



Feb. 5, 2024

Senator Alex Padilla
331 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Low Income Household Water Assistance Program Establishment Act

Dear Senator Padilla,

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) writes to express our support of your efforts to create a permanent, federal low-income household water assistance program, including your upcoming introduction of the Low Income Household Water Assistance Program Establishment Act.

By authorizing this much-needed program, Congress would recognize the importance of securing access to safe water and sanitation services for everyone. No one should lose access to these essential services because they are unable to afford their water bill.

Decades ago, Congress established the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), to help low-income households pay their energy utility bills, enabling millions to access essential home heating and cooling. Likewise, for decades the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) has been a vital lifeline to help low-income households meet their basic needs for food. And the federal Lifeline Program has provided households with assistance for decades to maintain access to essential telephone service.

Universal access to water is no less essential to public health and economic development than these other vital needs. Indeed, water is literally essential for life. Yet, Congress has never authorized a program to support households who struggle to pay their water and sewer bills—even though millions of people lose access to water, and even housing, when they cannot afford their water bills. Other families sacrifice other basic needs by cutting back on food or medicine, or falling behind on rent or electric bills, in order to keep their water running.

Water bills may once have been an afterthought in comparison to the cost of other utilities like electric and gas, which are supported by LIHEAP. But water and sewer rates have risen much faster than inflation for more than two decades, and the cost of basic water service now poses a significant challenge to many low-income households. The Low Income Household Water Assistance Program Establishment Act would help meet this critical challenge.

NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL

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The need for a federal water assistance program will only continue to grow. Water bills will continue to rise, as communities make billions of dollars in needed water infrastructure investments to protect public health, comply with state and federal water quality standards, and ensure water supply reliability, water bills will continue to rise.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress acted to incorporate low-income water assistance *temporarily* into the federal safety net, by appropriating funds for an emergency Low Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP). Over the past two years, this temporary LIHWAP has been an essential lifeline for millions of people and the water systems that serve them. Through the end of fiscal year 2023, LIHWAP helped 1.4 million households nationwide maintain or restore water service.¹ Nationwide, customers of at least 13,000 water and wastewater systems—mostly local, publicly owned utilities—have benefited from the program.²

But the pandemic-era funding for water assistance has expired, leaving the temporary LIHWAP program to end imminently. The program has already ended in most of the country, as the last remaining states are now spending down the last of their limited funds.

Low-income households across the country are now, once again, left without access to federal water bill assistance. Recent national polling found 36% of respondents struggling to pay their water bill on time, with 70% supporting continued federal assistance to help pay water bills.³

It is time for Congress to act.

We look forward to working with you to advance the Low Income Household Water Assistance Program Establishment Act and to strengthen its provisions to ensure it reaches everyone who needs water bill assistance. This includes ensuring all states use appropriate eligibility criteria and streamlined enrollment processes, and that households served by all water and wastewater systems are able to participate in the program. We also welcome the bill's acknowledgement that the Department of Health and Human Services and the Environmental Protection Agency both have important roles to play in promoting affordable access to water service and look forward to exploring with you the most effective way to define each agency's responsibilities.

Sincerely,



Lawrence Levine
Director, Urban Water Infrastructure & Senior Attorney

¹ <https://lihwap-hhs-acf.opendata.arcgis.com/pages/quarterly-snapshot>

² <https://lihwap-hhs-acf.opendata.arcgis.com/pages/quarterly-reports> (most recent total provided as of Sept. 2022).

³ <https://www.awwa.org/Portals/0/AWWA/Communications/2023PubPerceptionSurvey/Public-Perceptions-of-Tap-Water-Survey-23-Slides.pdf>