

Decision-Making and Influence

Objectives

- Identify ways to take action by reflecting and learning, connecting with community stakeholders and decision-makers, and advocating for change
- Access resources to find state- or utility-specific information related to financing opportunities, policy guidelines, and public meeting/comment requirements
- Understand how and when to communicate with decision-makers, and get involved during decision-making processes

1. Why Does Influence Matter?

2. Getting Started

- a. Reflect
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- c. Brainstorm Ways that Federal Funding Programs Might Be Improved

What Is Influence?

In the context of this resource, influence refers to the power to affect change at the local, state, or federal level. Influence can be exerted by individuals, organizations, or coalitions (of individuals and/or organizations). Stakeholder types could include residents, disadvantaged populations, commercial businesses, nonprofits, community organizations, labor unions, educational institutions, and customers, among others.

There are varied and myriad moments when advocates can employ their expertise about needs and priorities to influence outcomes. When thinking about federal, state and local/utility decision-making, opportunities may emerge around spending funds, developing processes, changing processes, and exploring new means and methods for accomplishing goals, for example.

For the purpose of this section, when the term “water” is referenced, it is referring to drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater collectively unless otherwise specified.

TAKEAWAY

As a community member, utilities and municipalities are responsible for providing safe, reliable and drinkable water to your taps, and ensuring that your local waterways are clean and healthy: You pay for these services, and these entities are responsible to you. You also should expect that utilities and municipalities have a way for you to communicate your water issues and broader concerns, so they can provide remedies and solutions.

The Decision-Making and Influence section distills the points of influence and action noted in the previous three sections. It offers advocates a practical set of recommendations for learning more about local water infrastructure systems and spotting factors that might compromise water affordability. It also provides advocates with a list of action items to influence decision-making at the federal, state, and local/utilities levels.

Affordability – According to the Pacific Institute, water is affordable when its cost does not prohibit access to the resource, nor interfere with other essential expenditures (ex. food, shelter, electricity).

WHY DOES INFLUENCE MATTER?

Water affordability and equity issues are inextricably linked to a broad set of societal issues: housing, economic security, climate change, and public health, among others. But because much of our water and wastewater infrastructure is underground, its essentiality to our everyday life is often out of sight. And now, we are experiencing a water infrastructure and water affordability crisis.

As infrastructure ages and is more frequently strained, water systems are experiencing failures: flooding, wastewater outfalls into water bodies, water main breaks, and chemical contamination. Necessary investments and repairs can increase water bills, burden low- and moderate-income customers, and lead to water shutoffs for households that are unable to pay higher bills.

River Network believes that “equitable water infrastructure investment” has been achieved when dollars are:

1. Directed by the community toward public health, and result in safe, clean, affordable and accessible drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater;
2. Distributed in a way that supports the communities that are most at-risk for environmental harm and have historically lacked investment, chiefly low-income communities and communities of color; and
3. Used to support the long-term sustainability of our waterways, water systems, and utilities.

Through its [Affordability](#), [Infrastructure](#), and [Utilities](#) sections, the River Network Equitable Water Infrastructure Toolkit has helped advocates understand the systems that must work to produce safe and reliable drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater:

In the [Affordability](#) section, advocates learned about what drives water to be unaffordable and explored opportunities to address affordability at the local, state, and federal levels.

In the [Utilities](#) section, advocates took a deep dive into the world of water utilities to understand how they are managed and regulated, how their decision-making impacts affordability outcomes, and what strategies can be pursued to improve water affordability.

In the Infrastructure section, advocates explored how water system improvements are financed, focusing special attention on federal programs, the states' role in administering those programs, and how equity can be built into these programs to improve outcomes.

To help advocates identify the interconnected nature of affordability, water utilities, and infrastructure, this Decision-Making and Influence section is organized by three arenas of influence: federal, state and local/utility. This allows advocates to think about strategies by audience (and given the nature of some advocacy efforts, note that some strategies will be listed in multiple categories).

GETTING STARTED

[Water infrastructure](#) impacts our day-to-day lives in many ways, both inside our homes (bathing and cooking) and out (recreation). When water quality and quantity are compromised, so too is our ability to move through our days...

- If our water is shut off, we cannot bathe or cook.
- If our streets or basements are flooded, it may be hard to get to work and our health may be impacted.
- If there are droughts, finding new sources requires thoughtful planning and consideration, and our quality of life may be compromised.



Profile: [Nanjemoy, Maryland](#)

However, because water infrastructure is largely underground and out of sight, it does not get as much proactive attention as other social issues or visible infrastructure like housing and roads.

Closer Look



Therefore, we invite readers to first consider a mindset shift. How can you build intersectionality between water infrastructure and other issues, like your health, housing, and/or economic vitality?

As those intersections become clearer, does water infrastructure take on a different meaning to you as a customer? As a renter or homeowner? As a resident? A neighbor? An advocate?

