

COVID-19 Relief and Recovery: Guiding Principles to Secure Our Water Future

As of April 10, 2020

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Introduction

Water is the lifeblood of our communities and our economy. We know water is playing an essential role in our health and well-being during the public health crisis brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Clean, affordable, and accessible water service is fundamental to public health and thriving communities. Modern treatment processes are intended to ensure all viruses, including COVID-19, stay out of the water supply. Water and wastewater systems are one of the greatest public health achievements in this country and cannot be taken for granted. The challenges facing water systems in a time of crisis will affect communities differently—those already in the midst of ongoing economic, environmental, and public health challenges may be hardest hit.

During this moment of crisis, we offer four principles that knit together enduring water issues critical at this time: who has access to it, who manages it, how it is paid for, and how all communities are kept safe and healthy. We see both challenges and solutions worthy of our collective attention right now. There is responsibility at every level of government—local, state, and federal—to make sure everyone has access to water. It is critical that the systems delivering this essential resource are strong enough to endure economic challenges in the short and long term, meeting the needs of all communities along the way.

Water connects us all. This is an important moment for the United States to commit to a future where everyone can count on reliable and safe water service—now and for future generations.

PRINCIPLE

1.

Ensure water is reliable and affordable for all.

Our shared well-being depends on everyone having access to quality, affordable housing, healthcare, food, and water and sewer service. Yet growing income inequality in the United States puts more people at risk of being unable to afford these essentials. The COVID-19 pandemic is bringing the challenge of water affordability sharply into focus. Water utilities depend on rates for system revenues, and shutoffs are commonly used to enforce bill payment. In response to the pandemic, water utilities are proactively suspending shutoffs and restoring service to people. Other economic impacts are also reducing utility revenues, which may mean rate increases are necessary over time to meet the costs of providing service. That, in turn, will worsen the affordability problem.

During this public health emergency, there should be a national moratorium on shutoffs and restoration of water service to households that have lost access. State and federal assistance should be provided to families to help pay water bills and to water utilities to offset the economic losses associated with free or below-cost service provision during the crisis.

In the longer term, there should be a commitment at every level of government to ensure access to a basic level of water and sewer service for all, regardless of income. While there are assistance programs for other utilities, such as the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (commonly known as LIHEAP), there is no equivalent for water. And, while water assistance programs can help, rate structures designed to ensure affordability are also needed. We must work together as a nation—with co-investment by water providers and local, state, and federal government—to ensure that everyone has safe and reliable water service.

PRINCIPLE

2.

Strengthen water utilities of all sizes.

Water utilities are anchor institutions in their communities, providing an essential public health service. Water and wastewater professionals are among the nation's critical infrastructure workforce who remain on the job—potentially putting their health at risk—during this pandemic. Maintaining safe water for cleaning and handwashing and maintaining wastewater treatment to prevent disease spread are critical tools in the fight against COVID-19. As the nation continues to grapple with the increasingly devastating effects from COVID-19, water utilities are serving their customers, protecting public health, and safeguarding their workforce.

Simultaneously, water utilities are experiencing sudden drops in revenue as economic activity precipitously declines. Tourism and convention activities are canceled, sports arenas are closed, hotels and schools are empty, and restaurants and bars are deserted. In addition to dropping revenues, water utilities are also incurring new, additional costs to staff critical operations during the pandemic. While water utilities of all sizes are struggling, small water systems are likely to need extra support since they have fewer customers capable of paying their bills and fewer workers to rely on when others fall ill. Small water systems may fail entirely without emergency action.

Any emergency relief and recovery dollars must include resources to keep water utilities strong and go directly to the agencies operating the water systems. Funding for affected water utilities is critical to help offset lost revenue, the costs associated with moratoriums on shutoffs, and the essential public health protections being put in place by water utilities through their emergency response. All utility personnel who are classified as essential workers should be eligible for state and federal emergency support and health protections. Grant or low-interest loan funding must be made available to help utility operations at a time when revenues are dropping dramatically. A portion of funds made available should be dedicated to water systems facing the greatest public health risk. Wherever possible, funding support for water utilities should come through established programs like the State Revolving Loan Funds, WIFIA, Community Development Block Grants, and USDA Rural Water programs.

