

March 2020

Alabama

Wiregrass
Electric
Cooperative

LIVING



Honoring heroes

**WEC and WTVY News 4 honor
community leaders**

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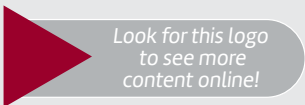
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ON THE COVER

WTVY News 4 and Wiregrass Electric Cooperative honored the 2019 winners of the Silent Heroes award at a recent banquet. **See page 50.**



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The power of participation

Les Moreland, CEO Wiregrass Electric Cooperative

As we start another spring, I am reminded of how blessed we are to live in such a beautiful area with wonderful people. While temperatures in the summer may be hot enough to keep you from enjoying all the Wiregrass has to offer, spring is the perfect time to go outside.

In January, our cooperative and WTVY celebrated our 2019 Silent Heroes of the Wiregrass winners, who are featured on the cover of this magazine. We enjoyed a wonderful time of fellowship and another chance to say “thank you” to the individuals who go above and beyond to make our area a better place to call home. You can read more about them in this issue of Alabama Living.

I would also like to thank our members. Because of your monthly contributions to our Operation Round Up Charitable Foundation, programs like Silent Heroes are possible. Your small change is changing lives, and we thank you. We are already well into another year of Silent Heroes, and I can’t wait to see the new winners selected in 2020.

March also has other very important happenings, and we want to remind everyone of them.

The State of Alabama conducts its primary for this election cycle on March 3, and we encourage all of you to get out and vote. It is exciting and inspiring to watch democracy in action. It is a wonderful thing to know we play a role — as long as we participate.

Which reminds me of something else that is both unique to this spring and requires our participation: the 2020 census.

Beginning this month, American residents will have the opportunity to respond to the census online. People can also return census forms via mail through April 30. Afterward, U.S. Census Bureau employees will visit households that have not responded.

Counting every resident inside our country is a monumental task, but it is also an extremely important one. In this magazine,

you can read more about how the census helps our leaders ensure that every county and state in the union maintains adequate representation in government. Population determines the number of representatives a state sends to Washington, making the census a critical part of our democracy.

While each census is important, the 2020 census could be critical for Alabama, and more specifically the Wiregrass. While the state’s population has maintained steady growth in the last 10 years, our neighboring states like Georgia and Florida have experienced major gains.

Some believe Alabama could be at risk of losing a U.S. representative and the accompanying electoral vote, which will impact the state’s contributions to the 2024 and 2028 presidential races. Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey has set a goal to get at least 90% of Alabamians to participate in this year’s census.

City, county and business officials from Houston, Henry and Geneva counties formed a coalition to encourage the response of as many Wiregrass residents as possible. Success, could prevent changes to Alabama’s political landscape — and also ensure our Wiregrass community receives the federal funding that it is rightly due.