Consider the following as jumping-off points:

Reflect

- Consider the network of infrastructure that enables water to come through your household taps, toilets, and cleaning devices; what do you think goes on behind the scenes? Try visualizing.
- Why do some areas flood and others don't?
- How is that water being managed in your community? Does the system seem to be working, or can you identify water quality, access, or affordability issues?
- What connections can you make between water infrastructure and other social issues that you hear/care about?
- Are there any existing issue-based campaigns (affordable housing, jobs, etc.) that water infrastructure/affordability could be a part of?

Share

- Talk to your neighbors, families, and friends. When they think or talk about water, what issues are you picking up on? Cleanliness? Affordability? Conservation? Something else?

Learn

- Use the [CNT Water Bill Calculator](#) to help inform your case for water affordability.
- Monitor the usage listed on your water bill; if it discernably fluctuates month to month or quarter to quarter, your water supply system may have a leak. (This tactic works for both individual households and as a broader strategy that advocates can share with constituencies who may be concerned about water affordability/excess water usage.)

Intersectionality – In the context of this toolkit, intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of socioeconomic identity, and environmental and public health issue

Advocacy – Advocacy refers to the various ways that stakeholders make their voices heard on issues that affect their lives and the lives of others in their communities, state, and country. It also involves helping policymakers find specific solutions to issues and problems.

Connect

- Community activism is a foremost means of assuring that water is clean, and that affordable and equitable outcomes are achieved. Coalition-building can surface and amplify community issues to command the attention of decision-makers, and many of the strategies noted in this section will be easier and/or more impactful if done in partnership. Also, many states have environmental policy groups that provide advocacy and watchdog support, and these bodies can be fantastic allies.

As advocates move through the following sections, they will see actions categorized one of three ways:

- Beginner (learning the basics, work that can be self-driven)
- Intermediate (digging deeper, work that may call for reaching out to experts or joining/forming a larger group)
- Advanced (building relationships with decision-makers, advocacy work that is most effective when done with a coalition)

Next to these Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced classifications, advocates also will find the corresponding subject area (Infrastructure, Affordability, or Utilities) that indicates where a particular action or set of actions is discussed in more detail in the toolkit.

GET INVOLVED: LOCAL / UTILITIES

Power – The ability to organize resources (e.g. money) and people to implement an action or idea. Those with power have the ability to choose between desirable options.

Equity – In the context of this toolkit, equity refers to a policy and program development approach that prioritizes investment in communities which are most in need or most largely disadvantaged, taking into account the historical costs and barriers certain identities have faced due to discrimination.

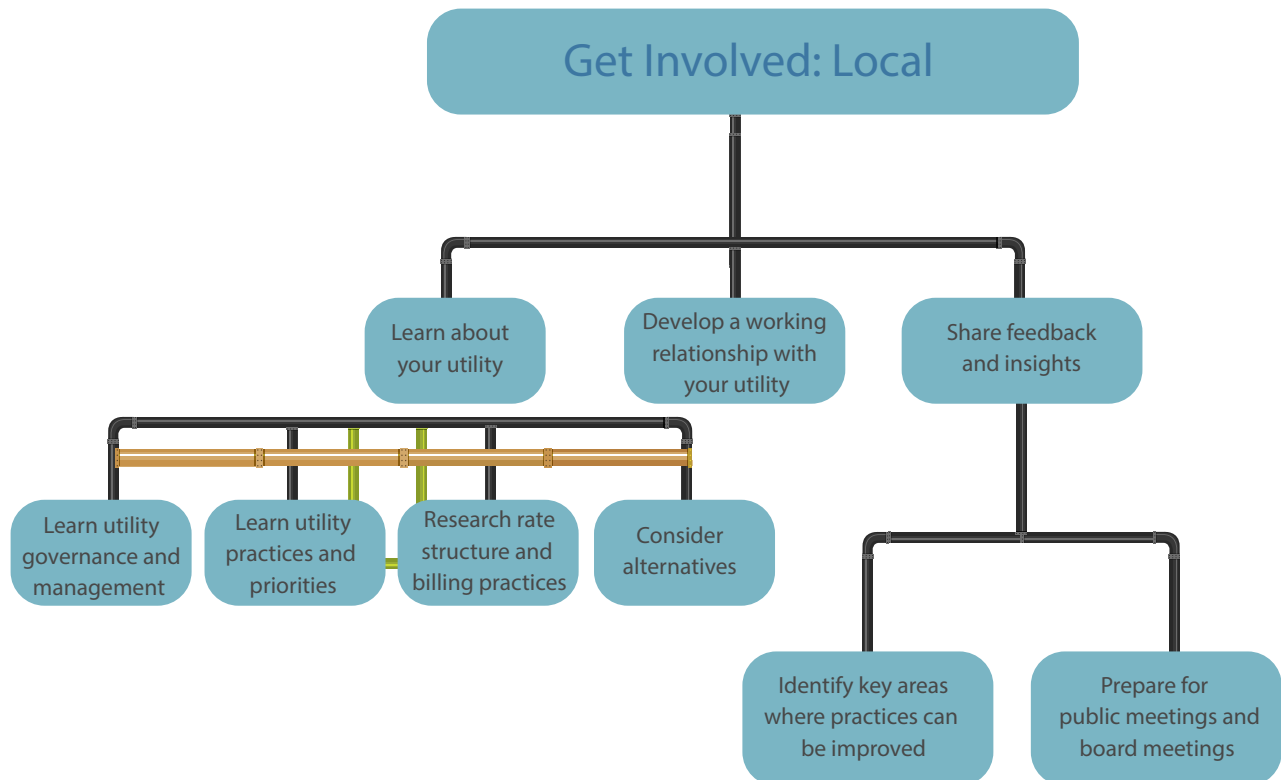
Refer to the [Infrastructure](#) section for more information about centralized and distributed infrastructure

