

Senate Bill 222 (Dodd)

Low-income Water Rate Assistance Fund

SB 222 would establish a first in the nation water affordability program to ensure every Californian can access drinking water and sewer service regardless of income.

Background

Water is essential in life, not a luxury good. Yet, water and sewer rates consistently outpace inflation, as demonstrated by families paying 45% more per month for drinking water service in 2015 than in 2007 (State Water Board AB 401 Report). Additionally, 34% of California households—roughly 13 million people—earn less than 200% of the federal poverty level or roughly \$50,000 per family. These dual realities cause low-income families to be increasingly unable to afford their water and sewer bills. According to the Human Right to Water (AB 685) passed in 2012, every Californian has a right to affordable safe drinking water and wastewater. Yet, studies consistently show that systems serving low-income families and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities are most likely to fail to provide this basic necessity. We cannot address racial and economic injustice in California while water remains unaffordable.

Many long-standing low-income assistance programs already exist statewide for essential services and utilities, such as the California Alternate Rates for Energy (CARE) Program, which provides a monthly 30-35% discount on electric bills and a 20% discount

on natural gas bills. California has rightfully prioritized and continued to annually fund these critical programs; however, water and sewer affordability remain conspicuously missing.

At the individual system level, most public water and wastewater systems face legal and financial barriers to establishing robust affordability programs. Only about half of California households are served by a public water system that offers low-income rate assistance, and those programs suffer from limited funding and low enrollment. These programs tend to be offered by the largest and most affluent of California's public water systems. Hundreds of small water systems that serve California households lack the resources and capacity to even consider implementing an affordability program. The problem is particularly acute where the majority of households in a community are low-income. Without outside resources, these systems have no options for helping their customers. We must quickly address this severe gap in our social safety net.

Solution


SB 222 is uniquely crafted to extend the proven model of utility affordability programs to water and sewer by establishing a universal and statewide assistance program. SB 222 would establish a framework to provide direct water and wastewater affordability assistance at the state level, which would avoid local legal and financial implications, such as Prop 218. SB 222 would create a first in the nation model for consistent water and wastewater affordability for all Californians.

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In 2019
500,000 CALIFORNIANS
lost access to running water in their home due to **unpaid water bills**

AffordableWaterforCA.org #KeeptheWaterFlowing

Supporters

Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environment
Asian Americans Advancing Justice: CA
Asian Pacific Environmental Network
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Burton
California Coastkeeper Alliance
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