefferson and Marion counties. "We built 30 beds, and it was such a cool process," she says. "They make it so easy. They show up with all of the materials, all of the tools, and you just work in an assembly line."

The employees enjoyed participating in the build, and several even brought their own children

to help. "I think any opportunity you can start off kids serving others early is good," she says. "We all had a great time doing it; it was fun work and an opportunity to help other people. I feel like what we do every day is helping people, but this was different. It created a sense of community, and it was heartwarming to know that we were working together, and that there was going to be a child sleeping in this bed."

In fact, Hutchison still has a scrap piece of lumber in her office from the build, branded with the SHP logo. "I look at it and remember that it was a great thing for our team ... that we made a difference in the community," she says.

"I love this mission," Higgins says. "We are there for the kids. [We're] providing them something that maybe they have never had and are giving them a chance to get a good night's sleep so that they can do better in school."

"This is a way to help the community and show God's love, to show that somebody else cares for

these kids. We want to provide for them, and we're not looking for anything, not even a thank you," she adds.

Yet, the words of appreciation come, sometimes with tears. Higgins recalls delivering a bed to a teenager. "One of the most memorable deliveries I had was with a 16-year-old girl. Can you imagine being 16 and never having a bed before? She was very excited and so thankful, [and] I think she hugged me."

Lehman says he has had the same experience. "We get a lot of gratitude. A lot of times, the kids want to get on the bed right away and start jumping up and down on [it] because they're happy. We get hugs, handshakes and thank-you notes. It's the things that we take for granted that delight these kids." He adds that he has a growing collection of artwork from grateful children. "They

draw out things, and they put 'Thank you, SHP,' on it or things like that. They won't win any art contest, but they'll win a heart contest.

"The other part that is very heartwarming is that we've been blessed in many ways by the community, who learns about this and wants to help — people who give us money, sheets, pillowcase sets and blankets. I don't think I've ever bought a blanket yet because of the churches. Often, we hear from sewing groups who are more than happy to help. It's just all over the place, and it's great," he adds.

He says through volunteers and donors, work will continue to fulfill the organization's mission. "It's in our slogan: 'No kid sleeps on the floor in our town,'" he says.

To apply for a bed, donate or find a chapter in your area, visit shpbeds.org. 💡

Far left: Every bed made is branded with the Sleep in Heavenly Peace logo.

Left: Volunteers with the La Harpe chapter of SHP work together to build beds for children in need.

Below: Happy recipients of new beds from the La Harpe chapter of SHP.



The COUNTDOWN BEGINS

Make a difference with a reverse advent calendar this holiday season

By Kayla Adkins

THE COUNTDOWN TO CHRISTMAS has begun, and with it, the tradition of opening the daily gifts found in advent calendars. These days, people can choose from a wide array of calendars, with gifts ranging from various candies to toys, cheese, chocolate, wine, beauty products, even dog treats. This year, however, consider a twist on tradition with a reverse advent calendar. A reverse advent calendar is a charitable alternative to the traditional version. Instead of receiving a small gift every day, participants place items in a box Dec. 1 through Christmas Eve to be donated to a local charity, food pantry or family in need.

Lake Williamson Christian Center in Carlinville — an M.J.M. Electric Cooperative member — participated in its first reverse advent calendar project in 2020 to help bring a little holiday cheer to local families.

Marketing Manager Ashley Haschemeyer shared the idea with her team. “Once I explained the concept and asked if anyone wanted to participate, everyone jumped at the opportunity, so much so that we ended up with way more than 24 items in our donation box,” she says.

One team member met a stranger in the canned vegetable aisle at the grocery store who was so moved by the idea that she grabbed some canned corn off the shelf and asked for it to be donated on her behalf.

Haschemeyer says that this project proved to be a teaching moment for her team. “The holiday season is portrayed as a time of love and giving, but sometimes people just aren’t aware of the outlets they can give to,” she explains. “Creating this opportunity at our workplace allowed several people to give quite generously who may not have normally, simply because they weren’t sure how to.”

According to Feeding America, one in eight people in Illinois face hunger. When choosing to address this need, there are a few important things to consider. Nonperishable food is best, because refrigerated items and fresh produce might not make it to the table before going bad.

