



Fact Sheet

Understanding Community Needs: Guidance for the Water Sector

Overview

Community needs related to water affordability are complex. Households that cannot afford their water bills may also be struggling with the costs of housing, transportation, child-care, medical bills, and other expenses. They may have barriers to engaging with the utility and filling out assistance applications, like not having internet access or working long hours. Some people are in precarious housing situations and worry that seeking help with water debt could lead to eviction.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only made affordability concerns more complicated, and people need new kinds of support and outreach from their utilities. During the pandemic, utilities have gotten creative with sharing information in their communities, using strategies like social media, phone calls, and partnerships with schools, food banks, and other local organizations. Utilities also need to hear from their customers to understand the challenges they are facing and the support they need. By learning more about the people they serve utilities can design more effective policies.

For all these strategies, partnering with organizations that have strong relationships with community members will lead to better outcomes. These organizations have in-depth knowledge on the best ways to engage their communities; for example, identifying languages spoken in the neighborhood, or knowing the best places to post flyers. Compensating partner organizations recognizes the value of their time and strengthens trust. After the initial engagement, utilities and community partners can set up ongoing spaces for dialogue and keep communities updated on policy changes that are implemented in response to their needs.

Please see the appendix below for a list of sample questions that can be used for surveys, interviews, focus groups, or listening sessions.

Opportunities for Action

Build on existing touchpoints for engagement.

In times of crisis, utilities and communities may not have the bandwidth to launch new engagement projects. Instead, utilities and their partners can use existing events, surveys, or customer committees to gather community input on affordability needs.

- **Mission of Love**, an organization in Prince George's County, MD, conducts intake surveys with their clients to assess their housing and food security needs. They are planning to add additional questions on water access and affordability.
- The [Portland Utility Board](#) is a diverse community oversight group that advises the city council on budgetary and policy matters related to the **Portland Water Bureau**, including water affordability and customer assistance.
- [Tucson Water's Citizens' Water Advisory Committee](#) advises the mayor and city council on water rates and fees.

Conduct surveys.

Surveys are a great way to gather basic information, such as whether people have experienced shutoffs, whether they have heard of assistance programs, and how they prefer to be contacted. Shorter surveys are effective for hearing from large groups of people because they are relatively easy to fill out. Offering compensation or gift cards makes surveys more accessible to low-income people.

- The **Community Action Organization of Western New York** conducts regular surveys of their clients' needs and experiences. They added several questions on water affordability to inform the **Buffalo Sewer Authority's** outreach efforts. The survey surfaced useful information like the causes of financial hardships and the effectiveness of utility programs in avoiding shutoffs.

Conduct interviews and focus groups.

While surveys are helpful for understanding community needs in broad strokes, longer conversations provide more nuance and context. People may be more comfortable sharing personal experiences in a one-on-one interview or small focus group. Focus groups are particularly effective for learning from specific groups of people; for example, low-income homeowners or customer assistance program participants. Since they take more time and may include more sensitive conversations, offering stipends to participants is critical.

- **Lake City Collective**, a community organization in Seattle, conducted interviews with residents dealing with water stress. They learned key details that can inform utility policy; for example, how housing insecurity, job loss, and lack of digital access affect the ability to enroll in water assistance programs, particularly for one-income households and individuals with limited English proficiency.

Hold listening sessions.

Listening sessions are a good strategy for connecting with people in a particular neighborhood. Meeting in a local gathering space rather than at the utility allows more residents to attend. At these meetings, utility staff should participate primarily as listeners. Providing transportation, childcare, and compensation is helpful. During COVID, online listening sessions are also an option.

- **Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District** partnered with CBOs to hold listening sessions in historically underserved neighborhoods as part of developing their [Water Equity Roadmap](#). Sessions were held in locations that were important gathering spaces for the community, and participants were offered stipends and transportation. Participants joined facilitated breakout groups exploring a series of questions related to water equity. Later, utility staff reconvened the groups to update them on how their input shaped the Roadmap's recommendations.

Hold collaborative design sessions.

Utilities can hold charrettes or collaborative design sessions with community-based organizations and residents to identify affordability challenges and workshop potential policy solutions.

- **Louisville MSD, Louisville Water, and Metropolitan Housing Coalition** held an intensive design workshop aimed at developing a common understanding of water affordability challenges, evaluating current assistance programs, and outlining a clear path forward. Participants included representatives from social services, health equity, housing, and philanthropic organizations, as well as utility leadership.

Build in-house utility capacity for community engagement.

Some utilities feel that they do not yet have the specialized skills for equitable community engagement. Partnering with community-based organizations is a great way to bridge the gaps in staff expertise and begin to build in-house capacity for community engagement. Utility staff can learn from CBOs' approaches and identify skills that would strengthen their team. Utilities can then create community engagement positions and hire people with lived experience of water affordability challenges.

- **San Antonio Water System's** [Uplift customer assistance program](#) hires staff that have been enrolled in the program, providing a more complete understanding of program users' needs.

- **Atlanta Department of Watershed Management** partnered with an organization called **West Atlanta Watershed Alliance** (WAWA) to engage residents in a neighborhood where they were planning a series of green infrastructure projects. A few utility staff started attending neighborhood meetings as invited guests of WAWA with the primary goal of listening. Later, they held small, focused in-neighborhood meetings with community members to get their input as they moved into concept design for the projects. Throughout the process, utility staff learned from their CBO partner’s approach to engagement.

Contract directly with community-based organizations.

Government agencies sometimes contract with consultants to lead their community engagement processes, who then subcontract with community-based organizations. This means that CBOs get a smaller percentage of the funding, although they may be providing the most valuable insights. Utilities can recognize CBOs’ expertise by building a direct relationship with them on community engagement initiatives.

Appendix

The following questions may be used in conducting surveys, focus groups, interviews, and listening sessions with residents that are affected by water affordability challenges.

Questions:

- What is your zip code?
- What is your housing type?
 - If you are a renter, do you pay a water bill directly to the utility, or do you pay your landlord or property manager a fee for water?
- What utilities do you pay directly?
- Have you experienced water shutoffs in the past?
 - If yes, how many times?
 - How long have shutoffs typically been?
 - How did they impact your household?
 - How did you meet your water needs while your services were shut off?
 - How did you get reconnected?
- Have you received shutoff notices in the past?
 - If yes, how did these notices impact you and your household?
 - Did you understand why you received the notices?
 - Did you feel like you knew what options were available to you?
 - Was there something that would have made it easier?
- Have you experienced other utility shutoffs?
- Have experienced arrears on your water bill?
- Have you had difficulty paying your water bill during the pandemic?
- Have you contacted your utility to seek assistance with paying your bill?
- Do you know about the water assistance programs that your utility offers?
- Have you used these programs?
 - If yes, did you have any trouble signing up?
 - If not, why not?
 - Was there something that would have made it easier?
- How would you prefer to be contacted by your utility (for example, by phone, mail, email, social media, through local organizations, or other communication channels)?
- How do you prioritize paying bills? What bills do you pay first (rent, gas, water, electric, other expenses)?
- What would you like your utility to keep in mind as they respond to the water affordability challenge?
- What alternatives to water shutoffs should your utility consider?
- What do you want your utility to know about how water affordability policies affect community members?

Support for this project was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Water Table as part of the US Water Alliance’s Recovering Stronger Initiative. Views expressed here are those of the authors and do not reflect the policy or positions of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and/or the Water Table.

To learn more, visit us at:

www.uswateralliance.org
[@USWaterAlliance](https://twitter.com/USWaterAlliance)

©2022 US Water Alliance. All rights reserved.