



# Water Equity and Climate Resilience Caucus

## Water Affordability for All

### *The Importance of Federal Water Bill Assistance*

Access to safe, affordable water and sanitation is a basic human right. Yet, across the United States, communities face mounting threats to their water security, including from the rising costs of water and wastewater service. Many of these same communities — particularly low-income communities and communities of color — simultaneously experience the lasting affects of disinvestment in basic infrastructure and the increasing risk of climate disasters.

**National action can improve federal water assistance and move toward water affordability, ensuring that every American has safe, affordable water. Such action includes improving temporary programs, establishing a permanent assistance program, and shifting toward long-term water affordability in the United States.**

### *Improving Federal Water Assistance*

In 2021, Congress created the first-ever temporary federal water debt relief and bill assistance program, the [Low Income Household Water Assistance Program](#) (LIHWAP). LIHWAP provides \$1.14 billion to states, Tribes, and territories to distribute to low-income households needing help to pay their water or wastewater bills or restore water service. This represents significant progress and an important first step for the United States to address unaffordable water bills and debt.

Yet, important improvements need to be made. By November 2022, [only about 70% of LIHWAP funds](#) were obligated and even less had made its way to families struggling the most to pay rising water bills. Assistance programs like LIHWAP rely on states and utilities to opt-in, and many smaller utilities lack adequate staff and technological capacity to implement them independently. Enrollment and fund distribution have remained challenges in implementation.

While there are federal programs that help low-income households pay energy and phone bills, there is no permanent program for water. The public strongly supports water affordability and assistance. 9 in 10 U.S. voters agree access to safe, affordable water is a human right and [75% support](#) the establishment of a permanent federal water bill assistance program.

**As a pandemic relief measure, LIHWAP funding ends in 2023. Communities across the nation need federal water assistance extended, expanded, and improved to reach low-income and communities of color most in need. This immediate assistance must occur in tandem with the establishment of a permanent water assistance program and progress towards true water affordability.**

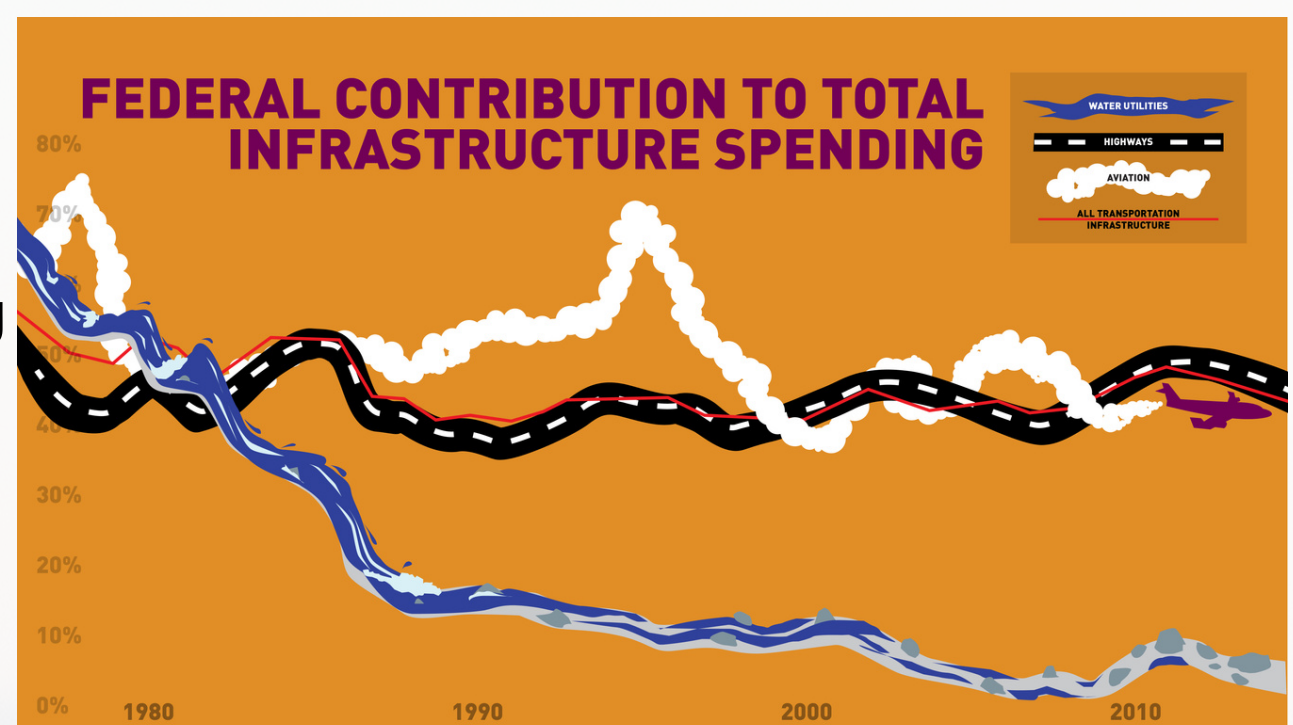
## Recommendations to Congress for Short-term and Permanent Federal Water Assistance

