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Miles: Michigan must adopt a state-wide water affordability system

Jeff Miles

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From our peninsula-themed state motto to our “Great Lakes State” moniker, Michigan’s identity revolves around water. Every year, people flock to our state seeking its lakes, rivers and streams. However, even with this abundance of water, we face a growing crisis: many Michiganders can’t afford the water flowing into their homes.

Since 1980, water prices across the state have nearly doubled — that’s after adjusting for inflation. More than 145,000 Michigan households spent more than 5% of their income on water and sewer bills alone in 2022. Rising water rates particularly harm seniors on fixed incomes, who must choose whether to use their limited resources on water or crucial medicines.

The water affordability crisis touches every part of our state, from the rural Upper Peninsula to Metro Detroit. According to United Way’s 2025 Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) report, 41% of households in Macomb, Oakland, Washtenaw and Wayne counties don’t make enough to cover a bare-bones budget. These are households that live one health problem or car repair away from not having the money to pay their water bills, plunging them into debt or facing their water being shut off.

We hear these families’ stories every day. Since the beginning of 2023, more than 10,000 people in southeastern Michigan have called our 2-1-1 helpline asking for assistance with their water bills. In 2023, we began working with Oakland County

and the Great Lakes Water Authority to run the Water Residential Assistance Program (WRAP) and the Hardship Assistance Program (HAP), which helps struggling households pay their water bills and make basic repairs that lower their bills long term. Since Oct. 1, we've expanded our role with WRAP to Washtenaw County and enrolled more than 800 Oakland and Washtenaw families in bill and repair assistance.

Each year, programs like ours in communities across the state are stretched for funding. Our current patchwork system leaves some areas without enough money to meet the need, forcing community agencies to place families on wait lists or unenroll them when funding runs out. And when people can't afford their bills, we all pay: with shutoffs increasing illness, evictions and foreclosures and driving higher rates when water providers try to recoup their losses.

The water affordability bill package (Senate Bills 248-256) introduced in the state Senate this April, offers a bipartisan solution to address this problem. This legislation would cap water rates at manageable levels for low-income families, protect people with qualifying health conditions from water shutoffs and help eligible homeowners make low-cost repairs.

To maintain the program, each water customer would contribute \$1.25 per month, reinvested in households within their region. That small fee does more than keep our neighbors' taps on for cooking, cleaning and drinking — it's a smart, shared investment that benefits everyone. Much of our state's water system is more than 50 years old, and replacing pipes or making repairs is costly. When many households fall behind on their bills, public utilities face budget shortfalls and must either defer critical maintenance — driving up the cost of breakdowns — or raise rates across the board. This modest contribution helps prevent both.

Our state offers similar, and very effective, assistance programs that help residents afford their electricity and heating bills. It's time for Michigan to adopt a state-wide water affordability system that will make sure we can all get the water we need at rates we can afford.

Jeff Miles is Vice President of Community Impact at United Way for Southeastern Michigan.