Make sure to look at the expiration dates on foods, as most places will not accept expired goods. For canned items, those with pop-top lids are best, because not everyone has a can opener. Also, make sure labels are intact, so people know what’s inside.

Refrain from food packaged in glass jars that can be broken during transport. And, although plenty of “junk food” items seem easier to purchase, nutritious food should be at the top of the list. Focus on whole grains, low sodium and plenty of protein. The best scenario is food that will provide sustenance to those receiving it.

The Central Illinois Foodbank lists its most needed food items as pasta, pasta sauce, canned vegetables, canned soup, peanut butter, canned fruit, canned meat and whole-grain cereal. Most needed nonfood items are laundry detergent, bath soap, shampoo, toilet paper, toothpaste and diapers. If you know where you plan to donate, reach out and ask what items they need most, since every area’s needs are different.

Keep in mind, however, that there are no strict rules for reverse advent calendars. Just as regular advent calendars have themes, reverse advent gifts can be specific to the charity or the community’s needs. For example, they can consist solely of food, toiletries, clothing or toys. Know a family with a new bundle of joy? Consider a box of baby items. If there’s a local animal shelter, donate a box of pet supplies. The only limit is your imagination.

This is a great project for families, coworkers, church groups or even individuals. Just make sure that list is handy, so you know what to add each day. While templates of reverse advent calendars can be found online, here are a few examples to help with inspiration. Let the countdown begin. ❖

REVERSE ADVENT CALENDAR IDEAS



FOOD

Add nonperishable food items to the box, with a different type of food each day. Items can include canned soups, pasta, peanut butter, canned fruit and vegetables, and whole-grain cereal. Then, donate the collection to a local food bank.



HYGIENE ESSENTIALS

Each day, add items like toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo, soap, sanitary products and deodorant. These are often in high demand at shelters.



WARM CLOTHING

Collect winter accessories such as gloves, hats, scarves, socks and coats. Once complete, donate these items to a clothing drive or local homeless shelter.



BABY ITEMS

Gather necessities for new parents and babies — diapers, wipes, baby shampoo, pacifiers and onesies. Many shelters and charities help young families.



PET SUPPLIES

Fill a box with pet supplies like dog and cat food, treats, toys, blankets and cleaning supplies. Local animal shelters often have holiday donation programs and a list of needed items.



TOYS

Each day, add a new or gently used toy, book, puzzle or board game to your collection. At the end of advent, donate them to organizations that distribute holiday gifts to children in need.



SCHOOL SUPPLIES

Gather school supplies such as notebooks, pens, pencils, crayons and glue sticks to help children with their education. Local schools or youth organizations would likely welcome the donation.

Doctor urges seniors to carry medical alert device

Seniors snap up new medical alert device that comes with no monthly bills

People don't always do what their doctor says, but when seasoned veteran emergency room physician, Dr. Philip B. Howren, says every senior should have a medical alert device, you better listen up.

"Seniors are just one fall away from being put in a nursing home," Dr. Howren said. "With a medical alert device, seniors are never alone. So it keeps them living independently in their own home. That's why seniors and their family members are snapping up a sleek new medical alert device that comes with no monthly bills ever," he said.

Many seniors refuse to wear old style help buttons because they make them look old. But even worse, those medical alert systems come

with monthly bills.

To solve these problems Universal Physicians, a U.S. company went to work to develop a new, modern, state-of-the-art medical alert device. It's called "FastHelp™" and it instantly connects you to free unlimited nationwide help everywhere cell service is available with no contracts, no deposits and no monthly bills ever.

"This slick new little device is designed to look like the pagers doctors wear every day. Seniors love them because it actually makes them look important, not old," Dr. Howren said.

FastHelp is expected to hit store shelves later this year. But special newspaper promotional giveaways are slated for seniors in select areas. ■



■ **NO MONTHLY BILLS:** "My wife had an old style help button that came with hefty bills every month and she was embarrassed to wear it because it made her look old," said Frank McDonald, Canton, Ohio. "Now, we both have FastHelp™, the sleek new medical alert device that our grandkids say makes us look 'cool' not old," he said. With FastHelp, seniors never have to worry about being alone and the best part is there are no monthly bills ever.

