



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 5, 2024

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Scholarship Program Helps Families of Laid off Coal Workers in Illinois

JOPPA, Ill. – On September 1, 2022, the coal-fired Joppa Power Plant closed its doors after 70 years of operating. This event marked a significant shift for the residents of Joppa, a town of fewer than 400 residents. The end of operations at the Joppa Power Plant left a void in the community, but for one Joppa family, it also opened doors.

Thanks to the [Displaced Energy Worker Dependent Transition Scholarship Program](#), Noah Holland is now on his way to a career in Electrical Engineering, supported by the state’s commitment to reinvest in energy communities.

The scholarship provides financial assistance to cover educational expenses of dependents (biological and adopted children and stepchildren) of eligible displaced energy workers. It pays tuition and fee costs at Illinois public universities or community colleges for a period equal to one calendar year, including a summer term, for undergraduate or graduate study. Other families impacted by fossil fuel closures and coal mine closures are also eligible for this scholarship.

The Holland family of Joppa experienced the impacts of the coal plant closure first hand. Jeff Holland, a long-time employee of the plant, lost his job, while his wife, Rayette, who serves as the Village of Joppa City Clerk, witnessed the broader community effects, including decreased tax revenue and challenges for the Joppa School District. The plant's closure also affected approximately 90 full-time workers and their families.

As the Holland family grappled with these changes, their son Noah, who had just completed technical training to become an electrician, was considering furthering his education. Encouraged by an instructor at West Kentucky Community and Technical College to pursue a degree in Electrical Engineering, Noah discussed this new path with his parents.

“You don’t ever want to tell your kid they can’t further their education. But we knew Jeff wasn’t going to have a job. We hadn’t known Noah wanted to continue school,” Rayette said.

The Hollands were committed to helping Noah find a way to continue his education, but it wasn't going to be easy.

That's when the family learned about the [Displaced Energy Worker Dependent Transition Scholarship Program](#). Noah was eligible for the scholarship due to Jeff's loss of employment at the Joppa Plant.

The Hollands were surprised and thankful to learn about the scholarship.

"I was amazed that there was such a niche scholarship available for someone in my exact situation and was very excited to apply when I heard about it," said Noah Holland, 2023/24 scholarship recipient.

"We are so thankful and we talk about our experience all the time," said Rayette, who wants other families to learn about and take advantage of the scholarship.

Noah graduated in 2019 with valedictorian honors from Joppa High School, and he first attended Shawnee Community College and then West Kentucky Community and Technical College. With support from the scholarship, he enrolled at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in 2023/24, pursuing a degree in Electrical Engineering. He plans to continue at SIU this fall semester.

The [Illinois Student Assistance Commission \(ISAC\)](#) administers the scholarship program, and ISAC recently announced [details and application dates](#) for the 2024-2025 academic year. Students should apply online by October 1 for consideration for a full year scholarship. Scholarships are available for undergraduate or graduate study and are not limited to specific academic programs.

"Funding a college education can be an overwhelming and very real concern for many students," said Eric Zarnikow, executive director of ISAC. "For students in families impacted by plant closures and job losses, enrolling or continuing in postsecondary education may seem like an impossible financial burden. This scholarship can turn that around and can truly be life changing for these students."

The Displaced Energy Worker Dependent Transition Scholarship Program was enacted into law in late 2021 as part of the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA). While CEJA is largely known for helping build renewable energy, it also created programs and opportunities to support Illinois communities and workers impacted by the closure of fossil fuel plants and coal mines.

Coal community leaders and environmental groups like Prairie Rivers Network helped inform and advocate for important pieces of CEJA aimed at reinvesting in energy communities. And they're now working to help get the word out.

The Holland's learned about the scholarship from Joppa Mayor Sue Sandusky through Prairie Rivers Network's continued advocacy and outreach to coal community leaders.

“We helped develop and advocate for the passage of the Energy Community Reinvestment pieces of CEJA, and it’s so incredible to now see those programs helping people like the Hollands,” said Amanda Pankau, director of energy and community resiliency at the environmental nonprofit Prairie Rivers Network, “And even more exciting, another CEJA program, the Energy Transition Community Grant Program, is providing \$40 million annually to communities impacted by plant and mine closures.”

Reflecting on Noah’s journey, Rayette said: “Growing up, Noah always said he was going to work at the Joppa Plant like his dad.”

This was a common hope among young people in Illinois’ coal communities, where employment at the local plant or mine was one of the few local job opportunities and a source of pride for the community. While that isn’t an option anymore for Noah and countless other people as the nation’s coal industry declines, Noah still wants to be a part of powering our communities.

“I pursued a degree in Electrical Engineering because I am excited to be involved in something so powerful as the energy that powers nearly everything in our daily lives,” Noah said.

No matter where his career takes him, in that way he will be following in his dad’s footsteps.

Students interested in the Displaced Energy Worker Dependent Transition Scholarship Program are encouraged to learn additional details about the program at <https://www.isac.org/displacedenergyworker>. Students can also talk to an ISAC staff member about this program by emailing isac.studentservices@illinois.gov or by calling ISAC Student Engagement and Support Services at 1-800-899 ISAC (4722) Monday through Friday between the hours of 8:00AM - 4:30PM CT.

About ISAC

The mission of the Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) is to provide Illinois students with information and assistance to help make education beyond high school accessible and affordable. ISAC provides comprehensive, objective, and timely information on education and financial aid for students and their families—giving them access to the tools they need to make the educational choices that are right for them. Then, through the state scholarship and grant programs ISAC administers, ISAC can help students make those choices a reality. Find us at [isac.org](https://www.isac.org) or on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/ILStudentAssistance) (@ILStudentAssistance), [X](https://www.x.com/ISACfinaid), on [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/ISACfinaid) @ISACfinaid, and watch our videos on [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com).

Prairie Rivers Network

At Prairie Rivers Network (PRN), we protect water, heal land, and inspire change. Using the creative power of science, law, and collective action, we protect and restore our rivers, return healthy soils and diverse wildlife to our lands, and transform how we care for the earth and for each other. PRN is the Illinois affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation. To learn more please visit www.prairierivers.org.

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