



# Information on Customer Assistance Programs for Water System Customers

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On Wednesday March 18, 2020, Governor Jay Inslee called on public utilities to suspend water shut-offs for failure to pay, to waive late fees, and expand customer assistance programs for people impacted by COVID-19 pandemic. On July 2, 2021, Governor Inslee updated the original request with [Proclamation 20-23.16](#), "Ratepayer Assistance and Preservation of Essential Services." This proclamation prohibits water systems from disconnecting water services due to non-payment, refusing reconnection, and charging fees for late payment and reconnection until October 1, 2021. Earlier versions of the proclamation required all utilities to develop a COVID-19 Customer Assistance Program. Although not explicitly stated in the current version of the proclamation, COVID-19 Customer Assistance Programs are still essential.

Our goal is to help community water systems support their customers' access to safe and reliable drinking water. These frequently asked questions help customers understand their water system's general responsibility to provide this essential service.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**I've received a shut-off notice from my water system stating my water will be shut off once the proclamation is lifted. What should I do?**

The main intent of the proclamation is to support water systems in providing options to customers to avoid water shut-offs. However, there is nothing explicitly prohibiting water shut-offs after the termination of the COVID-19 State of Emergency declaration on September 30, 2021.

If you are behind on your water bill:

- ◆ Contact your water system to see what assistance programs they have.
- ◆ Contact your local Community Action Agency to see if you are eligible for the Low Income Household Water Affordability Program.
- ◆ Call 211.

**How do I make a complaint?**

If you would like to contact the Office of Drinking Water regarding a shut off, please see our main [doh.wa.gov/DWCAP](https://doh.wa.gov/DWCAP) website for a link to our complaint form. If your water system is regulated by the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (WUTC) you can contact them by email at [consumer@utc.wa.gov](mailto:consumer@utc.wa.gov) or by calling the WUTC hotline at 1-888-333-WUTC (9882).

## What is the water system required to do?

After the Governor's Proclamation expires on September 30, 2021, it is expected that the water system:

- Continues to make good faith effort to reach customers with past-due accounts,
- Helps customers identify utility, local, state, and federal financial assistance programs they may be eligible for.
- Offer extended payment plans of 12 months or longer.
- Waive disconnection, reconnection, site visit, and late fees accrued during the disconnection moratorium.
- Refrain from shutting off water or charging late fees if a customer is on a payment assistance or payment plan through you or a third-party assistance program.
- Refrain from reporting overdue accounts to credit bureaus or placing liens on customers with overdue accounts for at least 180 days.
- The WUTC may have further regulations for regulated water systems.

## What am I expected to do to avoid getting my water shut off after the no shut-off proclamation is rescinded?

The Governor's proclamation states that the customer and utility are "expected to continue to communicate in good faith with one another, and to work together on the timing and terms of payment and repayment solutions." This means you may have to apply for your utility's customer assistance program or work with your utility to develop a repayment plan.

If you do not respond to the utilities efforts to contact you to make payment arrangements or other agreements, your utility may have policies and procedures in place to disconnect you once the proclamation is rescinded and the moratorium on disconnections is lifted. We strongly encourage you to work with your utility now and be as proactive as possible.

## How do I contact my water system?

The easiest way to find the contact information for your water system is to look at your water bill. It should have the name of the water utility, their phone number, mailing address, and may list a website.

If you have trouble locating the contact information for your water system please email [DrinkingWaterCustomerAssistance@doh.wa.gov](mailto:DrinkingWaterCustomerAssistance@doh.wa.gov). Please include your exact street address, city, and zip code. Also provide your name and phone number so we can contact you with any additional questions we may have to help identify your water provider.

## Does this erase my obligation to pay my bill?

**This proclamation does not relieve your responsibility to pay your bill.** Maintaining a financially resilient water system is imperative to the ongoing health and safety of its customers. We do encourage water systems to work with you toward maintaining the essential service of

water access. This could be through bill forgiveness, a payment plan, or some other form of assistance.

### **What if my water account is delinquent from before the Governor's order of March 18, 2020?**

While the proclamation and guidance don't specifically address what should happen in this circumstance, it does state that customers impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic should maintain access to essential services. The spirit of this proclamation is to maintain water access in the home. In that spirit, we encourage all water systems to work with any delinquent customers, whether that delinquency was from before or during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

### **What if my water system is refusing to make a long-term payment plan?**

Utilities should offer payment plans of six to eighteen months or longer considering each customer's unique circumstances. If your water system is not offering a customer assistance option that works with your unique circumstances, please email

[DrinkingWaterCustomerAssistance@doh.wa.gov](mailto:DrinkingWaterCustomerAssistance@doh.wa.gov).

### **What if I'm a renter and have been affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic, but my landlord is responsible for water payments?**

Customer Assistance Programs often require recipients of the program to be the owner-occupier of a residence, which may prevent landlords from receiving benefits to pass along to the renter. Renters and other multi-family units are considered hard-to-reach customers. While neither the proclamation nor the guidance specifically addresses this circumstance, the spirit of the proclamation is to keep these essential services. If your water is shut off due to your landlord not paying the water bill, please contact the Tenants Union of Washington at 206-723-0500 or visit their website at [tenantsunion.org](http://tenantsunion.org). You can also contact your water system for ways they can help you.

### **What if I am charged late fees?**

The proclamation prohibited charging late fees until September 30, 2021. The guidance on customer assistance programs states that utilities, at a minimum, should consider prohibiting disconnections for low-income and vulnerable households and waiving fees associated with late payments for those impacted by COVID-19.

### **Who is eligible for customer assistance programs?**

While this proclamation applies to anyone experiencing economic hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic, each water system will have their own customer assistance program eligibility criteria. You must be below 150 percent of the federal poverty level, or eligible for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), to be eligible for the new Low Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP). Check with your water system and your Community Action Agency to verify your eligibility status.

## For more information

More emergency resources are available on our [Drinking Water Emergencies webpage](#).

Our publications are online at [doh.wa.gov/drinkingwater](http://doh.wa.gov/drinkingwater).

Contact our nearest regional office from 8 AM to 5 PM, Monday through Friday. If you have an after-hours emergency, call 877-481-4901.

[Eastern Region](#), Spokane Valley 509-329-2100.

[Northwest Region](#), Kent 253-395-6750.

[Southwest Region](#), Tumwater 360-236-3030.



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