PRINCIPLE

3.

Close the water access gap.

COVID-19 has made it clear that there is no public health without clean water for all. If one person or community does not have clean water, the health and well-being of everyone else is at risk. Curbing COVID-19's spread requires people to increase handwashing, personal hygiene, and cleaning standards. But for the more than two million Americans who lack running water, indoor plumbing, or wastewater services in their homes and communities, these seemingly simple measures are out of reach. Many of those without access to water infrastructure live in rural and tribal areas, or are part of high-risk groups for COVID-19 including the elderly, disabled, homebound, people with preexisting conditions, and the homeless.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency and the US Army Corps of Engineers should partner to close the water access gap using existing natural disaster response protocols, prioritizing disadvantaged communities where local capacity may be limited. These agencies should also partner with states and municipalities to provide water deliveries and set up hand-washing stations for people without water immediately. These emergency measures should be supplemented with longer-term solutions to close the water access gap.

PRINCIPLE

4.

Fuel economic recovery by investing in water systems.

To weather this global pandemic, we need immediate and sustained intervention to protect people's health and well-being. But we must also begin planning for an economic recovery that leaves our communities and economy stronger and more resilient. If water infrastructure fails, it creates a domino effect across the economy and threatens our environment and public health. One-fifth of the US economy—agriculture, healthcare, manufacturing, and electricity—would grind to a halt without a reliable and clean supply of water. Yet, we have chronically underinvested in water for too long. As a result, a water main breaks every two minutes in the United States. The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates the country must spend at least \$1.2 trillion over the next 20 years on our drinking water and wastewater systems.

One of the smartest ways to jumpstart economic recovery is investing in our nation's water and wastewater infrastructure. Closing the water infrastructure investment gap would create more than 1.5 million American jobs, more than the entire employed workforce in 20 states. It would generate over \$260 billion in economic activity annually, which exceeds the gross domestic product generated by 28 states. Major investment in water systems is a smart and sustainable way to bring our economy back and build up communities so they can all thrive.

Take action. Join the diverse organizations who endorse these principles.

Signatories as of April 10, 2020:

Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority
Alexandria Renew Enterprises
Alliance for the Great Lakes
Alliance of Indiana Rural Water
American Public Health Association
American Rainwater Catchment Systems Association
American Rivers
American Society of Civil Engineers
American Water
American Water Works Association
Aspen Institute Energy and Environment Program
Association for Farmers Rights Defense, AFRD
Association of Boards of Certification
Association of Idaho Cities
Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies
Atlanta Department of Watershed Management
Atlantic County Utilities Authority
Audubon California
Bay Area Council
Black & Veatch
blueW
Boston Water and Sewer Commission
Brown and Caldwell
Buckman Direct Diversion Water Treatment Facility
Buffalo Sewer Authority
California Association of Sanitation Agencies
California Coastkeeper Alliance
California Institute of Environmental Design & Management
California League of Conservation Voters
California Municipal Utilities Association
Carollo Engineers
Cascade Water Alliance
Center for Community Progress
Center for Neighborhood Technology

