

Two UNIFORMS, One CALLING

They work to keep the lights on — and stand ready for another call. Fifteen Bluebonnet employees are committed to community service through their work with volunteer fire departments and first responder units.

Story by Connie Juarez • Photos by Sarah Beal

Russell Tiner and his wife were dressed and ready to leave their home in Lockhart to head out for their 20th wedding anniversary dinner. Then his pager went off. The call wasn't about his job as a lineworker at Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative.

This was about a fire in the grain and corn bins at Livengood Feeds in Lockhart. Instead of celebrating over a meal, Tiner spent hours unloading corn and knocking back hot spots alongside the Lockhart Fire Rescue crew. "My wife understood," he said with a laugh about that event 16 years ago. "We never made it to dinner that night."

Tiner has worked for Bluebonnet for 27 years. As a journeyman lineworker, he builds and maintains power lines and restores electric service.

He has also volunteered as a firefighter for the last 36 years, 25 of them as a certified emergency medical technician with Lockhart Fire Rescue and Mid-County Fire/Rescue. The departments cover 72 square miles between Luling and Lockhart in Caldwell County. Lockhart Fire Rescue, in operation for more than 135 years, has 17 firefighters, and Mid-County, founded in 1983, has 16.

Tiner contributes about 20 hours of volunteer service each month, assisting with some of the approximately 40 calls the two departments receive monthly. He has battled grass fires, applied tourniquets and

treated severe wounds.

His expertise with Bluebonnet's electric infrastructure has been an asset during emergency responses. If power lines are down around a structure fire or car wreck, he can quickly assess the scene and disconnect power before other first responders arrive. "I hear the call, and I'll pull up right behind them," Tiner said. "I can make the scene safe and get people where they need to be. Responders in Caldwell County have come to know me for that."

The Bluebonnet region is served by more than 100 first-responder divisions, agencies, districts and teams, with origins dating back as far as 1848. Fifteen Bluebonnet employees, including Tiner, volunteer with a dozen fire departments and emer-

gency units spread across the cooperative's 3,800-square-mile service area.

By day — and sometimes night — they restore electricity and ensure homes, farms and businesses have power. When duty calls, they put on another uniform and come to the aid of their communities. Their work stretches from Lockhart to Giddings, from Milano in Milam County to Carmine in Fayette County.

For residents in Bluebonnet's rural service area — where larger fire departments or ambulance services may be miles away — help often comes from hundreds of local volunteer first responders ready to save lives and protect property.

"Volunteers are the lifeblood and the first line of defense for emergency management response, whether that's a fire or a medical emergency," said James Altgelt, coordinator of Bastrop County's Office of Emergency Management. "Volunteer fire departments arrive quickly, bring every resource they have and often stop a situation from becoming catastrophic."

Restoring electricity and responding to emergencies require similar mindsets, skills and commitments to the job. Both require keen situational awareness, strict safety protocols, teamwork under pressure and technical skills. Whether climbing poles in a storm

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Journeyman lineworker Rudy Garcia wears two uniforms — and many hats — as a Bluebonnet employee and assistant fire chief for the Giddings Fire Department. This photo illustration shows Garcia dressed for his dual callings while standing at the fire department's station on Independence street. He has served with Bluebonnet and the Giddings Fire Department for more than three decades.

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TIPS FOR EMERGENCY FIRST AID

You don't have to be a trained first responder to know some basic first-aid steps for home, work or elsewhere. One of the most important things you can do is keep well-stocked first-aid kits in your home and vehicle — so you're ready to respond quickly if needed. Follow these tips to keep yourself and others safe.

1 Call 911 immediately if you believe someone needs medical attention. Before you provide first aid to someone else, keep yourself safe by evaluating the scene of an incident and the area around someone who needs first aid or medical attention.

2 When providing first aid, wear personal protective equipment

such as gloves, masks and goggles.

3 If there are others around, delegate tasks to ensure the best help is provided.

4 Check to see whether the person is breathing, has a pulse and is responsive. If not, and you have certified training, start CPR. Rotate the work of CPR among others who are certified, if possible, to avoid exhaustion.

5 If you think someone is in contact with a source of electricity and is being shocked, first call 911, then unplug the device or shut off electricity at the breaker. Do not touch the person in contact with electricity.

6 Stop minor bleeding by applying pressure using sterile bandages or cloths.

7 Use the RICE method for sprains or suspected fractures:

- REST the injured area
- ICE to reduce swelling
- COMPRESS with a bandage
- ELEVATE limb to minimize swelling

8 If someone has a minor burn:

- Run cool water over the affected area for at least 10 minutes.
- Do not apply ice.
- Loosely cover the burn with a clean, nonstick dressing.
- Call 911 for a more severe burn.

