Preserving Access to our Most Basic PPE:
Safe and Affordable Water
A 2021 Report on Water Affordability Challenges and Recommended Solutions

Access to safe and affordable drinking water and sanitation is a human right and a public health essential. But California’s already unequal water access is at risk of further failing right when we need it the most to slow down the spread of COVID-19 — and to make sure all Californians can participate in an equitable recovery.

Up to nearly 5 million Californians living in our most vulnerable communities could experience mass water shutoffs in the near future when California’s water shutoff moratorium expires and $1 billion in water debt comes due. Meanwhile, lost revenue has pushed over 100 small water systems to the brink of collapse, jeopardizing the only water source for the disproportionately Black, Indigenous and communities of color (BIPOC) they serve.

As decision-makers at every level of government grapple with the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic while looking towards a future recovery, we write with this simple yet urgent message:

- Water is the most basic form of PPE.
- The COVID-19 pandemic will have long-lasting negative impacts on access to safe and affordable drinking water in California.
- There can be no equitable COVID-19 recovery amidst mass water shutoffs and failing water systems in California’s most vulnerable communities.
- This is a statewide crisis. It’s not an urban or rural issue. It’s a California issue.
- This is a matter of racial justice, given the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
We urge the legislature to pass SB 222 and SB 223, authored by Senator Bill Dodd with co-authorship from Senator Lena Gonzalez, Assemblymember Robert Rivas and Assemblymember Richard Bloom. These bills are intentionally constructed to avert the looming crisis of mass water shutoffs and failing water systems. The legislation directly advances important water affordability solutions.

**SB 222 — Low Income Water Rate Assistance:** This bill would establish a new and much needed statewide Water Affordability Assistance Fund and direct the State Water Board to stand up a new statewide water affordability assistance program. Funding could come from future state and federal sources.

**SB 223 — Water Shut-off Protections:** This bill would extend and strengthen existing water shutoff and bill repayment protections. SB 223 would extend existing protections to cover very small water systems (200 or fewer connections) that are currently left out. The bill would protect against shutoffs for those with less than $400 dollars in water debt (excluding late charges and interest) and who are less than 120 days behind on payments. The bill would require universal access to extended repayment plans of at least 12 months in duration and also require access to arrearage management plans. SB 223 would also require the State Water Board to provide technical assistance to very small water systems and establish a bridge loan program to assist small water systems suffering major revenue loss. Lastly, the bill would require water systems to waive late fees and reconnection fees for low-income Californians.

Lastly, we urge California leadership to ask Congress to build on their modest one-time national allocation of $638 million in water affordability funding. In light of water being our most basic form of PPE and California’s $1 billion in water debt, ongoing funding for water affordability will be essential to secure an equitable pandemic recovery.