Seniors born before 1961 get new medical alert device with no monthly bills ever

It's just what seniors have been waiting for; a sleek new medical alert device with no contracts, no deposits and no monthly bills that instantly connects you to free unlimited nationwide help with just the push of a button for a one-time \$149 price tag that's a real steal after today's instant rebate

The phone lines are ringing off the hook.

That's because for seniors born before 1961, it's a deal too good to pass up.

Starting at precisely 8:30am this morning the Pre-Store Release begins for the sleek new medical alert device that comes with the exclusive FastHelp™ One-Touch E 911 Button that instantly connects you to unlimited nationwide help everywhere cell service is available with no contracts, no deposits and no monthly bills ever.

"It's not like old style monitored help buttons that make you talk to a call center and only work when you're at home and come with hefty bills every month. FastHelp comes with state-of-the-art cellular embedded technology. That means it works at home or any-



■ **FLYING OUT THE DOOR:** Trucks are being loaded with the new medical alert devices called FastHelp. They are now being delivered to lucky seniors who call the National Rebate Center Hotline at 1-800-330-4294 DEPT. HELP8387 today. Everyone is calling to get FastHelp, the sleek new medical alert device because it instantly connects you to unlimited nationwide help everywhere cell service is available with no contracts, no deposits and no monthly bills ever.

(Continued on next page)

(Continued from previous page)

where, anytime cell service is available whether you're out watering the garden, driving in a car, at church or even hundreds of miles away on a tour or at a casino. You are never alone. With just a single push of the One-Touch E Button you instantly get connected to free unlimited help nationwide with no monthly bills ever," said Jack Lawrence, Executive Director of Product Development for U.S. based Universal Physicians.

"We've never seen anything like it. Consumers absolutely love the sleek new modern design and most of all, the instant rebate that practically pays for it and no monthly bills ever," Lawrence said.

FastHelp is the sleek new medical alert device with the best of combinations: a quality, high-tech engineered device that's also an extremely great value because there are no monthly bills ever.

Better still, it comes with no contracts, no deposits and no monthly bills ever – which makes FastHelp a great choice for seniors, students and professionals because it connects to one of the largest nationwide networks everywhere cell service is available for free.

And here's the best part. All those who already have an old style monitored medical alert button can immediately eliminate those monthly bills, which is why Universal Physicians is widely advertising this announcement nationwide.

"So if you've ever felt a medical alert device was too complicated or expensive, you'll want to get FastHelp, the sleek new medical alert device with no monthly bills," said Lawrence.

The medical alert device slugfest was dominated by two main combatants who both offer old style monitored help buttons that come with a hefty bill every month. But now Universal Physicians, the U.S. based heavyweight, just delivered a knockout blow sending the top rated contenders to the mat with the unveiling of FastHelp. It's the sleek new cellular embedded

cuts out the middleman by instantly connecting you directly to highly trained 911 operators all across the U.S. There's absolutely nothing to hook-up or install. You don't need a land line and you don't need a cell phone. Everything is done for you.

"FastHelp is a state of the art medical alert device designed to make you look important, not old. Old style monitored help buttons you

wear around your neck, or require expensive base station equipment or a landline are the equivalent of a horse and buggy," Lawrence says. "It's just outdated."

Millions of seniors fall every year and spend hours lying on the floor helpless and all alone with no help.

But seniors who fall and get immediate help are much more likely to avoid getting sent to a nursing

home and get to STAY living in their own home independently.

Yet millions of seniors are still risking their safety by not having a medical alert device. That's because seniors just can't afford to pay the monthly bills that come with old style medical alert devices.

That's why seniors born before 1961 are rushing to cash in the whopping \$150

instant rebate before the 21 day deadline ends.

So there's no need to wait for FastHelp to hit store shelves later this year because seniors born before 1961 can get it now just by using the \$150 instant rebate coupon printed in today's newspaper before the 21 day deadline ends. If lines are busy keep trying, all calls will be answered. ■

HOW TO GET IT:

► **IF BORN BEFORE 1961:** Use the rebate coupon below and call this

Toll-Free Hotline: 1-800-330-4294 DEPT. HELP8387

► **IF BORN AFTER 1961:** You cannot use the rebate coupon below and must

pay \$299 Call: 1-800-330-9423 DEPT. HELP8387

THE BOTTOM LINE: You don't need to shop around. We've done all the leg work, this deal is too good to pass up. FastHelp with the instant rebate is a real steal at just \$149 and shipping and there are no monthly bills ever.