Ceres
Chattahoochee Riverkeeper
Chemtex Environmental Laboratory Inc.
Cimino Backflow Testing & Inspection
City of Des Moines
City of Sacramento
City of Santa Cruz Water Department
City of Santa Fe Water System
Clean Water Action/Clean Water Fund
Clean Water Services
Cleveland Neighborhood Progress
Cleveland Water Alliance
Common-Unity PGH
Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo
Community Water Center
Congressional Black Caucus Foundation
The Conservation Fund
Cooper's Ferry Partnership
Cotton Research Institute
Cream City Conservation
Creative New Jersey
Current
Cynthia and George Mitchell Foundation
DC Water
Denver Water
DigDeep
Dream In Green
Drink Local Drink Tap
Duke University, Nicholas School for the Environment
Earth Economics
Eco-Engineering International, Inc.
EJ Water Cooperative, Inc.
Elevate Energy
EMA, Inc.
Engineers Without Borders USA
Environmental Community Action (ECO-Action)
Environmental Defense Fund
Environmental Policy Innovation Center
Environmental Resolutions, Inc.
EPCOR USA
Evoqua
Faiths for Safe Water
FLOW (For Love of Water)
Freshwater Future
Geosearch Limited
GlobeWater & Solar
Greater Cincinnati Water Works
Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance
Greeley and Hansen
Green Infrastructure Leadership Exchange
Green Water-Infrastructure Academy

Greenbelt Alliance
Greenprint Partners
Greer Commission of Public Works
GRW Engineers, Inc.
Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy
Hampton Roads Sanitation District
Harris & Associates
Harris County Utility District 15
Hazen and Sawyer
Houston Water
Illinois Environmental Council
INTERA
The International Association of Plumbing and Mechanical
 Officials
International Union of Painters & Allied Trades
Isle Utilities
Jacobs
Jersey Water Works
KC Water
Laborers' International Union of North America
Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability
Louisville Water
Louisville/Jefferson County Metropolitan Sewer District
Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District
Madison Water Utility
Metropolitan Council
Metropolitan Planning Council
Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago
Mi Familia Vota
Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District
Milwaukee Water Commons
Milwaukee Water Works
Moonshot Missions
Mount Pleasant Waterworks
National Association of Clean Water Agencies
National Black Worker Centers Project
National Rural Water Association
National Wildlife Federation
Natural Resources Defense Council
Nevada Department of Environmental Protection
Nevada Division of Environmental Protection
New England Water Environment Association
New Jersey Future
NEW Water
New York State Backflow Testers Association
Nia Solutions
Northeast Biosolids & Residuals Association
Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District
Northeast-Midwest Institute
Oregon Citizens' Utility Board
Oregon Environmental Council
Pacific Institute
Partnership for Southern Equity
Philadelphia Water Department
Phoenix Water
Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority
PolicyLink
PUSH Buffalo
Raleigh Water
Raybern Utility Solutions
Recode
Regional Water Authority
River Network
Robert Redford Conservancy for Southern California
 Sustainability at Pitzer College
Rural Community Assistance Partnership
S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation
San Francisco Public Utilities Commission
San Jerardo Cooperative, Inc.
Schreiber Water
Scott Miller Strategies
Seattle Public Utilities
Separation Processes, Inc.
Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans
Signal Group
Slavic Village Development
Smart Growth America
Southeast Rural Community Assistance Partnership
Southwest Environmental Finance Center
Stantec
Superior Water Management of Texas
Sustainable Conservation
Sustainable Synthesis Limited, PBC
Svanda & Coy Consulting
Tetra Tech
Texas Rural Water Association
Texas Water Infrastructure Network
TREE-Training Research Education for Empowerment
Tucson Water
U.S. Water Partnership
Union of Concerned Scientists
United for Infrastructure
United Methodist Committee on Relief
University of Pittsburgh, School of Public Health, Center
 for Health Equity
University of Wollongong
Urban Water Works
UrbanKind Institute
US Water Alliance
Valley Water
Value of Water Campaign
Vermont Rural Water Association

Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission
Water and Wastewater Equipment Manufacturers
Association
Water Environment Federation
Water For People
Water Foundation
Water Hub
Water Pigeon
The Water Research Foundation
WaterNow Alliance
West Atlanta Watershed Alliance
Willamette Partnership
Woodard & Curran
Xylem
York Sewer District
Zephyr Mangata

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**To learn more about these guiding principles, share ideas,
or ask questions, please contact the US Water Alliance:
info@uswateralliance.org**