



## Fact Sheet

# Offering Engaged, Compassionate Customer Service: Guidance for the Water Sector

### Overview

Many shutoff moratoriums established during the COVID-19 pandemic are coming to an end. Utilities recognize that some communities have not recovered financially from the impacts of the pandemic and are still struggling to pay. Moreover, in some cities, the number of accounts that are eligible for shutoff exceeds the utility's technical capacity to conduct service disconnections. Since eviction moratoriums are lifting simultaneously or before utility shutoff moratoriums end, many people will likely prioritize rent payments over utilities to stay in their homes.

Help is available in the form of federal, state, and local COVID-19 relief funding and utility customer assistance programs like discount and payment plans. However, people with water debt may not be aware of these programs or have time to apply, especially if they are dealing with job loss, illness, or housing insecurity. Some communities have hesitations about accepting assistance because of their immigration status, anxiety about punitive responses, or past negative experiences with government agencies. They also may find navigating utility programs or calling customer service intimidating. Others are newly vulnerable and have never needed to use assistance programs before. Compassionate customer service practices can help address these anxieties and work with people to find a solution.

Traditionally, utilities have relied on mailers, social media, and bus ads to inform their customers about assistance programs, and some partner with local organizations and community centers to get the word out. Offering flexible, responsive customer service alongside these strategies will help utilities reach more people at risk of shutoff. Utilities can reach out directly to find out more about customers' needs, enroll them in water assistance programs, and connect them to other organizations that provide resources. Utilities can also ensure that their application processes are simple and user-friendly. These practices can make it easier for customers to make partial, regular payments, allowing the utility to collect steady revenue without having to perform disconnections.

### Opportunities for Action

#### Directly contact households that are at risk of shutoff.

Unpaid bills signal that a household may be experiencing financial stress. Utilities can reach out to customers who fall behind on bills to learn more about their situation and inform them about assistance programs. Utilities can also partner with community-based organizations that have strong relationships in neighborhoods to check in with households that are behind on bills.

- **Greater Cincinnati Water Works'** customer service department makes outgoing calls to customers that are at risk of shutoff—specifically those who are falling behind on their payment plans—to check in and help them get back on track.

- **Louisville Water and Louisville MSD** partnered with a technology company called [Promise Pay](#) to distribute CARES funds, enroll customers in payment plans, and improve repayment rates for existing payment plans. Promise sent text messages to customers at risk of shutoff to connect them to relief funds and payment plans. They also made direct calls, conducted targeted digital outreach based on customer data, and provided translation. Thanks to this approach and an integrated communications and marketing plan, the utilities were able to distribute \$4 million in CARES funds and significantly improve the number of payment plan customers keeping up with their bills—from 20 percent to 93 percent.
- **WSSC Water** makes direct outgoing calls as well as robocalls to customers at risk of shutoff to inform them about available financial assistance. If it looks like the household has a leak that is causing high bills, the utility offers to do a plumbing inspection and connect them to an organization that gives grants for repairs, or to a credit union that provides low-interest loans.

### Set up payment centers in neighborhoods.

Some customers have difficulty paying bills and learning about utility programs online or over the phone. Utilities can set up payment centers (or kiosks) in neighborhoods, ideally with customer service staff available to answer questions. While this may not currently be possible due to COVID risks, it is a promising strategy moving forward. Payment centers can be established in partnership with community organizations, neighborhood centers, stores, and other local facilities.

- **The City of Seattle** has customer service centers around the city, including a mobile center that visits traditionally underserved neighborhoods. These centers accept bill payments and offer information about city services and programs, including utility programs.
- **San Antonio Water System** has payment centers in neighborhoods staffed by customer service teams to help people pay bills and enroll in assistance programs.
- **Detroit Water and Sewerage Department** allows customers to pay their water bills at kiosks located around the city. The kiosks, some of which are open 24 hours a day, accept a variety of payment methods and include energy bills as well as water.

### Partner with CBOs to hold utility assistance clinics.

Some customers have questions about their bills that need a more in-depth answer than they can get online or over the phone. Utilities can partner with community organizations to host assistance clinics, where customers can discuss their questions with utility staff. This helps communities get to know their utilities and provides utilities with insights into how their programs are working.

- **SCOPE**, an organization based in South Los Angeles, partnered with **Los Angeles Department of Water and Power** to host customer clinics where utility staff share information on their assistance programs and answer community members' questions. Customer clinics were held both virtually and on-site.

### Offer language accessibility.

Many people are unaware of utility programs that they could benefit from because materials are not available in the language they speak. Utilities can translate their written materials into the languages that are commonly spoken in their city and offer language options over the phone. If they do not have the in-house capacity for translation and interpretation, utilities may be able to seek help from other city departments, such as an office of immigrant and refugee affairs.

- The **San Francisco Public Utilities Commission** uses professional translators to translate information on assistance programs into seven languages.

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