

BROADBAND:
HELPING YOU CONNECT



SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2020



VTX1 Companies

COMPASS

VOL. 1, NO. 5

NEW HOMES, NEW LIVES

Habitat for Humanity
builds a brighter
future



A PLACE TO RECHARGE

Ronald McDonald House
offers solace to families

LONG-DISTANCE BONDS

Broadband makes connections
across the miles

Bringing people together even when we must be apart

Farmers, businesspersons and citizens of rural communities who founded our cooperative knew the addition of telephone in the area would help them keep in touch with many near and far. For decades, technology in many forms has helped to create and maintain these essential human connections.



DAVE OSBORN
Chief Executive Officer

Because of telephone lines constructed across our then, primarily rural South Texas area, parents could talk with their children and grandchildren who did not live in the vicinity. With this innovation, sons and daughters serving in the military from coast to coast had a lifeline back home. If bad weather rolled through, calls could be made to check on friends and family and if trouble did strike, telephone helped to send a lifeline to the closest doctor's office or hospital. Building our phone network helped connect people of our communities like never before.

Today, I believe our founding cooperative members would be amazed at the ways we use the technology highlighted in this issue to stay connected. Thanks to the broadband network

VTX1 Companies provides, members upload photos of their gardens, craft projects or baking creations to share with friends and families in our community or across the world. Videos are shared of first steps, birthdays and graduations through social media platforms. Streaming video has allowed us to virtually attend classes or church on Sunday. Video calls allow us to catch up with friends and family, hold meetings for work or visit with a doctor from home. Cellular networks are even used to make video calls. Not known by many, most often it's the fiber optic backbone we've built that connects the cell towers that feed the internet connection that travel with you where you go.

The pandemic has significantly sped up our willingness to adopt such technology. Experts suggest that in the last three to five months, Americans have used virtual meetings, video chat and applications at levels that weren't projected to be reached for another three to five years. Perhaps you've embraced new technology during this historic period in time? Many members have, for the first time, paid bills, shopped or paid for a food delivery from a local restaurant to shelter in place as necessary.

I appreciate your patience and willingness to learn these new skills. I know I'm ready for things to get back to normal, but I'm proud to see the difference our cooperative makes in keeping our community connected — no matter what you choose to do today or in the future. 📞

OCTOBER IS NATIONAL COOPERATIVE MONTH

Every year, we take time to recognize National Cooperative Month, and I never pass up a chance to celebrate our cooperative story. I will always appreciate the bold decision by Willacy County residents to band together to found Valley Telephone Cooperative, Inc. No other company was willing to invest in a telecommunications network in our area, so they took it upon themselves to bring our region into the modern era. Their cooperative spirit lives on today through our board and employees who proudly continue the tradition of connecting our members through technology. Thank you to our members for your continued support!



VTX1 Companies

Phone: 800-446-2031

Hours of Operation:

- Business Offices:
Mon.-Fri. • 8 a.m.-5 p.m.
- Customer Service:
Mon.-Fri. • 8 a.m.-7 p.m.
- VTCL & Fiber Tech Support:
Mon.-Fri. • 8 a.m.- 9 p.m., Sat.-Sun. • 10 a.m.-7 p.m.
- Wireless Tech Support:
Mon.-Sun. • 24/7

Raymondville Corporate Office

881 E. Hidalgo Ave. • Raymondville, TX 78580

Dilley Office

1489 W. FM 117 • Dilley, TX 78017

Falfurrias Office

300 N. St. Mary's St. • Falfurrias, TX 78355

George West Office

510 Bowie St. • George West, TX 78022

Jourdanton Office

511 Main St. • Jourdanton, TX 78026

Seguin Office

3547 N. Hwy. 123 Bypass • Seguin, TX 78155
830-379-0660

San Antonio Office

6884 Alamo Downs Pkwy • San Antonio, TX 78238
888-651-6080

Board of Directors:

- Chief Executive Officer – Dave Osborn
- District 1 – J.T. Mayo Jr. (Port Mansfield & San Perlita)
- District 2 – George Bennack (Stillman)
- District 3 – Matthew Kiefer (Lasara)
- District 4 – Margie Pollock (Encino & Hargill) – SECRETARY
- District 5 – VACANT
- District 6 – Idalia (Dolly) Villarreal (El Sauz & McCook) – PRESIDENT
- District 7 – Charles Fred Hillje (Annarose & Artesia Wells)
- District 8 – VACANT
- District 9 – James Mann (San Miguel & Tilden)
- District 10 – Frank Weaver (Concepcion & Miranda City) – TREASURER

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WORDSOUTH
A CONTENT MARKETING COMPANY

On the Cover:



Hugh Rojas, ReStore Director for Habitat for Humanity of the Rio Grande Valley, ensures shoppers receive deep discounts.
See story Page 9.

