

March 8, 2022

Hon. Andrea Stewart-Cousins  
Majority Leader  
New York State Senate

Hon. Carl Heastie  
Speaker  
New York State Assembly

Re: Allocate \$400 million for New York's Low Income Household Water Assistance Program

Dear Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins and Speaker Heastie,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we urge the Legislature to allocate \$400 million dollars to the Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) in this year's budget. On December 21, 2021, New York's utility shut off moratorium expired, exposing struggling New Yorkers to the immediate risk of having their water shut off or liens placed on their homes if they're unable to afford their water bills. For many New Yorkers, the pandemic exacerbated existing burdens of unaffordable water and sewer bills, and it placed many more in that same precarious position. It is imperative that the State respond to this growing crisis by providing adequate financial support to households quickly and effectively.

Five days before the state's moratorium on shutoffs was set to expire, New York City's water and wastewater utility noted that residential and commercial arrears have nearly doubled since the start of the pandemic, totaling at around \$750 million dollars<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, information collected via Freedom of Information Law requests demonstrates the Suffolk County Water Authority had over \$31,000,000 in outstanding residential water arrears in 2021 and Erie County Water Authority had over \$9,000,000 in total arrears at the beginning of 2021. Unsettlingly, water authorities will likely begin resuming collection practices, such as liens and service shutoffs, for these bills. The reinstatement of these harmful and dangerous collection practices disproportionately impact low-income and Black, Indigenous, Peoples of Color (BIPOC).

For decades, the cost of water has been rising across the country much faster than inflation.<sup>2</sup> As aging infrastructure fails, new water pollution threats are discovered, and extreme weather impacts disrupt services, the increasing cost of water is being shouldered by residents through their water bills. Before the pandemic, in 2016, it was estimated that over 15 million people nationwide, or one out of every 20 households, went without water at some point due to nonpayment.<sup>3</sup> The pandemic has only exacerbated these realities and as it begins to recede, it's leaving an enormous amount of devastation in its wake.

It is without question that no one benefits from unsettled debts. The state has an opportunity this session to make residents and utilities whole again by appropriating \$400 million dollars to LIHWAP, New York's only water assistance program. The emergency COVID-19 relief program, established by the federal government, opened for applications in New York in December 2021. Its only source of funding is a \$70 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycwaterboard/downloads/pdf/minutes\\_and\\_resolutions/12-16-21-water-board-meeting-transcript.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycwaterboard/downloads/pdf/minutes_and_resolutions/12-16-21-water-board-meeting-transcript.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid at 3.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/rpt\\_1810\\_watershutoffs-web2.pdf](https://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/rpt_1810_watershutoffs-web2.pdf)

New York provided critical temporary protections throughout the majority of the pandemic but now it has to solve a bigger, historical problem: how to get New Yorkers out from under mounting debts. Allowing water utilities to balance the books by raising rates or threatening residents with shutoffs and liens is simply not a solution. As Governor Hochul recently said, “Water is a necessity that every New Yorker should have easy, affordable access to.”<sup>4</sup> It’s long overdue for New York to actualize these values to protect communities statewide.

Sincerely,

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Executive Director  
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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.liherald.com/merrick/stories/hochul-signs-public-water-legislation.136174>

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