

California lawmakers must act to stop water shutoffs | The Sacramento Bee

[B sacbee.com/article257068142.html](https://www.sacbee.com/article257068142.html)

By Uriel Saldivar and, Nydia Medina Special to The Sacramento Bee

A mural on a water tower in Poplar depicts water flowing out of a faucet onto a bowl of grapes held by a child. Water is in short supply for both farms and cities in this current drought year. CRAIG KOHLRUSS Fresno Bee file

For many people, the new year means a fresh start. But for the million-plus California households with overdue water bills, Jan. 1 had a much less pleasant significance: the end of emergency water shutoff protections.

Even though the pandemic is still raging, a state water shutoff ban ended on Dec. 31. Unfortunately, the billion dollars in this year's budget meant to wipe out water debt won't reach many families who need it. A lot of utilities are opting out of [the voluntary debt relief program](#), leaving customers in a lurch.

That means the amount of help available for families struggling financially will be determined by their address rather than their need. That's unacceptable in a state that recognizes a human right to water and has spent money to help families keep the water on despite COVID-related hardships.

Less than 20% of the \$333 million set aside to cover drinking water debt was claimed by the original Dec. 6 deadline, according to the [California State Water Resources Control Board](#). The state has now extended the deadline to Jan. 15, but many water systems, including capital region utilities such as the Sacramento County Water Agency and the city of West Sacramento and Tulare County's Oroshi and Woodville public utility districts, have said they don't plan to apply.

The shortcomings of this voluntary program are clear. We need a permanent, universal and mandatory low-income ratepayer assistance program to address California's water affordability crisis.

The [latest state survey](#) found that over one in four households has an overdue balance on its water bill. And no one should have to live without water during a pandemic.

There's a myth in the United States that debt is a result of personal choice rather than structural inequality. That's simply not true, and our water debt problem is a real-time example of how our systems conspire to keep people poor.

Workers who lost jobs or income during the pandemic could be facing utility bills in the thousands of dollars. While some will be able to wipe the slate clean thanks to the state's debt relief program, others whose utilities choose not to participate will face compounding late fees, reconnection charges and lower credit scores forcing them to pay higher interest rates. They may even risk losing their homes.

Why did so many utilities leave free money on the table when they knew some families were struggling? One possible reason is the fact that this program prohibits them from charging customers late fees. They could still recover administration costs for extra billing, but they wouldn't be able to punish customers who fell behind on payments.

Another reason is that many utilities are themselves struggling with staffing and financial constraints. There are 3,000 water systems in this state. Most are quite small and have limited bandwidth to work through an application or figure out the rules of a one-time offer.

That's why we can't rely on emergency fixes to our long-standing water affordability problem. We need the U.S. Senate to pass the Build Back Better Act to make the new federal low-income water assistance program permanent, and we need California's Legislature to pass Senate Bill 222 to create a similar safety net at the state level.

If California leaders are serious about the promise of water as a human right, they'll enact a long-term solution that allows every Californian to live without fear of having their water shut off.

Uriel Saldivar is a senior policy associate at Community Water Center, working to ensure every family in California can access safe and affordable water. Nydia Medina is an AGUA Coalition member and community activist organizing for safe water solutions in Orosi.

Nydia Medina is an AGUA Coalition member and community activist, organizing for safe water solutions in her community of Orosi. Nydia Medina

Uriel Saldivar is senior policy associate at Community Water Center, working to ensure every family in California can access safe and affordable water. Uriel Salvidar