At the Fedor Volunteer Fire Department's annual fish fry in Lee County, Scott Iselt, an engineering project coordinator at Bluebonnet and a longtime firefighter for Fedor VFD, hands Taronda Schulz tickets for the fundraiser. The department has hosted the event for 42 years at the Old Picnic Grounds on FM 1624 south of Lexington to support its volunteer operations.



Russell Tiner serves Caldwell County in many ways. He is a Bluebonnet journeyman lineworker, volunteer firefighter, EMT and chaplain with both Lockhart Fire Rescue and Mid-County Fire/Rescue. At Lockhart's Station No. 2, he helps operate Quint 2, the department's largest vehicle.

LOCAL SUPPORT POWERS VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS

Volunteer fire and emergency departments across Bluebonnet's service area depend on the people around them for support. That often comes in the form of fundraisers that combine food and social connection.

For many Texans, the volunteer fire department fish fry is a much-loved tradition.

The Fedor Volunteer Fire Department Fish Fry occurs annually on the fourth Saturday of September at the Old Picnic Grounds in Fedor. "Our little community goes from a couple hundred to around 2,000," Scott Iselt said. "We've got an auction, a live band and a country store selling baked goods. The event really keeps the department running."

The Carmine VFD hosts an annual fried chicken drive-through and raffle in July at its station that draws thousands of people every year. Jason Carmean and others in the department rely on such events to help pay for equipment, training and other essential needs.

The Giddings Fire Department also organizes popular community fundraisers. Each September, the weekend before Sept. 11, firefighters host their Patriot Day BBQ Cook-off at Firemen's Park. They also hold a Fourth of July barbecue and fireworks celebration.

These departments also rely heavily on donations from individuals and businesses. Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative supports local fire departments through financial grants. In October 2025, the cooperative's Board of Directors awarded \$1,000 grants to each of the 64 departments across its 14-county service area.

Several departments, including Mid-County Fire/Rescue and the Carmine Volunteer Fire Department, have received support through Community Development Partnership Program grants given by Bluebonnet and the Lower Colorado River Authority. Those grants help area volunteer fire departments, emergency responders and other nonprofit groups pay for capital improvement projects such as purchases of vehicles, emergency generators and vehicle extrication tools.

DOUBLE DUTIES

15 Bluebonnet employees volunteer with fire departments and first-responder units

SHAWN BIGON

Apprentice lineworker

Years at Bluebonnet: 3

Volunteer: Assistant chief, South Lee County Volunteer Fire Department

Years of service: 14

"I joined the fire department to help protect my community. My favorite memory is entering my first structure fire and putting all the training I went through to use."



MICHAEL BLAND

Engineering inspector

Years at Bluebonnet: 2

Volunteer: Battalion chief, Bastrop County Emergency Services District No. 2

Years of service: 15

"It has been a great experience getting to know many people in the community, being part of the best volunteer department in Texas and serving with the greatest volunteers in the country."



KYLE KASPER

Lineworker

Years at Bluebonnet: 20

Volunteer: Firefighter, South Lee County Volunteer Fire Department

Years of service: 18

"Between being on call for Bluebonnet and all the other things going on, it can be hard to find time for everything — but we do our best to make it work."



ERIN KIESCHNICK

New service

Years at Bluebonnet: 15

Volunteer: Board member, former secretary, Lincoln Volunteer Fire Department

Years of service: 10

"At work, we often talk about wearing many hats — and volunteering is no different. Whether it's directing traffic, organizing volunteers or showing up on scene with water and food, you step up where you're needed."



KYLE KIESCHNICK

Substation

Years at Bluebonnet: 7

Volunteer: Captain, Lincoln Volunteer Fire Department

Years of service: 18

"Managing time is a constant juggling act. Lots of late nights, early mornings and staying focused during the day."



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or stabilizing a patient at a crash scene, these employees bring the same precision and dedication to every call.

"We're incredibly proud of the number of employees who show up when their communities need them most, serving as volunteer first responders outside of work," said Eric Kocian, Bluebonnet's chief engineer/systems operations officer. "Safety is a top priority for Bluebonnet. That commitment carries over beyond the workplace — these individuals take the same care and focus when volunteering, ensuring neighbors stay safe. That deep sense of duty and service is who we are. Safety, commitment and community are at the heart of everything we do."

Another journeyman lineworker, Rudy Garcia, has been at Bluebonnet for 30 years and a volunteer firefighter for 31. Garcia, who lives in Giddings, serves as assistant chief of the Giddings Fire Department's 34 active members. Most are volunteers; two are paid firefighters. In 2025, the department responded to about 370 calls, mostly vehicle accidents and grass or structure fires.