PROS: It's the sleek new medical alert device that comes with the exclusive FastHelp One-Touch E 911 Button that instantly connects you to free unlimited nationwide help everywhere cell service is available with no contracts or deposits. It connects you to the vast available network of cellular towers for free and saves seniors a ton of money because there are no monthly bills ever making this deal irresistible. Plus it's the only medical alert device that makes seniors look important, not old.

CONS: Consumers can't get FastHelp in stores until later this year. That's why it's so important for seniors born before 1961 to call the National Rebate Center Hotline within the next 21 days. For those who miss that deadline, the sleek little medical alert device will set you back over \$300 bucks.



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FastHelp, the new medical alert device that instantly connects you to free unlimited nationwide help everywhere cell service is available with no contracts, no deposits and no monthly bills ever.

USE THIS COUPON: To get \$150 off FastHelp you must be born before 1961 and call the National Rebate Center Hotline at **1-800-330-4294 DEPT. HELP8387** before the 21 day rebate deadline ends.

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A ONE-WOMAN SHOW

*Serving up a passion for cooking
at Shorty's Kitchen*

By Colten Bradford

"I WILL BE BACK as fast as my short legs can take me," Melissa Gamer says as she breezes out the door, strings from her apron fluttering behind her and a bulging bag of take-out containers in each hand.

Gamer, better known as "Shorty" to almost everyone around her, is a one-woman show at her South Beloit restaurant, Shorty's Kitchen. The Rock Energy Cooperative member is the chef, baker, server, cashier, janitor and social media manager — and that's not a complete list of her responsibilities. With her dedication to sourcing local, fresh ingredients, Gamer brings both comfort food and community connection to her restaurant.

"I don't know my real name anymore," Gamer jokes. Originating from her bartending and waitressing days at the local American Legion, the patrons there dubbed her "Shorty," and the name stuck. In her home state of Wisconsin, she's known as "Little Cookie." She has embraced her nicknames, but she does have one request. "Just don't call me late for dinner," she laughs.



Top: Bacon cheeseburger and pasta salad
Above: Melissa "Shorty" Gamer with her homemade pies

Running her restaurant solo, Gamer's day starts early. Each morning, she decides on the day's specials, preps social media ads, gathers her grocery list, shops and begins preparing for the day. Her restaurant is open Monday through Friday, with Saturday reserved for lunch service and cooking classes. She even works Sundays, but only to tackle equipment cleaning and paperwork.

"I sleep really well at night," Gamer says. "I'm usually sleeping before my head hits the pillow. . . . I actually have a notepad and pen next to my bed, because that's where I seem to get my best ideas. That's where I dream up stuff."

She sources her ingredients locally whenever possible, buying meats from local butcher Prairie Hill Meats and produce from local farmers. She also has her own small garden and cans ingredients for her soups.

Shorty's menu reflects her passion for homemade, farm-to-table-style food. From homemade stroganoff to her popular jalapeno bacon cheeseburger, Gamer's dishes bring regulars back week after week. Her specialties include bacon-wrapped barbecue meatloaf, chicken and dumplings on Tuesday nights and her Friday fish fry.

She's known for her unique "Fried Stuffed Football Potatoes," which she serves during football season — baked, deep-fried potatoes stuffed with a variety of fillings, like pot roast, sloppy joe, bacon-egg-cheese or buffalo chicken. She has 50 gourmet hamburgers that she rotates on special. Desserts are also close to her heart. She specializes in pies and cheesecakes, often taking custom orders as a "personal chef" for her customers.

Gamer credits her parents for her love of cooking and serving others. As a child, she helped her mother in the kitchen, while her father taught her about business. By age 16, she was creating menus, with dreams of owning her own place one day.

When she moved to Illinois over a decade ago, she brought that knowledge with her. From working multiple roles at restaurants to her job as a cook at the American Legion, Gamer's journey led her to where she is today. Despite challenges, including opening her business shortly before a global pandemic, she has persevered.

