

December 7th, 2020

Dear Michigan Senators,

We urge you support Senate Bill 241 (S-1) sponsored by Sen. Stephanie Chang (D-Detroit). The bill places a statewide, temporary moratorium on water shut offs and ensures water service is restored to any Michigander currently shut off. Access to water is essential to human life at any time, but even more so during a public health pandemic when hand washing and bathing is critical to limiting spread and exposure to COVID-19. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's Executive Order 2020-144 required public water supplies to restore water service to Michiganders across the state during the state of emergency. The EO allowed low-income households – many of whom are fixed income, unemployed, underemployed and/or essential workers – to have essential water service. The recent Michigan Supreme Court decision invalidated the EO, leaving behind an inadequate patchwork of local policies for water access for our most vulnerable Michigan households. Michiganders across the state are experiencing financial hardship that has put their access to basic utility services at risk. This is a statewide problem that needs a statewide solution.

Unfortunately, Michigan has no comprehensive water service reporting requirements so access to data on water shut offs is limited. In Detroit – the most glaring example of water unaffordability and shut offs – a Freedom of Information Act request by Joel Kurth from Bridge Magazine found that 9,500 occupied homes that were disconnected for non-payment in 2019 were still without service in mid-January 2020.¹ Further, a national survey found that the average water utility disconnected five percent of households for nonpayment in 2016, affecting an estimated 15 million Americans.²

During the pandemic and economic downturn, many Michigan residents are struggling to keep up with their water bills. As part of SB 690 the Legislature rightly included \$25 million in direct assistance to help Michiganders pay their water bills and provide some measure of protection against potential shut offs. Water utilities, however, had to opt in for this assistance program and not all did. Only 132 of the approximately 1,400 community water system in Michigan opted into the program, meaning that many Michiganders now have no protection from potential shut offs and very little access to bill assistance. The chart included with this letter was compiled by the Natural Resources Defense Council in collaboration with Peoples Water Board from data provided by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS). It shows the utilities that have opted in to the program as well as the extent of accrued arrearages within those utilities' territory. The chart underscores the depth of financial difficulties currently faced by Michiganders. In total 317, 631 households had accrued a combined \$21,617,862 in water arrearages. To-date the assistance program has helped over 85,000 eligible Michigan water-insecure households in cities, villages, and townships across the state address water bill arrearages that have accumulated during COVID, but over 231,796 households were ineligible under the program and are still at risk of being shut off.

We understand that restoration of water service incurs costs and that many public water supplies across the state are also struggling financially. Recently MDHHS created the Water Repair Assistance Program to help public water supplies cover the costs of water restorations, including where water disconnections led to damaged or corroded water or sewer mains and household plumbing.³ This program will help ease the burden of water restorations for water service providers.

Access to water is fundamental to life, especially when fighting COVID-19, which necessitates constant hand-washing and proper sanitation. Lack of access to water places Michigan residents at risk and hinders our ability to slow the spread of COVID-19. Research conducted by We the People of Detroit demonstrated the clear correlation between water shut offs and COVID-19, showing that areas of Detroit where there were the highest

¹ Bridge Magazine, Coronavirus Fears Renew Calls for Gov. Whitmer to End Detroit Water Shutoffs, March 2, 2020, <https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-health-watch/coronavirus-fears-renew-calls-gov-whitmer-end-detroit-water-shutoffs>

² Food & Water Watch, America's Secret Water Crisis, October 2018, <https://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/insight/americas-secret-water-crisis>

³ Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, New Program Helps Low-Income Households That Lack Water Access; Funding is important for protection from COVID-19, October 2, 2020, <https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/0,5885,7-339--541785--,00.html>

rates of water shut offs were also the same areas hardest hit by COVID-19.⁴ Access to water also will support fully opening our economy and getting our children back in school buildings full time.

We respectfully urge you to support Senate Bill 241 (S-1) and provide the water access protections all Michiganders need to weather this global pandemic in safety and security.

Sincerely,

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⁴ WLNS6, Detroit Water Shutoffs Led to More COVID-19 Cases, July 9, 2020

<https://www.wlns.com/news/michigan/detroit-water-shutoffs-led-to-more-covid-19-cases/>