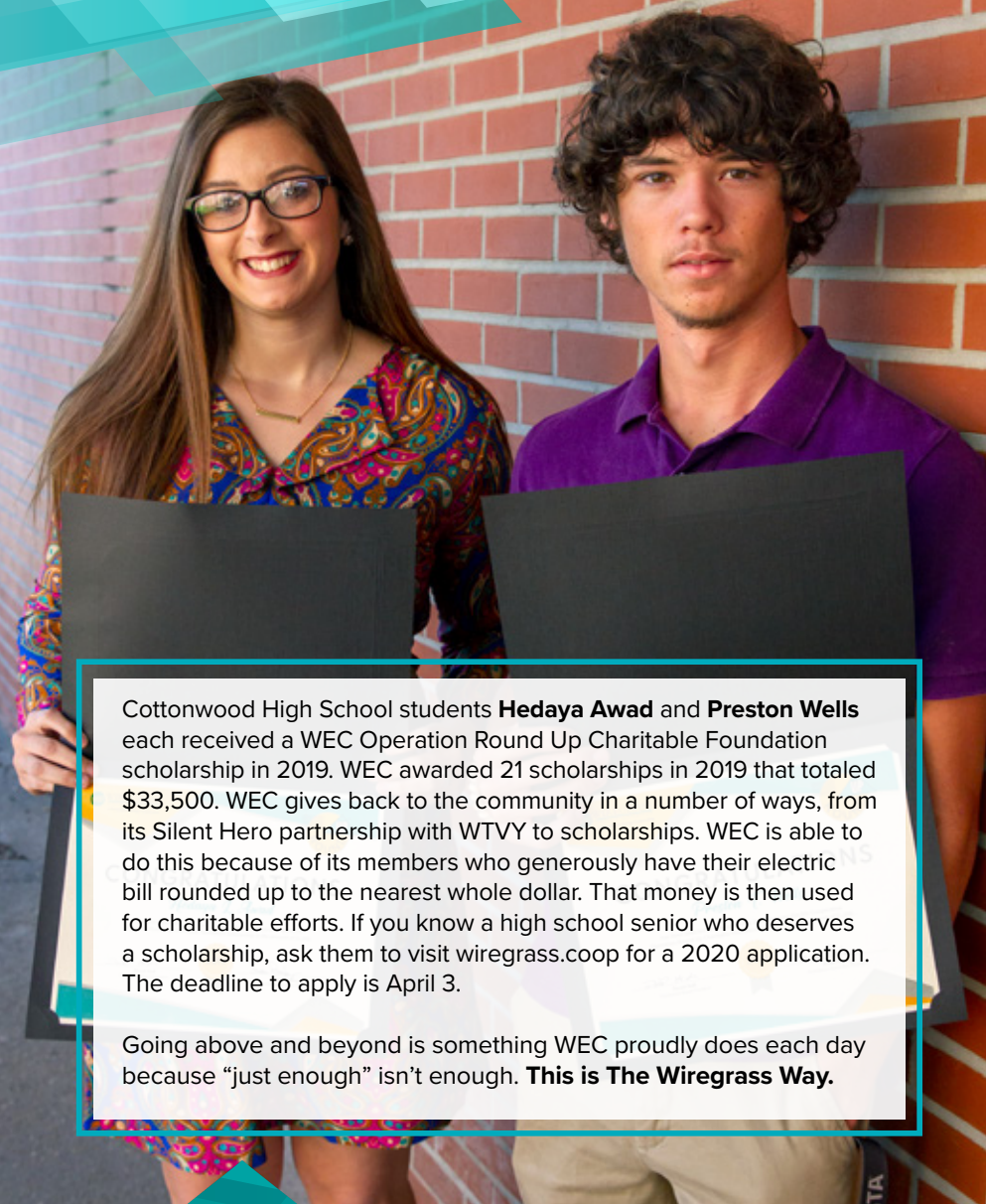
We appreciate the community leaders’ census-related efforts. We believe this partnership will lead to great success, and we urge all of our members to participate.

We have been blessed to have great representation, leaders who have stood in the gap for rural America and ensured that we are not left behind.

We feel answering the census — like voting — is part of the obligations we have as Americans. Participation is all that is asked of us, and participation is indeed all we have. So I urge you to participate in the 2020 census. It will make all the difference in the future of our area. ■

THE WIREGRASS WAY

JUST ENOUGH ISN'T ENOUGH



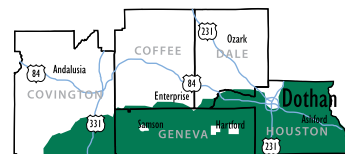
Cottonwood High School students **Hedaya Awad** and **Preston Wells** each received a WEC Operation Round Up Charitable Foundation scholarship in 2019. WEC awarded 21 scholarships in 2019 that totaled \$33,500. WEC gives back to the community in a number of ways, from its Silent Hero partnership with WTVY to scholarships. WEC is able to do this because of its members who generously have their electric bill rounded up to the nearest whole dollar. That money is then used for charitable efforts. If you know a high school senior who deserves a scholarship, ask them to visit wiregrass.coop for a 2020 application. The deadline to apply is April 3.