Cooperatives cooperate within TTA

As you may already know, October is National Cooperative Month, which is a great time for me to introduce myself and your Texas Telephone Association.

We are an organization that helps cooperative and independent telephone companies like VTX1 Companies solve problems together and share the stories of rural broadband customers like you with policymakers and legislators in Austin and Washington, D.C.



Mark Seale, Texas Telephone Association executive director.

In 1905, we were founded by a group of companies with the vision to bring all Texans reliable phone service. As we have grown over the years, our focus remains on providing reliable service and on using the latest communications technology available to provide for a connected rural Texas.

TTA is made up of 41 companies serving every part of our state. Our members connect more than 1.2 million households in an area covering over 124,000 square miles. That's about half of Texas — an area the size of Montana.

My name is Mark Seale, and I am the new Executive Director at TTA. I joined TTA this summer at an exciting time, as the organization has recently rebranded and renewed its focus on the broadband and telecommunications issues that matter to you.

As a seventh-generation Texan with roots in rural Texas, and as someone who has been involved in state politics for more than 30 years, I am proud to join a group of committed telecom providers who not only understand the struggles in connecting rural Texans but also know how to tell those stories to the right decision makers to get results.

As we move forward, I will work with CEO Dave Osborn and other staff at VTX1 to chart the course for identifying challenges and to solve them collaboratively — keeping our focus on your community and its connectivity needs.

October may be the month when we recognize cooperatives like VTX1, but know the cooperatives and independent telecommunications providers within TTA are cooperating on your behalf all year long.

Learn more about us at tta.org.



Why a cooperative?

October is National Cooperative Month, so we want to take a moment to celebrate the people who make our cooperative possible: **YOU!**

As a member of Valley Telephone Cooperative, Inc., you aren't just paying for a service you need. You're also investing in your community and future. Here are a few reasons you can be proud to call yourself a member of a cooperative.

❖ **YOU'RE TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR EXPERIENCE** — Decisions that affect you aren't being made by wealthy stakeholders who live in a city far away. Instead, you and every other member are invited to take an active role in electing board members who set policies and make decisions. This puts you in control of decisions that affect your experience and your wallet.

❖ **YOU'RE SUPPORTING YOUR COMMUNITY** — Cooperative members, employees and leaders are your neighbors. As local residents, they care about providing vital resources and creating sustainable growth that benefits everyone. As part of our cooperative, you support that growth and community spirit.

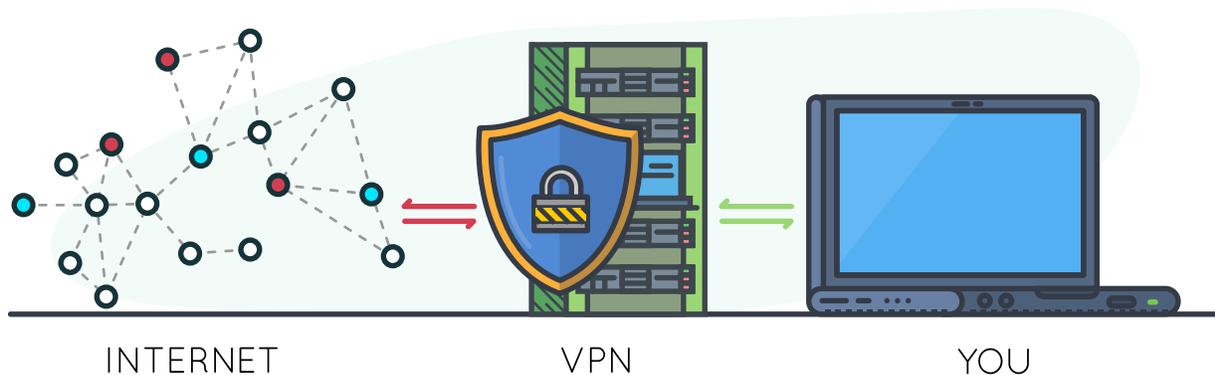
❖ **YOU'RE CONNECTED TO YOUR HISTORY** — VTCI was founded when local residents banded together to solve their own problems. When big companies wouldn't bring telephone services to small towns, our founders took matters into their own hands. They ensured that our region would have access to communications technology so rural families and farms could survive and thrive.