In addition to everything else, Gamer decided to launch Saturday cooking classes. She came up with the idea after a customer asked, "Can you teach me [how] to cook this?" "I'm like, ding, ding, ding, I will give it a try. So, I started doing cooking classes," Gamer explains.

These classes became her creative outlet and a way to engage with the community in a more personal setting. From making comfort food favorites to organizing Christmas cookie sessions, she found that these classes weren't just a source of income — they were a social activity where people could bond with each other.

With the holiday season in full swing, she has two special cookie-making classes planned for Dec. 7 and 14. These sessions promise to be both festive and family-friendly, allowing people to create seasonal treats while learning something new. Call the restaurant if you would like to register for an upcoming class.

During the holidays, Gamer also offers "take and bake" catering options for Thanksgiving and Christmas. From mashed potatoes to green bean casseroles, she prepares traditional holiday sides that customers can take home and heat up at their convenience. While she doesn't have the capacity for large meat dishes, her trays of cheese balls, party dips and deli salads have become holiday staples for many families.

"This doesn't feel like work. I think that's where I get the energy [to do this]. I'm passionate about cooking, and I love what I do," Gamer says. "When you walk in the store, you're my family." 🍷

LET'S EAT!

Shorty's Kitchen

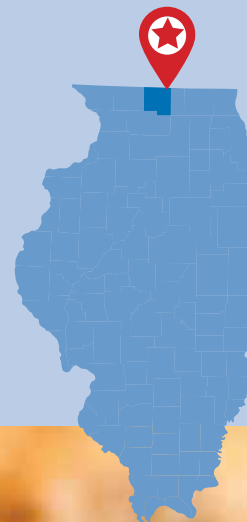
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[Shorty's Kitchen on Facebook](#)

HOURS

Mon-Fri: 11 a.m.-7 p.m.

Sat: 10:30 a.m.-1 p.m.



Comfort and joy

IT'S THE HOLIDAY SEASON. For many, this means an increased level of stress, busy schedules and endless to-do lists. While I'm not saying that you should look to food for comfort when stressed, I am saying enjoying a favorite comfort food can't hurt anything, right? Familiar, soul-warming dishes can bring a sense of calm during the holiday rush and recapture the simple pleasures of the season. 💡

WE NEED RECIPES!

Spicy dishes

Stone fruit

Cake

Corn

Please email recipe submissions or questions to finestcooking@icl.coop or mail them to Finest Cooking c/o Illinois Country Living, 6460 S. 6th St. Frontage Road East, Springfield, IL 62712. Please include your name, address, phone number (for questions), and the name of your electric cooperative. Additional recipes can be found on our website at finestcooking.com.



Recipes are prepared, tasted and photographed by **Colten Bradford**, Illinois Country Living editor.



Best Ever Comfort Stew

Submitted by Jan Elise Dial, Corn Belt Energy Corporation

Servings: 8

2-3 potatoes

1 pound ground beef

1 packet dry onion soup mix

Black pepper, to taste

1/4 cup flour

1 15-ounce can beef broth

1 15-ounce can stewed and diced tomatoes

1 15-ounce can mixed vegetables, drained

2 cups tomato juice

Clean and dice potatoes and place in a microwave-safe dish. Microwave on high for 3-5 minutes to partially cook the potatoes. In a Dutch oven or large pot over medium heat, brown ground beef seasoned with dry onion soup mix and black pepper. After the meat is browned, add flour to hamburger to absorb grease. Add the beef broth and stir meat mixture to incorporate flour. Add in tomatoes, mixed vegetables, potatoes and tomato juice. Bring to a boil and simmer until all vegetables are tender. Add more liquid to thin, if needed. Serve with yeast rolls or biscuits.

Corn Casserole

Submitted by Carolyn Myers, Norris Electric Cooperative

Servings: 4-6

1 15-ounce can corn, not drained

1 15-ounce can creamed corn

1/2 cup butter, melted

1 cup sour cream

1 cup Velveeta cheese, cubed

1 cup macaroni, uncooked

1 tablespoon onion, finely chopped

Salt and pepper, to taste

Mix all ingredients and pour into a slow cooker. Cook on low for 3 to 4 hours, or until macaroni is tender.