Improvements to existing LIHWAP program	Recommendations for a permanent water assistance program
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow direct payments to utilities to credit customer accounts if the utilities meet certain criteria (e.g., serving a primarily disadvantaged community, high levels of per-capita debt for residential accounts, and/or completed data match).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include debt relief and crisis assistance as part of the program design. <i>Debt relief</i> provides households with a fresh start. <i>Crisis assistance</i> is a short-term measure that maintains service for households experiencing job loss and other financial shocks, preventing them from falling into insurmountable debt.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow LIHWAP enrollment via virtual appointments and with self-attestation of income.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure adequate funding so that households with the lowest incomes receive the greatest amount of assistance.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incentivize states, Tribes, and territories to use a portion of their administrative allowance to facilitate automatic enrollment through critical data matching from other federal and state income-based assistance programs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage the <i>Needs Assessment for Nationwide Rural and Urban Low-Income Community Water Assistance</i>, which will be conducted by EPA as authorized by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, to build an equity-centered program design.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Automatically enroll households currently receiving any other income-qualifying assistance (e.g., TANF, LIHEAP, SNAP).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure equity in implementation by matching infrastructure investment, payment assistance, and needs assessment within a federal program.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage relevant data sharing among federal agencies on need, eligibility, enrollment, participation benchmarking, and more.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embed equity as part of program design, given the large racial and socioeconomic disparities that exist in water access, assistance, and affordability across the country.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure robust communications plans and outreach through sufficient resources, direction from HHS, and tips on reaching those most in need.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand and clarify use of funds to ensure equitable outcomes in water assistance and service.</li> </ul>	

## Why Federal Water Assistance is a First Step

Our water and wastewater systems are stressed from decades of disinvestment. Before the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the share of federal funding for water utilities fell from over 60% in the 1970s [to below 10%](#), while other infrastructure spending remained largely the same. At the same time, the cost of maintaining and upgrading water infrastructure, ensuring safety, and responding to the climate crisis has fallen on states and localities, utilities, and ultimately ratepayers. An [American Society of Civil Engineers and Value of Water](#) analysis found the U.S. needs to invest \$109 billion a year over the next 20 years to fix the water infrastructure gap.

Water rates are rising exponentially, [faster than inflation](#) and all other utility costs. In a 2022 [American Water Works Association survey](#), 1 in 3 respondents reported struggling to pay their water bill on time. Faced with rising and unaffordable bills, households risk debt, having their water shutoff, or even losing their home and/or custody of their children.



The burden of unsafe and unaffordable water falls on low-income communities and communities of color. [Black communities](#) have been disproportionately impacted by failing infrastructure and aggressive water shutoff policies, facing [higher rates of water disconnections](#). Many rural communities, including Tribal communities, farmworker communities, and communities near sites of legacy industrial contamination pay twice for safe drinking water because their taps are contaminated, forcing them to rely on [more costly](#) bottled water.

