



Recovering
Stronger



Preventing Water Shutoffs for Low-Income Households: A 10-City Pilot Project Description

COVID-19 has upended life across America, disrupting business as usual in every sector and shifting the way we relate to, and work with, one another. In many ways, and across many sectors, the pandemic exposes and reinforces structural challenges and social inequities. In the water sector, this plays out through access to water, the cost of water services, governance structures, and even how we fund and deliver those water services. Local water agencies can use this opportunity to forge significant progress and help communities and the nation to recover stronger.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that universal access to water is critical to a safe and healthy society.

Water affordability issues—particularly water shutoffs—were a concern before the pandemic, and the new reality has underscored the importance of clean, affordable water services in protecting public health. Many water agencies have implemented shutoff moratoriums and restored service in homes that were shut off. These measures are a promising move towards more equitable practices, but they beg the question: what happens when moratoriums expire and the pandemic subsides?

The time is right for a paradigm shift in the water sector around affordability, shutoffs, and utility financial resilience. Water agencies have long struggled to balance the costs of water management with affordability needs, and community advocates are vocal in their criticism of shutoffs. During this moment of uncertainty, there is an opportunity for water leaders to implement approaches that meet the multiple goals of providing equitable water service, preventing water shutoffs, and ensuring that utilities are financially resilient.

Overview

In response to this moment of crisis and opportunity, the US Water Alliance is undertaking a pilot project with member utilities to advance practices and policies to prevent shutoffs for low-income households in 10 cities. While water shutoffs are a flashpoint issue that is being debated in newspapers and in policy circles, we believe that with the right set of strategies and supports, water agencies can make progress on this in their own service areas right now. This project will align the resources and expertise of an array of stakeholders to advance equitable solutions that prevent water shutoffs. The Alliance will convene teams in each of the 10 cities composed of utility staff, community leaders, and technical experts to collaboratively develop strategies that prevent shutoffs and ensure utility financial resilience in a post-COVID world. Together, the teams will explore a range of approaches to prevent shutoffs through targeted changes to customer assistance programs, customer service practices, arrears, rate design, operational efficiency, and other areas of utility management. At the heart of this pilot will be the establishment and support of a utility-community partnership in each of the 10 cities. It is our belief, that by building understanding and shared purpose between water agencies and communities who represent low-income households we can make progress that is faster and more sustainable.

Project Components

Develop a menu of strategies. The US Water Alliance will develop a menu of utility management and policy strategies that prevent shutoffs while maintaining utilities' financial resilience. These may include adjusting rate structures, finding alternative mechanisms for enforcing payment, providing financial and other assistance to low-income customers, lowering overall utility costs, state and federal policy supports, and more.

Support adoption in 10 participating cities. The US Water Alliance will work with 10 water agencies to demonstrate that the strategies are feasible and compatible with sound utility management. We will guide them through identifying the causes and effects of shutoffs, selecting an appropriate strategy (or strategies), and developing a community engagement approach to advance their efforts. Cities will receive coaching, technical assistance, and support to identify affordability challenges and implement utility management and policy changes.

Support community collaboration. The Alliance believes in the power of strong utility-community partnerships to make progress on water equity. We will work with water agencies to identify organizations representing communities affected by water shutoffs to partner with. Teams may include groups like housing advocates, social service providers, energy utilities, public health departments, and other local stakeholders that are invested in the issue. We will provide advice and facilitation support to enable productive utility-community collaboration.

Promote knowledge building and peer exchange. The Alliance will convene the 10 teams in learning sessions, peer-to-peer exchanges, and other mechanisms to support knowledge transfer and connections. By advancing this work as a community of practice, we hope to accelerate progress across the 10 cities.

Spread and share outcomes. The Alliance will highlight and celebrate participating cities that are making progress on preventing shutoffs through publications, presentations, convenings, and briefings for policymakers looking to address water affordability and access issues at the state and federal level. The lessons and insights from this pilot will inform the national conversation on affordability and utility financial resiliency.

Times of upheaval can lead to moments of radical change. As COVID-19 upends life across America, we can take this moment of disruption and turn it into a source of lasting transformation in how we view, value, and manage our nation's water systems. At the US Water Alliance, we are dedicated to forging the pathway needed to recover stronger by seeking to reknit a local, state, and federal partnership for water. On the local side of this partnership, much progress can be forged by local water agencies. This project is one of five pilots to drive innovation at water agencies. To read more about the local, state, and federal components of the US Water Alliance's initiative, *Recovering Stronger*, visit www.uswateralliance.org.