Cheeseburger Soup

Submitted by Shaelyn Steidinger, Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative

Servings: 6

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 3/4 cup onion, chopped | 3 cups chicken broth |
| 3/4 cup carrots, shredded | 4 cups potatoes, diced |
| 3/4 cup celery, diced | 1/4 cup flour |
| 1 teaspoon dried basil | 4 ounces Velveeta cheese |
| 1 teaspoon dried parsley | 1-1/2 cups milk |
| 4 tablespoons butter, divided | 3/4 teaspoon salt |
| 1/2 pound ground beef, cooked and drained | 1/2 teaspoon pepper |
| | 1/4 cup sour cream |

In 3-quart saucepan, saute onion, carrots, celery, basil and parsley in 1 tablespoon of butter. Add beef, broth and potatoes and bring to a boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer 10 to 12 minutes. Meanwhile, in small pan, melt remaining butter and stir in flour. Add to soup and return to a boil. Cook and stir for 2 minutes. Reduce heat to low. Add cheese, milk, salt and pepper; cook and stir until cheese melts. Remove from heat and blend in sour cream. Serve.

Donna's Company Meatloaf

Submitted by Donna Nadig, JCE Co-op

Servings: 4-6

- | | |
|--|---------------------------|
| 1 pound ground beef | 1/4 cup onion, minced |
| 1/3 cup ketchup | 2 teaspoons mustard |
| 1/4 cup chicken broth | Topping: |
| 1/2 teaspoon salt | 1/2 cup ketchup |
| 1/4 teaspoon pepper | 1 teaspoon mustard |
| 1/8 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes | 4 tablespoons brown sugar |
| 1/2 cup breadcrumbs | Dried oregano leaves |

Preheat oven to 350 F. Mix all meatloaf ingredients and place in a foil-lined loaf pan. Mix topping ingredients except for oregano. Pour topping mixture over meat and sprinkle desired amount of oregano leaves over the top. Bake 1 to 1-1/2 hours, or until the internal temperature reaches 160 F. Let the meatloaf rest 10-15 minutes before serving.

Apple Crisp

Submitted by Denise Smith, Rural Electric Convenience Cooperative

Servings: 6-8

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 6-8 apples, peeled and sliced | 2 cups sugar, divided |
| 2 teaspoons water | 1 cup flour |
| 1 teaspoon vanilla extract | 1 teaspoon baking powder |
| 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon | 1 egg |
| | 1/2 cup butter, melted |

Preheat oven to 350 F. Place sliced apples in a greased 7x10-inch baking dish. Mix water and vanilla together and sprinkle over apples. Combine cinnamon with 1/2 cup sugar and pour over apples. Mix flour, baking powder, 1-1/2 cups sugar and egg together until crumbly. Cover apples with the mixture and add a dash of cinnamon on top. Pour melted butter over the top. Bake for 50 minutes, or until browned to your liking. Serve warm with or without ice cream.



Back to our holiday roots

Embracing the tradition of fresh Christmas trees

LAST HOLIDAY SEASON, MY family set out on a cold December day to visit a local Christmas tree farm. After years of decorating a fake tree, we decided to use a fresh-cut tree

broke a sweat on that 20-degree day as the tree tumbled over, but claimed, "That was easy."

I had never paid much attention to the types of Christmas trees growing on farms. As a kid, a tree is a tree. However, there are significant differences in the species of evergreens we can choose for our holiday decor. Some are more suited than others to being cut, decorated and placed in a home for a few weeks. While there are more species than can be mentioned in this article, the following are some common ones you may encounter at a tree farm.

A fresh pine scent

Pines are popular, with Scotch pine topping the list. Pines are known for having a pleasant scent, excellent needle retention and branches stiff enough to hold heavy

ornaments. Scotch pines are dense trees with dark green needles, 1 to 3 inches in length.

White pine is another common option, especially for those looking for a larger tree. The branches of white pine are more flexible, meaning heavy ornaments may fall off, and the needle retention is not quite as strong as Scotch pine. It is also less aromatic, making it an option for those who suffer from allergies.

Home "fir" the holidays

Fir trees are known for having excellent needle retention for the

entire holiday season. These trees have stiff branches that will hold most ornaments. Balsam fir is a preferred species due to its strong scent, and it is commonly used for wreaths, garlands and swags.