❖ **YOU'RE INVESTING IN YOUR FUTURE** — Just as cooperatives fought to bring reliable telephone service to rural America decades ago, we're working hard today to bring you fast, reliable internet. By working together once more, we're ensuring that our region will be able to access the latest technologies for improved quality of life, education, health care and business.

Cooperatives make a sustainable future possible — and you make our cooperative possible! Thank you for being a member of Valley Telephone Cooperative, Inc.



VTX1 offices will be closed on Monday, Sept. 7, in observance of Labor Day. Have a safe and happy holiday!



Stay secure

A VPN offers a layer of protection when you're on the go

Privacy and security on the internet are vital as more and more of our daily lives revolve around digital communication and most of our financial interactions shift online. A virtual private network, or VPN, can add an additional layer of protection, especially if you find yourself accessing your data outside your home.

WHAT IS A VPN?

At its most basic level, a VPN links your device to a remote computer called a server and allows you to use the internet through that server's internet access. Anyone looking at your internet traffic would only see a secure, encrypted connection to that remote host. A VPN can also keep websites and internet services from tracking your browsing habits, monitoring your search history and knowing your geographic location.

You may not even realize you're already using a VPN. If you're working from home and have access to your company's network, odds are that it's through a VPN.

WHY WOULD I WANT ONE?

If you're at home, VPN use for security is limited, since it is highly unlikely a hacker has targeted your home network. But you may still be interested in being anonymous to companies collecting your data for advertising and commercial purposes.

Once you leave your home and start using other Wi-Fi

networks, a VPN becomes more important. It doesn't matter how good your passwords are. They won't do you much good if they're intercepted by a hacker while you're accessing your bank account at a local coffee shop or even a hotel. People with bad intent can set up access points with similar names to legitimate connections, tricking users into unwittingly giving up their information.

IS THERE A DOWNSIDE?

Connecting to a VPN may slow your connection to the internet. Most VPN providers will show you a list of server locations along with the expected delay, allowing you to choose the fastest link. If you're using a VPN at home, it may also interfere with connections between your VPN-protected computer or smartphone and some of your smart devices.

WHAT'S A GOOD FREE OPTION?

They may not come with all the features that a paid VPN includes, but if you're only using it sporadically, then a free option makes sense. TunnelBear (tunnelbear.com) has a data limit of 500MB per month, but it is user-friendly, available on desktop and mobile versions, and is backed by McAfee, the security software giant.

WHAT'S A GOOD PAID OPTION?

NordVPN — nordvpn.com — is the biggest name in the VPN business for a reason. It provides top-grade security, speedy connections and ease of use across a variety of devices. It can get expensive at \$11.95 a month, but the price drops if you choose annual plans. Most pay services periodically offer discounts, so it may be worth checking out a free option and waiting for a deal. [👉](#)

DEVICE OF THE MONTH

Jabra Elite 75t earbuds

Whether you're working out or working from home, a set of great-sounding Bluetooth earbuds can liven things up. Consider the wireless Jabra Elite 75t earbuds for great performance at a reasonable price. Price: \$180.



Providing the comforts of home



Habitat for Humanity of the Rio Grande Valley builds futures

Story by ANDREA AGARDY



Photo courtesy of David Pike.

A house is more than four walls and a roof. It's a home — a place to rest, to dream and plan for the future.

Thanks to Habitat for Humanity of the Rio Grande Valley, more than 100 families who may have thought homeownership was impossible now have safe, secure, affordable and comfortable houses of their own.

The affiliate of Habitat for Humanity International, led by Executive Director Marissa Treviño, has served Starr, Cameron, Willacy and Hidalgo counties since 1988. In exchange for contributing 300 hours of “sweat equity” alongside building crews working on their homes, Habitat families receive mortgages they can afford. Rather than paying back a bank, mortgage payments go to Habitat, which reinvests those funds into building more homes.

The construction process lasts an average of five months, during which time friendships and community bonds form. The day the keys go to new homeowners is often an emotional experience.

“It’s definitely an extreme amount of gratitude for the homeowners — finally having a place of their own that they can call home,” says Trisha Watts, Habitat’s Director of Development and Communications. It’s also a celebration for the volunteers, she says, “especially after all the effort put in knowing that you’re helping these families in the process.”

VOLUNTEERS MAKE IT POSSIBLE

Volunteers do the bulk of the physical labor on Habitat builds.