Linework and firefighting require planning and the ability to assess many aspects of a situation. "You can't get tunnel vision. Just like at Bluebonnet, you get a call, and you don't know what it is," Garcia said. "Same with fire. You have to clear your head, figure out whether people are still inside, how you're going to approach it and who's going to be on the nozzle."

Garcia remembers one particularly difficult call in 2015. It was around 7 on a chilly April morning, just after a downpour. His fire department responded to a vehicle crash and water rescue at Yegua Creek in Lincoln. A driver had been trapped inside his semi-truck cab after it rolled off Texas Highway 21 into the rushing creek. Fifteen firefighters from the Giddings department and about 10 from Lincoln VFD worked together on the rescue. "We tied 100-foot-long ropes around ourselves so we wouldn't get swept away," Garcia recalled. "We cut the roof off the truck, used the Jaws of Life to pry open the door and pulled him to safety. He was not injured at all."

Others bring teamwork skills they hone at Bluebonnet to their volunteer firefighting work. Scott Iselt, who lives in Fedor, is a project manager in Bluebonnet's engineering department and has been with the cooperative 20 years. He has served with the Fedor Volunteer Fire Department for three decades. The department covers a 46-square-mile rural area in north-central Lee County south of Lexington.

"Most of the calls we respond to are grass fires, some motor vehicle accidents and a lot of traffic control," Iselt said. With 15 volunteer firefighters, knowing a team's limitations is key. "Often, our response team is just two men — one driver, one working



Jason Carmean, a Bluebonnet lineworker crew supervisor in Brenham, stands outside the Carmine Volunteer Fire Department in Fayette County, where he has volunteered for 22 years. Jason, 51, a Bluebonnet employee for 32 years and Carmine resident, has responded to countless emergencies, from farm accidents to oil well incidents.

the hose." That makes mutual aid and radio coordination important. Iselt's previous background training with the Texas Department of Public Safety enhances his ability to interact with the public during incidents. "This translates to effective traffic management and clear, authoritative communication with people at emergency scenes," he said. Whether working to restore power for Bluebonnet or responding to a fire, Iselt said, safety requires keeping everyone on the same page and maintaining good teamwork.

Jason Carmean has been a Bluebonnet employee for 32 years. He is a lineworker crew supervisor and lives in Carmine, where he has been a part of the Carmine Volunteer Fire Department for 22 years. The department, established in 1890, has 16 active volunteers. The small community straddles U.S. 290 in Fayette County north of Round Top.

Carmean was fire chief there for six years, and has seen nearly every type of emergency, from farm accidents to oil well incidents.

He recalled stabilizing an injured passenger who was trapped inside a vehicle after a crash. "I crawled into the back seat, held his neck, gave oxygen and kept him stable until STAR Flight arrived." Doctors later told Carmean that without his patience and support, the patient could have been paralyzed.

For Carmean, safety is a priority in both linework and first-responder work. "At Bluebonnet, I supervise crews and make sure they're safe. It's the same on fire calls. Leadership and awareness carry over both ways."

That sense of responsibility isn't limited to the job site — it extends to every fire call. For Garcia, the connection between leading crews and answering emergency calls runs deep, rooted in a



Sherry Murphy, Bluebonnet's Giddings-area community and development representative, has volunteered with Winchester Area Volunteer Fire Department for 17 years and currently serves as the board treasurer. The department purchased this F-550 SuperDuty 4x4 truck for emergency and wildland fire response through fundraising and a community grant provided by Bluebonnet and LCRA in 2015.

Photo by Joe Stafford

When Iselt got the address, he realized it was the home of his uncle, whom he learned was unresponsive after a fall. "We raced over there, prepared the landing zone — finding a spot free of power lines, trees and cars — then fenced off the perimeter with our trucks," he said. "It was pitch dark, but I helped get him safely onto the helicopter."

Before he heads out on a call, Garcia has a little ritual. "I always give my wife, Amber, a kiss. It's not just a sentimental gesture. In this line of volunteer work there is always some risk involved."

A first responder may face a set of challenges that can hit harder than those of a lineworker — situations that are often unsettling. Carmean has learned how to manage the pressure of emergency response while staying focused and grounded. "I tell my teams that you can respond to calls and come back without carrying the weight of it with you," he said.

For particularly traumatic emergency response situations, support is available to first responders, he said. Carmean has learned ways to cope. "When I leave, I leave it behind," he said. His emergency response training has given him tools to stay calm, even on the toughest calls.

