



CLOSING THE WATER ACCESS GAP IN THE UNITED STATES

**A National
Action Plan**



Today, more than two million Americans live without running water and basic indoor plumbing, and many more without sanitation.

On the Navajo Nation in the Southwest, families drive for hours to haul barrels of water to meet their basic needs. In the Central Valley of California, people fill bottles at public taps, because their water at home is not safe to drink. In West Virginia, they drink from polluted streams. In Alabama, parents warn their children not to play outside because their yards are flooded with sewage. In Puerto Rico, wastewater regularly floods the streets of low-income neighborhoods. Families living in Texas border towns worry because there is no running water to fight fires.

The United States is home to some of the most reliable water and wastewater systems on earth, and many Americans believe access is universal.

But in fact, millions of the most vulnerable people in the country—low-income people in rural areas, people of color, tribal communities, immigrants—have fallen through the cracks.



17%

of people living in rural areas report having experienced issues with safe drinking water.

Native American households are 19 times more likely than white households to lack indoor plumbing.

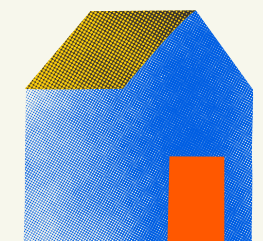
African American and Latinx households

are nearly twice as likely.



12%

of people living in rural areas report issues with their sewage system



Communities facing water access challenges exist in every state

Alaska, Maine and New Mexico are among the states hardest hit.

WHAT IS EQUITABLE WATER ACCESS?

This report focuses on equitable access to safe drinking water and sanitation. This means that all people have water and wastewater services that are **safe, acceptable, accessible, affordable, and non-discriminatory**. These services must include:

- ◆ Safe, reliable running water;
- ◆ A tap, toilet, and shower in the home; and
- ◆ A system for removing and treating wastewater.

Americans without access to running water and wastewater treatment face almost unimaginable challenges in everyday life that are difficult to convey using data. **Living without water and sanitation access makes it difficult to stay healthy, earn a living, go to school, and care for a family.**

So in addition to providing the most comprehensive national analysis of the water access gap to date, this report also provides the view from within six impacted communities emblematic of other places across the country that still lack access: **California's Central Valley, the Navajo Nation, the Texas colonias, rural areas in the South, Appalachia, and Puerto Rico.** These communities did not receive adequate water and wastewater infrastructure when the nation made historic investments in these systems in past decades. That initial lack of investment created a hidden water and sanitation crisis that is still felt today.



Our analysis of Census and American Community Survey data, conducted in partnership with Michigan State University, had several key findings:

- ◆ **Federal data doesn't accurately measure the water access gap.** National-level data collection undercounts vulnerable communities, it leaves out wastewater issues, and it is inconsistent, making the problem difficult to measure and manage.
- ◆ **Race is the strongest predictor of water and sanitation access.** Communities of color are more likely to lack water access than white communities, and the disparity is particularly extreme for Native Americans.
- ◆ **Poverty is a key obstacle to water access.** Access to indoor plumbing is correlated with household income, educational attainment, and unemployment rates.
- ◆ **Water access challenges affect entire communities.** The water access gap isn't a matter of individual choice, it is the result of historical and geographical factors that have left entire communities without adequate services.
- ◆ **Progress is uneven, and some communities are backsliding.** Overall progress on water access is slowing, and in Delaware, Idaho, Kansas, New Hampshire, Nevada, South Dakota, and Puerto Rico the number of people without basic plumbing at home recently increased.

This report shines a light on America's hidden water crisis and proposes a plan of action. It is the most comprehensive analysis of water and sanitation access in the United States to date, and it identifies promising, community-centered solutions that can help us extend water services to all people.

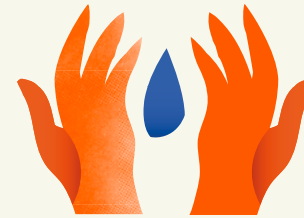
Communities that lack water access have shown extraordinary tenacity in the face of these challenges. In Appalachia, local food banks are using atmospheric water generation technology to get drinking water to those who need it. On the Navajo Nation, communities are forming trucked water delivery networks to power off-grid home water systems. And in California, local organizations are successfully advocating for transformative policy and funding changes. These communities demonstrate that with dedicated resources, ingenuity, cross-sector partnerships, increased public awareness, and political will, the water access gap can be closed for good.

The report describes what life without water access looks like for communities, and the promising practices incubated in six regions facing water and sanitation access challenges.

The United States can close the water access gap in our lifetimes. This report provides a multi-faceted action plan, organized around four principles, that draws on our quantitative and qualitative research and the guidance of an Advisory Council made up of more than thirty national leaders. Everyone has a role to play in making this plan a reality: water and wastewater utilities, policy-makers, regulators, funders, the private sector, nonprofits, residents of communities who lack water access, and you.

ACTION PLAN

While it may seem daunting, the United States can close the water access gap in our lifetimes. It will take dedicated resources, ingenuity, partnerships, public awareness, and political will. The following section provides a multi-faceted action plan, organized around four principles, that draws on the quantitative and qualitative research described above. It was developed through consultation with this report's Advisory Council, a cross-sector group of national leaders (see list on page 3). The Action Plan highlights promising strategies and practices that are improving water access for vulnerable communities. Everyone has a role to play in making this plan a reality: water and wastewater utilities, policymakers, regulators, funders, the private sector, nonprofits, residents of communities who lack water access, and you.



1. REIMAGINE THE SOLUTION

- ◆ Define water access as a crisis
- ◆ Provide interim measures while developing permanent solutions
- ◆ Develop alternatives to traditional infrastructure



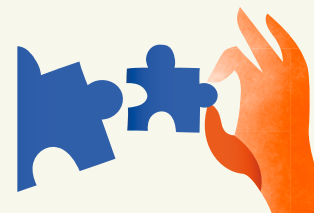
2. DEPLOY RESOURCES STRATEGICALLY

- ◆ Expand and refocus federal and state funding
- ◆ Build a domestic Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) sector
- ◆ Create funding options for household-level infrastructure



3. BUILD COMMUNITY POWER

- ◆ Use data to bring visibility to communities
- ◆ Support community water governance
- ◆ Build relationships between communities with water access challenges



4. FOSTER CREATIVE COLLABORATION

- ◆ Support system consolidation that benefits communities
- ◆ Bring market expertise to the water access challenge
- ◆ Design multi-benefit solutions

The United States is one of the most prosperous democracies on earth, with the opportunity, the resources, and the responsibility to close the water access gap once and for all. Together, we can ensure that every person enjoys safe water and clean sanitation in our lifetime.