“We have a variety of different people that come in. We have student organizations sometimes and volunteers from banks, from stores like McCoy’s Building Supply,” Watts says.

Many Habitat homeowners stay involved with the organization and lend a hand on other builds. “We’ve got our own Habitat for Humanity community among the families we’ve assisted, those that we’re in the process of assisting and volunteers,” she says.

More hands are always welcome.

Prospective volunteers can learn more about getting involved by logging on to habitatrgv.org — no special skills or experience necessary. “As long as they’re at least 16 years old, we can definitely find something for them to help with,” Watts says.

BARGAINS WITH BENEFITS

Habitat’s efforts aren’t limited to new home construction. It also operates two retail locations where the public can score huge deals while supporting the organization’s mission.

Called ReStore, the shops in Harlingen and McAllen offer many products for the home, ranging from furniture and housewares to flooring, windows and more. Store proceeds go back into Habitat’s general operations. “We try to price our items 50-75% off retail prices,” says ReStore Director Hugh Rojas. “Our main customer is anyone else who’s looking to get something good at a better price.”

Most of the merchandise on ReStore shelves comes from individuals or corporate partners like Home Depot, McCoy’s and Lowe’s. “Some of it is new merchandise,” Rojas says. “Some of the people who do donate to us donate new things — things that they no longer have in their stores or things that are probably discontinued in their catalogs.”

Whether you’ve got your eye on a brand-new set of dishes or a gently used couch, if you see something you like in a ReStore shop, seize the moment. If you leave it behind, it may not be there later.

“We’ve got a little slogan: ‘Miss a day, miss a deal!’” Watts says. [👉](#)

GET INVOLVED!

To learn more about Habitat for Humanity of the Rio Grande Valley — including information on how to apply to receive a home, make a donation or volunteer — go to habitatrgv.org.

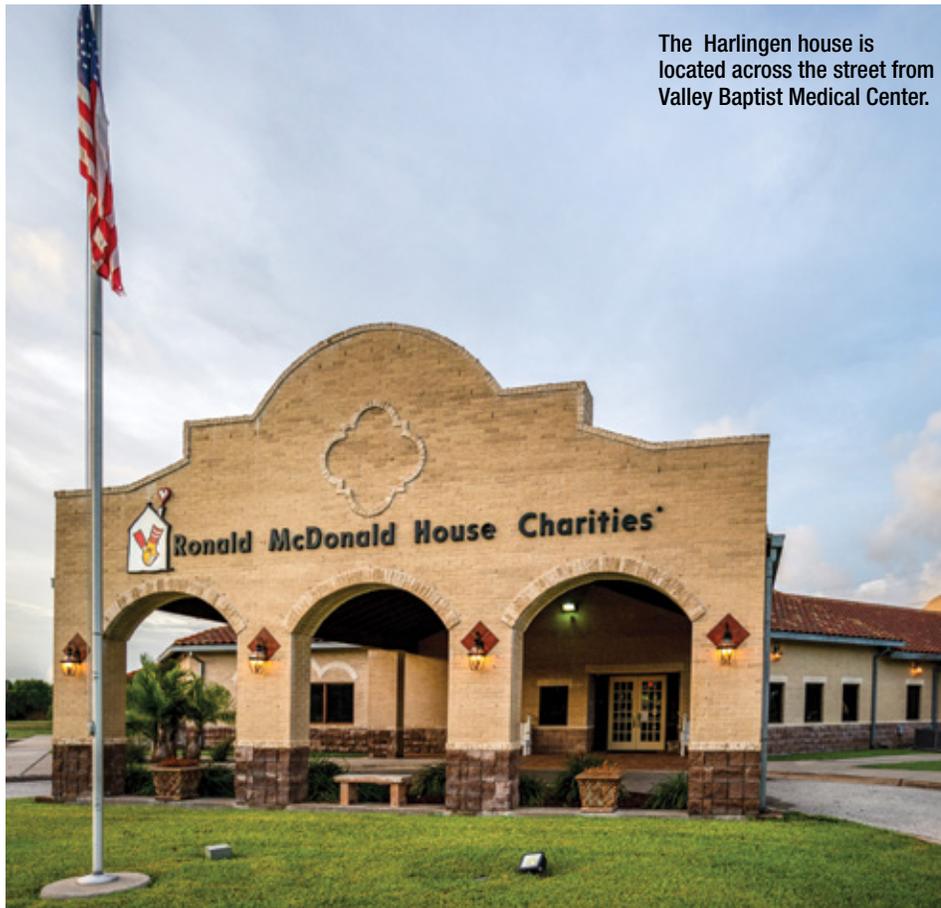
RESTORE LOCATIONS:

