



# THE APPRENTICES

Bluebonnet's rigorous training program for linemen produces skilled, confident pros

Want to become a lineman?

Bluebonnet accepts applications for its U.S. Department of Labor Certified Apprentice Program on the first Tuesday of every month (and only on that day). Find applications and other career opportunities at [bluebonnet.coop](http://bluebonnet.coop) by clicking on Careers at the bottom of the any page.

By Lisa Ogle

**W**hen Kendal Fiebrich applied to become an apprentice for Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative at age 19, he knew that linemen dig holes and set poles, but not much more about the job.

He has since learned how to work in the pitch-black during a severe storm, armed with a flashlight to locate downed power lines. He also spent four years learning how electricity works, how to build and safely repair power lines, and how to use dozens of pieces of equipment and machinery. Along with that, he has built a lifelong bond with fellow linemen.

Although experience is a factor in hiring, "we look for somebody who is going to fit into the Bluebonnet culture," said Garrett Gutierrez, assistant superintendent of operations in Bluebonnet's Red Rock service center. "We have the knowledge and know-how here to teach them how to do the job. It falls back on that person to have the passion to get through the apprentice program."

After four years of dedication, that's exactly what Fiebrich did. He and Gutierrez were among five employees who recently completed the program and became U.S. Department of Labor-certified journeyman linemen.

Bluebonnet's program requires 672 hours of technical instruction and 8,000 hours of on-the-job learning. The program generally takes four years, though previous experience and education can speed things along. Some apprentices start right out of high school, while others have had years of experience in utility line work or other fields.

The co-op began offering an apprentice program in 2004. Since then, 81 people have graduated from the program. In 2015, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs approved benefits for military veterans going through the training program.

The source of the technical instruction has changed a few times over the years. The 18 current apprentices are going through the Northwest

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Five employees completed Bluebonnet's apprentice program and became U.S. Department of Labor-certified journeyman linemen — from left, Blake Schramm, David Davis, Kendal Fiebrich, Garrett Gutierrez and Jeremy Lynch.

Sarah Beal photo

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Lineman College program for that component, which involves two weeks per year at the Idaho-based college's Texas campus in Denton. Northwest Lineman College's instructors have worked across the country and draw from a wide variety of experiences, said Corban Hegdal, a fourth-year apprentice in Bluebonnet's Red Rock service center who went through the college's 15-week training program in Idaho before being hired in 2015.

The program supplements what the apprentices learn on the job and results in better-educated linemen, said Brandon Johnson, Bluebonnet's safety and training supervisor. That benefits co-op members because when that lineman "goes out on a trouble call, he'll have a better idea of how to figure out the answer," he said.

The co-op's apprentice program also attracts the strongest candidates, said Heath Siegmund, superintendent of operations in the Red Rock service center. It can make the difference between a top candidate choosing to work for Bluebonnet rather than another utility that doesn't offer an apprentice program.

The program was a big draw, and it showed that Bluebonnet cares about training and retaining employees, Hegdal said.

"I enjoy the challenge" of becoming a lineman, he said. "It is something that many people can't do or are unwilling to do. The people who are good at it have invested a lot of time to become so."

It's sometimes hard to tell at the beginning of training who will become a successful lineman, Johnson said. Candidates must overcome any fear of heights, be ready to work with electricity every day and be willing to work in extreme conditions.



Sarah Beal photos

Apprentice Connor Sanderson strips the jacket off a cable while crew supervisor Matthew Ledford guides him during this challenging task.

Good linemen "enjoy working with their hands, enjoy working outdoors, are typically accustomed to physical activities and enjoy being part of a team," he said.

On-the-job training focuses primarily on building overhead power lines, though apprentices also learn about underground lines and transmission of power at substations.

On-site training has certainly offered some memorable moments. During calls, Hegdal has crossed creeks, jumped fences to avoid dogs at night and spent cold, wet nights in a bucket during freezing rain.

The payoff is when you "see everybody's lights come on," said Logan Lancaster, a fourth-year apprentice in Bluebonnet's Giddings service center.

The training also starts linemen off on the

right foot down a long-term career path.

"I always think about what the future holds — graduating from this program, moving up the ladder, teaching future apprentices," said Ty Kasper, a first-year apprentice.

Because the program today is more hands-on, apprentices now spend less time in the classroom and more time in the field, applying the lessons they've learned, Johnson said.

The comprehensive classroom program covers all aspects of line work, with the toughest components — "basic electricity" and "alternating current fundamentals" — being heavy on theory, algebra, geometry and the relationship between voltage, current, resistance and power.

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## SHOWCASING THEIR SKILLS

Apprentices are encouraged to participate in the Texas Lineman's Rodeo, a competition in which they climb poles, make power line repairs and perform other tasks, all simulating skills they perform on the job. They compete for accuracy and time on a field of poles and equipment that are not electrified.

Bluebonnet has sent apprentices to the annual event in Nolte Island Park in Seguin since 2004. Daniel Fritsche, a crew supervisor in Giddings, was among three apprentices who competed that year. He now serves as the apprentice coach and said those who compete are better climbers and tend to be more highly motivated to become linemen.

Kendal Fiebrich, a recent apprentice program graduate who was named top apprentice lineman at the 2014 rodeo, said participating in the competition has been just as important as going through the apprentice program. The events often reinforce what the apprentices are learning in the classroom and allow competitors to connect with those at other co-ops to compare notes on techniques and tools.

This year's rodeo is set for July 15. Find details in the July issue of Texas Co-op Power magazine.

## WIN A PRIZE!

Think you could be a lineman? Watch for pop quizzes on our Facebook page this month for your chance to win a pair of Bluebonnet leather gardening gloves. Plus, Lineman Appreciation Day is April 18, so stay tuned for a special tribute to Bluebonnet's linemen on our Facebook and Twitter pages.

Kendal Fiebrich, above, is tested on his ability to 'ground' an underground transformer. At left, Fiebrich, in foreground, and Jeremy Lynch take a written test during classroom time.



# TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The wire grip (A) holds wire and connects it to the strap hoist (B), which is a hand-held, ratchet-action crank used to tighten a wire.

The voltage detector (C) is a safety tool that detects the presence of voltage before work begins. The multi-meter tool (D) is used on the member's side of the line to measure voltage.

This amp meter (E) measures electric 'load' to determine whether the equipment is capable of handling the load. If not, adjustments to the equipment are made.

The beefy bolt cutter (F) is used to cut steel support wires. A compression tool (G) is used to clamp down on a connector to hold two pieces of wire together. Hot cutters (H) have insulated handles for cutting wire while a line is energized. A hammer stick (I) is a fiberglass, insulated tool for safely removing equipment from underground access points. Long ratchet hot cutters (J) are used on overhead lines to isolate a section of line so a crew can work safely and members don't lose power. The shotgun stick (K) is used to maintain control of equipment when working from the bucket of a bucket truck.