Going above and beyond is something WEC proudly does each day because “just enough” isn’t enough. **This is The Wiregrass Way.**

THE WAY WE GIVE BACK TO THE COMMUNITY



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Survey says ...

Census provides critical information for funding and representation

If answering 10 questions netted \$1,600 in benefits per year, would you respond? If so, your chance arrives in mid-March when the 2020 census begins.

While Wiregrass Electric Cooperative members will not pocket cash directly for completing the survey, they and their communities will reap the benefits in several ways. In the last decade, the 2010 census partially determined how about \$8 billion in federal funding was spent in Alabama per year, says Dothan Mayor **Mark Saliba** — a figure that roughly equates to \$1,600 per state resident who responded to the survey.

Census-impacted funding affects 132 programs, including Medicaid, highway improvement projects, Section 8 housing vouchers, Head Start, Early Head Start, several nutrition initiatives, the Child Health Insurance Program and many educational programs, Saliba says.

“The census is so important for a lot of things for our area,” says **Brad Kimbro**, WEC’s chief operating officer. “For our county governments, it means so much funding for things like paved roads. Economic development is affected by paved roads, and we’re a big supporter of economic development. We want to live with the funding we’re entitled to.”

In the last decade, though, the Wiregrass missed out on a significant amount of those federal dollars due to poor response rates for the 2010 census. Officials estimate 73% of residents in Houston and Geneva counties answered the survey, while only 59% of Henry County residents participated.

That is why civic and business leaders from those three counties partnered together recently to promote the importance of the census through various business groups, community organizations and churches.

“If the census doesn’t reflect our community accurately, the shortfall in budget dollars has to be made up somehow or the programs suffer,” says **Lori Wilcoxon**, the tri-county’s census coordinator.

In addition to federal funding, the census determines other vital aspects of

American government — namely, electoral votes and legislative districts for the U.S. House of Representatives. Though Alabama has experienced some growth in the last decade, some experts believe the state could lose an electoral vote — and the accompanying U.S. representative — since some other Southern states have registered faster population explosions.

Electoral votes, not necessarily the popular vote nationwide, determine who wins a presidential election every four years.

An accurate count could prevent Ala-



Cliff Mendheim, Dothan Area Chamber of Commerce board chairman, speaks about the history and importance of the nationwide census at a recent news conference.





State House District 93 Rep. Steve Clouse, right, tells a crowd at the Dothan Civic Center that a poor participation rate in the 2020 census could cost Alabama an electoral vote as Houston County Commission Chairman Mark Culver stands in support.

bama’s potential reduction and the major reshaping of districts that would follow. Kimbro suggests the district that includes the Wiregrass could expand to incorporate cities like Auburn or Mobile, which could impact how well the area is represented in the district in future years.

“If we do lose a House seat from seven to six, our district as well as the other districts will look significantly different,” says state Rep. **Steve Clouse**, whose 93rd District covers portions of Dale and Houston counties. “Because of us being in the corner, it’s probably not going to be in a good way. We need to do our part in the Wiregrass region to make sure we get as many folks counted as possible.”

Clouse notes that Utah lost an electoral vote after the 2010 census but would not have if the U.S. Census Bureau had registered just 435 more respondents in the Beehive State — highlighting the importance of counting every Alabamian.

“People ask, ‘What can I do to help my community?’ Fill out the census survey,” Kimbro says.

Alabama Gov. **Kay Ivey** has targeted a 90% participation rate statewide for the 2020 census, a goal local officials also hope to obtain. **Scott Farmer**, executive director of the Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission, says the partnership will address several of the challenges officials encounter when trying to count all Wiregrass residents.

“Parts of Dothan are hard-to-count areas. These are folks that might not receive media the way other folks do, who are not out and about,” says Farmer, whose organization helps small municipalities obtain and utilize federal grants. “A lot of this is pulling resources together, like, coordinating with the Dothan-Houston County Library System to get the message out and help people fill out the census. I think it’s important to educate people through different groups, whether it’s schools, churches, people like United Way officials.”