Other fir options include the Fraser fir, which has better needle retention than the Balsam. Because Fraser fir ships well, it can be common in tree lots. Green is often the Christmas tree color of choice; however, the white fir provides an alternative blue color and a citrus-like scent.

Spruce up the place

Spruces are not as popular as Christmas trees primarily due to their relatively poor needle retention; however, the Colorado blue spruce is a common choice due to its bright blue color. With sharp needles, this tree often leaves my fingernail cuticles bloodied when hanging ornaments. Once the needles begin to fall, they can find their way into socks and slippers. If you decide to go with the blue spruce, wait until after Dec. 1 to set it up to make sure the tree will last the entire season.

Finding a fresh tree

When shopping at a tree lot with pre-cut trees, it is important to choose the freshest tree. Check with the local tree lot to determine recent shipments. Additionally, check freshness by bouncing the tree on the ground or gently tugging the end of the branch with the thumb and forefinger; in both tests, no needles should fall off. Keep in mind, the freshest tree is one you cut yourself. When doing so, be sure to bring a sharp saw and eager helpers to make quick work of the job, especially if it's on a cold day. 💡



Chris Enroth is a horticulture educator with the University of Illinois Extension, serving Henderson, Knox, McDonough and Warren counties. This column also appears in the "Good Growing" blog at go.illinois.edu/GoodGrowing.

for Christmas. While this was a first for my family, I grew up with cut trees for the holidays. My father and I would travel to a tree farm and tag a tree in November. As the holiday drew near, we would return, cut down the tree and bring it home.

Arriving at the farm with my own family, we traversed fields looking for the perfect tree. Finally, a tree was selected. Our hands were already numb as I handed the saw to my eldest and he set to work. Everyone took turns with the saw to say they played a part, but my eldest finished the job. He even