- » 412 Ash Ave., McAllen, 956-686-7455
- » 502 N. First St., Harlingen, 956-230-3850

'A HOME AWAY FROM HOME'

Ronald McDonald House provides comfort to families of ailing children

Story by ANDREA AGARDY | Photography by DAVID PIKE



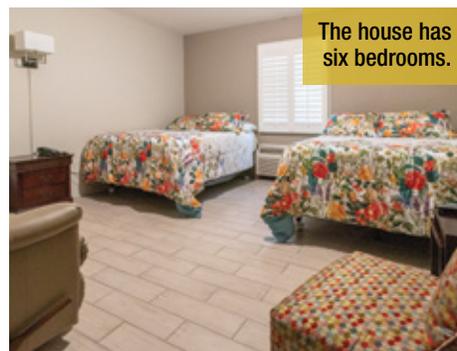
The Harlingen house is located across the street from Valley Baptist Medical Center.

Comforting a sick child doesn't eliminate parents' everyday responsibilities. Adding to the stress and worry of sitting at a child's bedside are routine tasks like cooking meals and doing laundry. Overwhelmed families in South Texas have a haven standing by to ease some of that burden.

"We want to be known as a home away from home for families being treated for serious injury or illness," says Mariano "Bean" Ayala, Executive Director of Ronald McDonald House Charities Rio Grande Valley. "That's what we are — a home away from home." In its 20-year history, the local chapter of the international nonprofit organization has helped more than 3,500 families.

THE HARLINGEN HOUSE

The Ronald McDonald House, just across the street from Valley Baptist Medical Center in Harlingen, offers the comforts of home to families of children receiving treatment at the hospital. The facility asks families for a donation of \$10 a day. "If they don't have that \$10, we're



The house has six bedrooms.

not going to turn them away," Ayala says. "This is their house. Although we don't have income barriers, our goal is to reach as many low-income families as possible."

Built in 1992, the house can accommodate multiple families at once. It has six bedrooms, each with a private bathroom, a fully stocked kitchen and laundry room, a dining area, two living rooms, a playroom, a patio and a backyard. There's also a "quiet room," complete with an often-idle piano. "I've been here for two years, and I have never heard the sound of the piano," Ayala says.

After spending all day surrounded by the sounds of the hospital, many parents welcome the opportunity to simply sit still and undisturbed. "It's something they may not have experienced for days or weeks or even months," Ayala says. "When they come out of that room, they come out beaming. It really refreshes them."

FAMILY ROOMS

In addition to the house, the organization also operates family rooms at Valley Baptist Medical Center and Edinburg Children's Hospital, roughly 35 miles away. Open daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., the family rooms are inside the hospitals and offer many of the same accommodations as the house — all free of charge. Families can come by and take a shower and a nap, do a load of laundry and grab a bite to eat.



Families arrive to find a stocked kitchen.

“People just think we hung the moon,” Ayala says. “Unless you’re in that situation, you might never actually understand what it means to use the Ronald McDonald House or family room.”

The little things Ronald McDonald House Charities offer mean the world to mentally and physically exhausted parents. And for the ailing children, seeing that their parents are in good hands can have positive effects on their health. “If you’re in a hospital, doesn’t it drive you bananas? You don’t think the kids see that? They read us like a book,” Ayala says. “A child in the hospital knows a parent is hurting. A parent can get away from that tough environment, come into a Ronald McDonald House, shower, clean up and eat. They get away from all those sounds, and then they go back to that child re-energized, with a smile. The child sees it and feels it.

“It is a proven fact that when a child is sick and they see their parents with a smile and in a great mood, they heal quicker. That’s what the Ronald McDonald House is all about.”