Community support keeps fire departments equipped, but the bonds among responders keep them going.

"It takes a certain kind of person to do this work," Carmean said. "You have to be willing to get up in the middle of the night or suit up in 104-degree weather after a full day's work — for no pay. But the camaraderie makes it worth it. The fire department is like a brotherhood, just like the linemen at Bluebonnet."

There's a larger calling at the heart of volunteer work that has carried these volunteers through decades of responding to calls that could be dangerous. "I actually have a passion for this," Garcia said. "To me, it's always felt like a God-given talent. This is why I'm still able to do it after all these years."

DOUBLE DUTIES

LOGAN LANCASTER

Lineworker crew supervisor
Years at Bluebonnet: 12
Volunteer: Fedor Volunteer Fire Department
Years of service: 8

"Someone asked me if I would be willing to help out, and I was willing to do what was needed to raise funds to support the department."



JUSTIN LEWIS

Apprentice lineworker
Years at Bluebonnet: 3
Volunteer: Firefighter, Ellinger Volunteer Fire Department
Years of service: 1.5

"Bluebonnet is a very community-friendly organization. I get a good feeling of helping others when I restore power, and I get that same feeling when helping individuals in the community while volunteering."



BRIAN MITSCHKE

Technical services superintendent
Years at Bluebonnet: 21
Volunteer: Firefighter, Dime Box Volunteer Fire Department
Years of service: 10

"I assisted first responders when a wreck occurred right in front of me one day many years ago and have volunteered with Dime Box VFD ever since."



PHILIP THARP

Journeyman lineworker
Years at Bluebonnet: 11
Volunteer: Firefighter and cook, South Lee County Volunteer Fire Department
Years of service: 15

"There really is no time management as a first responder. If you can go to a call, you go."



BRYAN WOODS

Lineworker crew supervisor
Years at Bluebonnet: 3
Volunteer: Firefighter, Milano Volunteer Fire Department
Years of service: 9

"Some moments are tough, but there's plenty of good ones too. Once I pulled a lady out of a flipped car, and she hugged me and said I was an angel."



INTERESTED IN BECOMING A VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTER?

PREREQUISITES

- Be 18 or older
- Have a high school diploma or GED
- Live or work within a reasonable distance of the desired fire station
- Maintain a valid Texas driver's license and satisfactory driving record
- Pass a background check, drug test and physical examination

TO APPLY

- Contact your local fire department to learn about volunteer openings and other application requirements
- Complete an application
- Participate in an interview, if required

TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION

- Attend basic training sessions, through either the fire station or a fire academy
- Earn Texas Commission on Fire Protection firefighter certification
- Obtain emergency medical technician (EMT) certification, if required



FREEZE READY Five safety tips for winter weather

Winter weather can be unpredictable in Central Texas, especially in January and February. Temperatures can quickly swing from mild to freezing. Cold snaps and icy conditions can last for hours or stretch on for days. Here are five ways to stay safe during a Texas cold snap:

1 Trust the warnings, not your windshield: Things may look fine, but icy conditions could be headed your way. Regularly check weather forecasts: Use multiple sources — a trusted local TV or radio station, a weather app and emergency alerts — so you aren't caught off guard.

2 Dress in layers: Start with a moisture-wicking base, add an insulating middle layer like fleece or flannel and top it off with a wind- and waterproof jacket. Wear gloves and warm socks, along with a knit cap and headband or neck gaiter.

3 Avoid driving on icy roads: The best plan is to not drive, but if you must, remember ice is a particularly dangerous road hazard in Texas. Ice can form quickly and be hard to see — especially on bridges. Go slow, brake gently, avoid sudden moves and plan for longer travel times.



4 Keep your vehicle winter-ready: Keep the gas tank at least half full and stock the vehicle with a few cold-weather items, such as bottled water, snacks, a blanket, a phone charger, a flashlight and an ice scraper; share travel plans with loved ones.

5 Prepare your home and yourself: You probably know the three P's: Protect pipes, pets and plants. Stay safe by watching your step, wearing the right shoes and avoiding getting wet or staying outside too long.

For more tips, go to texasready.gov/be-informed or bluebonnet.coop/winter-tips.

OFFICE CLOSINGS

Bluebonnet offices will be closed Thursday, Jan. 1, for New Year's Day; Monday, Jan. 19, for Martin Luther King Jr. Day; and Friday, Jan. 23, for a companywide meeting. If your power goes out, you can report it by texting

OUT to 44141, online at bluebonnet.coop, on the MyBluebonnet mobile app or by calling 800-949-4414. You can pay your bills anytime online, on the mobile app or by calling 800-842-7708 (select Option 2 when prompted).

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