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March — Fences/gates

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May — Serenity



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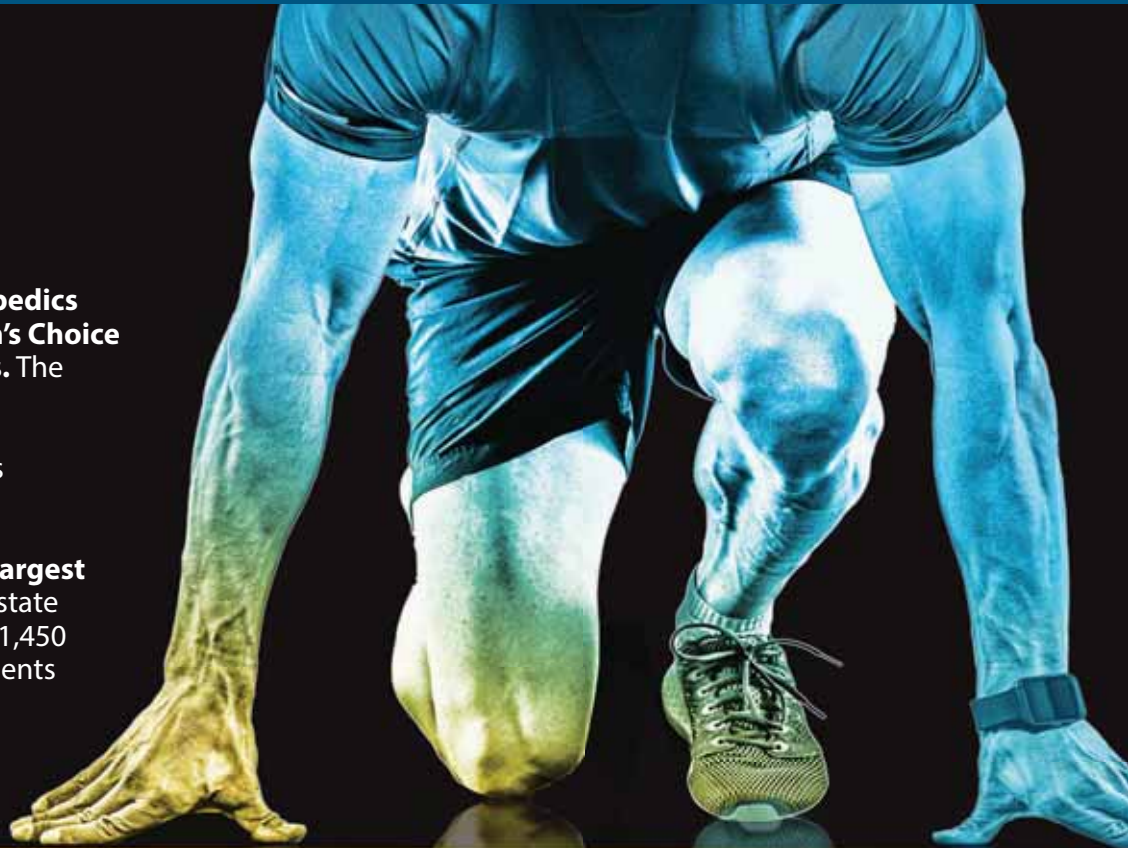
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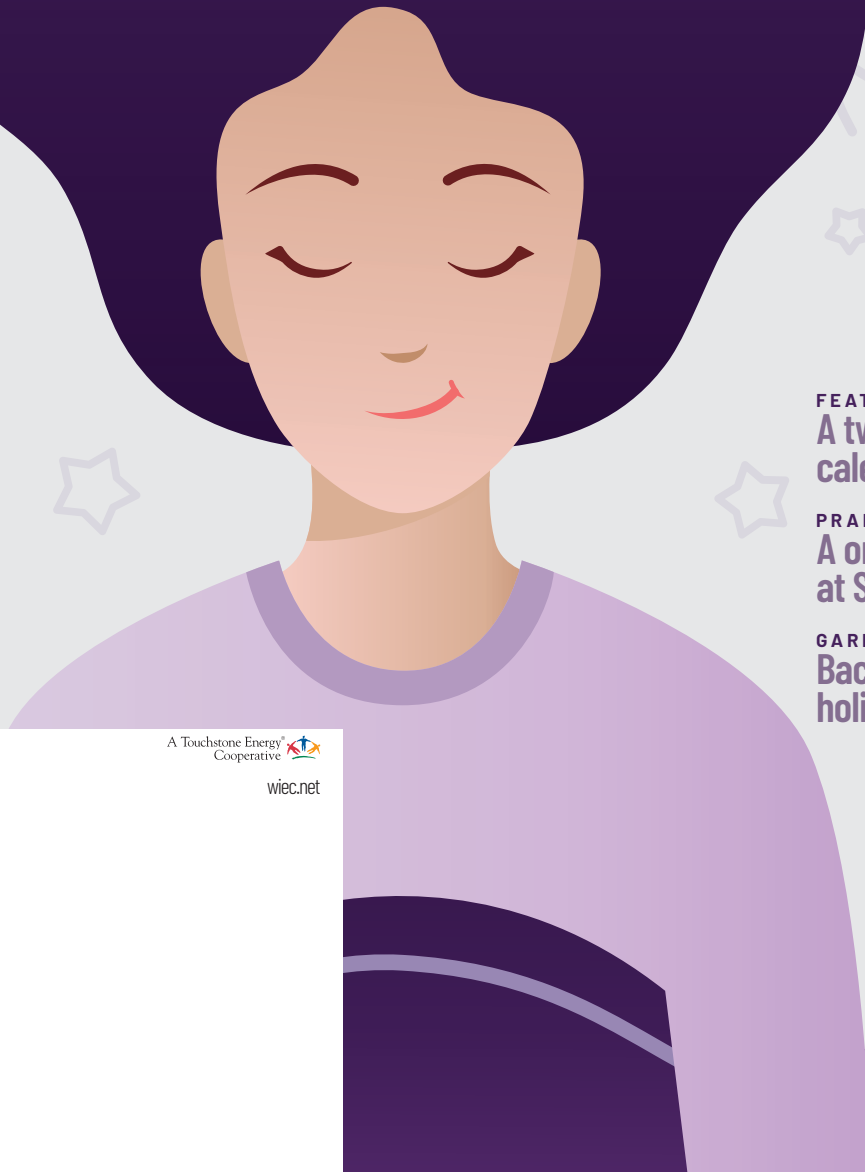
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