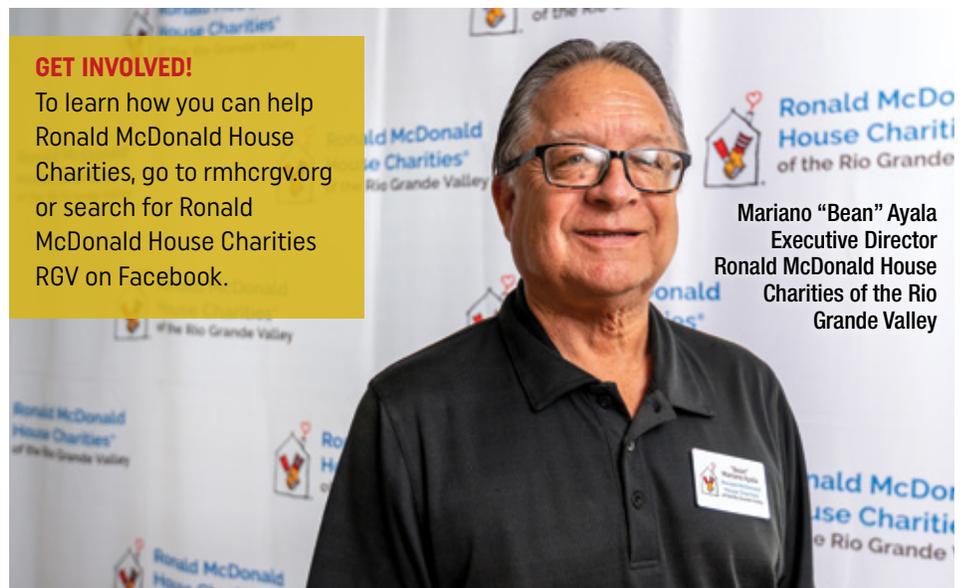
THE COMMUNITY MAKES IT POSSIBLE

The organization wouldn’t be able to provide this assistance without the continued and enthusiastic support of the community. With only two full-time staff members and another 10 part-timers, volunteers are responsible for much of the workload, including staffing the family rooms and cooking meals at the house.

“We’re very, very dependent on volunteers,” Ayala says. “We are always seeking volunteers. The volunteers leave here with big, big smiles because they know the effect of whatever they did is going to have on the families.”

Volunteers come from all corners of the community — Girl Scout troops, local banks, large employers like AT&T and Southwest Airlines and even seasonal residents, or “Winter Texans.”

The Ronald McDonald House receives funding through donations, fundraisers and corporate partnerships. Ayala counts VTX1 Companies among the chapter’s



GET INVOLVED!
To learn how you can help Ronald McDonald House Charities, go to rmhcrgv.org or search for Ronald McDonald House Charities RGV on Facebook.

Mariano “Bean” Ayala
Executive Director
Ronald McDonald House
Charities of the Rio
Grande Valley

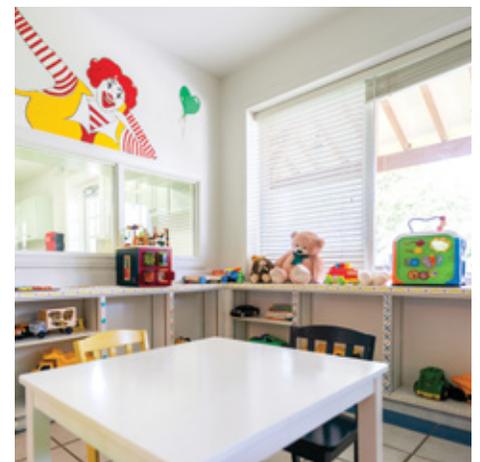


The Ronald McDonald House has plenty of activities on hand to entertain siblings of hospitalized children.

dedicated supporters. “VTX1 has helped not just monetarily, but with volunteers,” he says. “VTX1 has been a blessing to the Ronald McDonald House in so many ways.”

“Helping others in need by using our time is an easy choice,” says Yolanda Silva, VTX1 Companies Network Supervisor. “Especially when it comes to children.”

For example, VTX1’s recent broadband and Wi-Fi upgrades at Camp Perry, which hosts the chapter’s largest annual fundraiser, allowed Ronald McDonald House volunteers to quickly process credit card payments. “VTX1 came to the rescue with internet service, allowing us to get people in quicker,” Ayala says.



“The year before, people were waiting 30, 35 minutes to get in because we couldn’t process their information. VTX1 is a true blessing.” 📞



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VTX1 Companies

2021

Calendar Photo Contest

Wednesday, July 1st

SUBMIT YOUR BEST PHOTO OF LANDSCAPES, ANIMALS, AND EVERYDAY LIFE FOR A CHANCE TO HAVE YOUR IMAGE FEATURED IN OUR 2021 CALENDAR!

THIS CONTEST IS DESIGNATED TO VTCI MEMBERS AND VTXC CUSTOMERS. DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION IS

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2020

VISIT WWW.VTX1.NET FOR A COMPLETE SET OF CONTEST RULES.