The U.S. Census Bureau will not mail forms to post office boxes, impacting people who utilize them and creating another challenge. Technological advances may curb that impact, though, as for the first time people can respond to the census online from mid-March to April 30.

After April, the census bureau will visit dwellings from which they received no response.

Public perception of the census also presents a problem in obtaining an accurate count. Some people may confuse the census with the American Community Survey, which contains several pages of questions about income and other demographics that may discourage people from answering.

The census everyone will take in 2020 is a much shorter form — only 10 questions — and the categories about income only ask for a broad assessment, officials say. Additionally, federal law prevents the U.S. Census Bureau from revealing any identifying information about any respondent.

Local officials hope that information will assuage those concerns and encourage better rates of participation.

“I’ve already had people calling me saying, ‘I don’t like some of these questions,’” says **Mark Culver**, Houston County Commission chairman. “We understand that, but understand that these things are not an overreach by the government. We just need you to be counted.”

“As far as the census, this only comes around every 10 years. What goes on now is gonna affect us for 10 years down the road,” adds Alabama House District 87 Rep. **Jeff Sorrells**. “A lot of people may not want to fill this out and think that someone’s trying to pry in on them, but this is for the Wiregrass and for the future.” ■

U.S. census at a glance

WHO: All people residing in the United States, U.S. government employees (military and civilian) and their dependents living abroad are counted in the census.

WHAT: Since 1790, thanks to a requirement in the U.S. Constitution, Congress has conducted a census every 10 years to determine how many people live in the country overall and in each state.

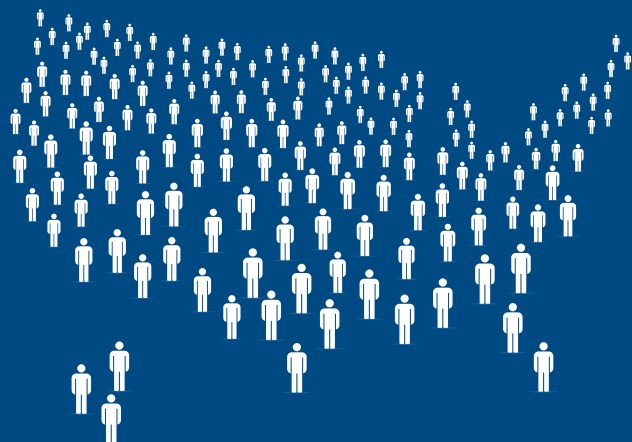
WHY: The census has always determined each state's representation in Congress, specifically how many people it can send to the U.S. House of Representatives. This, in turn, constitutes each state's vote total in the Electoral College — which determines the winner of presidential elections.

Originally the census also helped determine each state's share of the debt the country accrued during the Revolutionary War, but secondary purposes of the census have changed throughout history. After a 1965 U.S. Supreme Court ruling, officials use census data to create the outlines of federal legislative districts in an effort to ensure each member of the U.S. House of Representatives serves about the same number of people. Subsequently, state and local legislative districts have followed suit in that endeavor.

In addition to representation, today's census data, like population and income levels, factor into the amount of federal funding each state, county and community receives for at least 132 programs. These include Medicaid, highway projects, special education programs, Title I education grants, Head Start, Early Head Start and Section 8 housing. Following the 2010 census, for example, Alabama received about \$8 billion per year in federal funding for these programs — equating to about \$1,600 per counted resident.

“In federal funding, the money follows the numbers, not the need,” says **Jessica James**, a U.S. Census Bureau representative. “We want the complete, accurate count.”

WHEN AND WHERE: For the first time in history, residents can answer census questions online beginning sometime in mid-March. The U.S. Census Bureau will also send surveys to physical addresses by early April, which can then be mailed back. Beginning May 1, U.S. Census Bureau employees will go door to door to follow up with those who have not responded online or by mail. ■



Source: U.S. Census Bureau



Heroes among us

WEC and WTVY honor community contributors with banquet

Some support the elderly, and some aid children and their families. Some honor veterans, and some assist the ill and hurting. All are Silent Heroes of the Wiregrass.