### San Jerardo Cooperative, California



Ileana Miranda serves as General Manager of the San Jerardo Cooperative in rural Monterey County, California. This farmworker community, established in the 1970s, has struggled to access safe and affordable water for decades. Nitrate and arsenic contamination left the community's well water unsafe to drink. After years, San Jerardo was finally able to drill a new well and add water treatment with funding from the state, yet affordability remains a looming concern. The average annual income for families in San Jerardo is only [\\$20,000](#), yet many pay over [\\$115 per month](#) for water. With these critical safety updates, keeping the water meter on for the community, regardless of how much water is used, is now more expensive. Water rate assistance is key to making sure San Jerardo families don't have to choose between paying their water bill and other critical services.








## Moving from Assistance to Affordability

An assistance-only approach falls short of addressing disparities in water access. For every family in the U.S. to have access to clean water, we must ensure that water is affordable. This means moving from a short-term strategy of providing *water assistance*, where financial support helps households cover the cost of water bills, to a long-term strategy of ensuring true *water affordability*, so no household lacks access to water due to inability to pay.

**We can only achieve water affordability by standing up a permanent assistance program and keeping costs to consumers low through sustained federal investment.**

This will require consistent federal commitment to improve water infrastructure across all communities, prioritize communities without access to clean water and those hardest hit by the impacts of climate change, and eliminate water debt and shutoffs.

The following chart outlines these shortcomings and why moving towards water affordability in the long-term will close water access gaps:

Affordability	Assistance-only
 <p>Water shutoffs and debt are eliminated, ensuring the human right to water for all.</p>	 <p>Reduced bills for households meeting eligibility criteria, such as income or disability, don't guarantee debt relief, crisis assistance.</p>
 <p>Include sufficient levels of investment in water systems from rates, state, and federal funding to keep water affordable for all customers.</p>	 <p>Reliance on states and/or utilities to opt-in, burdening smaller utilities and limiting availability.</p>
 <p>Programs use automatic enrollment and benefit levels keep water costs below 3% of household income.</p>	 <p>Does not guarantee adequate investment to keep rates from rising to unaffordable levels or needed workforce and infrastructure improvements.</p>
	 <p>Existing programs can be difficult to apply for and don't always provide adequate benefits.</p>

## National Action for Water Affordability

The United States needs a national commitment to safe, affordable water and sanitation for all by:

- Establishing and funding a **permanent federal low-income water bill assistance program** at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that, combined with other programs and investment, makes the human right to water a reality for us all.
- **Ending water shutoffs** that deny water access based on the inability to pay.
- **Sustaining federal investment** in drinking water and sanitation infrastructure that ensures the cost of repairing and updating water systems does not fall on low-income ratepayers and exacerbate existing water affordability challenges.
- **Targeting federal investment** and oversight in low-income, rural, and communities of color that have faced historic disinvestment, pollution, and the impacts of flooding, fire, and drought.
- **Advancing a permanent affordability program** and close water data gaps of household cost burdens and water system capacity, allowing for prioritization of federal funds to address the greatest disparities in water access.

## About the Water Equity & Climate Resilience Caucus

The [Water Equity & Climate Resilience \(WECR\) Caucus](#) is a national network of nearly 100 organizations centering frontline communities of color and low-income communities in working to achieve water equity and climate justice through federal and state policy advocacy. It is anchored by [PolicyLink](#) and includes water and climate leaders across the nation, with significant representation in the West, Great Lakes, and Southern regions of the United States.

The WECR Caucus's priorities are to secure safe and affordable drinking water and equitable infrastructure systems for all; support communities impacted by rising water, flooding and drought; target education, workforce development and business opportunities in a climate-resilient water system; and integrate arts and cultural work into movement building, organizing and policy change.