Wiregrass Electric Cooperative and WTVY News 4 united all of the 2019 Silent Heroes of the Wiregrass honorees at a January banquet — providing a voice to the selfless acts they all do quietly. The Silent Heroes program, now in its third year, provides \$1,000 to the winners thanks to WEC's Operation Round Up Charitable Foundation.

"Every time I get to speak about this program, I get excited. It just works," says **David Hall**, the foundation's president. "Silent Heroes, you're what makes this place a wonderful place to live and worship."

"They're doing things, and they're not trying to get credit for them," says **Brad Kimbro**, WEC's chief operating officer. "They're doing it silently to do nothing else but to help people. By helping people, our Wiregrass communities are so much better."

Wiregrass Electric and WTVY News 4, which partners with the cooperative to present the Silent Heroes awards, honored the

following people for their contributions:

- **Brandee Lukas, Lifted Higher Ministries** — She formed Lifted Higher Ministries with her husband, Adam, to help parents develop the life skills needed to obtain custody of their children from the foster care system. The nonprofit also assists the elderly.
- **Abbie Sheppard** — The Wiregrass woman crochets hats for chemotherapy patients to wear, and she also provides goodie bags.
- **Sherrie White** — She assists several people with their rent, utilities payments and transportation needs. Some clients have enough money to buy their groceries and medication but lack the transportation to do so.
- **Matt Larson, Annie's Cafe of Enterprise** — On multiple occasions, Larson and his staff have served food to victims of disasters, both locally and in other areas of Alabama. Additionally, the restaurant organizes annual back-to-school supply drives.
- **Celeste Kelly, Catholic Social Services in Dothan** — The organization provides assistance with food, clothing, utilities,



Brad Kimbro, Wiregrass Electric Cooperative's chief operating officer, addresses the crowd attending the Silent Heroes of the Wiregrass 2019 banquet in Dothan in January.



Top: Silent Heroes award recipients from 2019 gather for a picture with WEC and WTVY News 4 officials. Bottom left: Silent Heroes banquet attendees enjoy food from award-winning chef Kelsey Barnard Clark of KBC in Dothan. Bottom right: Silent Heroes winner Martha Ann Meadows, right, attended the Silent Heroes banquet.

medicines and rent in an eight-county service area.

- **Echo United Methodist Church** — The congregation in this small Dale County community owns a 10-acre tract of land, which it uses to grow food for those who are less fortunate. The church has served about 100 needy families.
- **Tina Johnson** — The Enterprise police officer assists children in impoverished neighborhoods with their schoolwork and supports them in other ways. She also serves as the school resource officer for Enterprise High School.
- **Mike Thames** — The Geneva resident has fed and created shelters for a burgeoning feral cat population. That has led to the adoption of several of the cats.
- **Pilot Club of Dothan** — While it assists on several projects, an empha-

sis is a fundraising initiative that helps purchase trackers for Alzheimer's disease patients. These trackers help law enforcement officials locate missing patients.

- **Homer Spooner** — The Cottonwood-area resident and his wife, Sheila, build wooden crosses to memorialize deceased local veterans. Then, they display the crosses between Memorial Day and Independence Day and around Veterans Day along Alabama Highway 53.
- **Suzie Peters** — The Dothan police officer volunteers some of her off-duty hours to teach self-defense classes to females 12 and older.
- **Martha Ann Meadows** — The Hartford-area woman volunteers at a service organization, and she bakes cakes for several fundraisers that benefit an array of area needs.

- **Ron Bedford** — He not only once walked from Mobile to Washington, D.C., to raise money for a World War II memorial, but he also has conducted several fundraisers for cancer research. Bedford was a 2018 winner of the Silent Heroes award, but he was honored in January due to the timing of the 2018 banquet.

Funding for Operation Round Up stems from the contributions WEC members make each month when they opt to round their power bills to the next dollar. The roundups generate about \$120,000 annually, which the foundation reinvests into the community through scholarships and programs like Silent Heroes. ■