Utilities and municipalities are on the front lines, the entities that are most directly connected with providing water services, ensuring that streams and rivers are clean and healthy, and interfacing with customers and residents. Within the legal and programmatic frameworks set by federal and state governments, local utilities and municipalities have the power to implement responsive and impactful policies and programming to achieve affordability, equity, and sustainable outcomes.

Utilities can improve water affordability by:

- implementing equitable rate structures and customer assistance programs to reduce how much customers pay for services.
- having effective operations, maintenance, and asset management practices.
- pursuing diverse project portfolios that includes distributed infrastructure (e.g. green stormwater infrastructure) that benefit both the community and the natural environment.

Advocates can use this section to guide their learning about local utility governance and management, develop a relationship with their water utility, and strategically advocate for local change, individually or with a coalition.



Learn About Your Utility

(Beginner, Utility)

Governance and Management Systems

Use the following questions to paint a clearer picture of your utility: how it operates and is regulated, how it manages assets, and how your billing and rate structures are determined. Visit the websites of your utility and/or municipal government for resources and information to help inform your answers to the below questions:

- Who manages my drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater services?
- Is my water utility publicly or privately-owned? Does it service a single community, or is it a regional authority?
- How is my utility governed? (Ex. Private board of directors? City council? Appointed or elected board or commission?)
- What is the process and oversight for rate-setting? Does it happen at city council meetings? At a state regulatory hearing? A water board of commissioners meeting?
- Who do I need to know at the utility and/or governing body to effectively advocate for water management and funding practices that support affordability outcomes?
- If my utility is publicly owned, does it commingle enterprise funds with municipal general operating funds?

(Beginner, Utility)

Water Loss Tracking

Every day, billions of gallons of treated water are lost through water main breaks and leaky pipes, and this loss has myriad implications for water affordability. Use [this NRDC interactive map](#) to find out state requirements around tracking water loss.

- What does your state require?
- If your state has some level of water loss tracking requirement, are there documents available that can tell you how much water your utility losses, and whether it is compliant with state guidelines? If not easily accessible, reach out to your utility or elected official for direction.

- If there is no uniform water loss auditing system, consider writing a letter to your state representative advocating for one to be instituted.

(Intermediate, Utility)

General Asset Management

A well-run utility has certain processes and documents in place that drive project prioritization. They may have generic versions of documents and plans on their websites, but due to concerns over security and terrorism, more detailed documents and plans (ex. delineated maps and blueprints) may not be publicly available. Also note that project priorities will likely change across time — for example, emergency interventions related to pipe breaks and storms will need to be addressed, and new regulations can also place projects ahead of what may have been planned.

Research publicly available documents or reports that outline your utility’s asset management plans, capital improvement plans, and/or financial reports. These documents and plans are usually developed over the course of several months and are ideally renewed after a few years, and projects included in these plans have the highest chance of being implemented. You can review these documents to verify that planned projects are not irrelevant or over-sized (i.e. based on an unrealistic growth calculation), and these plans also are good indicators of how your utility is integrating distributed infrastructure into its plans, incorporating green stormwater infrastructure, for example.

These documents can be found on local government websites or through an online search along the lines of “[utility name] utility asset management plan,” “[utility name] capital improvement plan,” or “[utility name] water infrastructure improvement plan.” Keep in mind that not all asset management plans are easily accessible or available, and these documents may not be clear or straightforward. Advocates might consider reaching out to their elected representatives for support or direction, and also consider reaching out to your utility by email or phone (as explained further in the [Infrastructure](#) section.)

Capital Improvement Plan – Capital improvement plans list all planned projects, equipment purchases, and major planning / engineering studies of a utility or municipality. These implementation plans provide a working blueprint for sustaining and improving the community infrastructure and typically include information about construction timeframes, and financing and funding needs.

Consider the following questions when reviewing relevant documents:

- When was the last time the asset management plan or capital improvement plan was updated?
 - When is the next version of this plan being developed?
- What aspects of an integrated water management plan does the utility consider, or what asset management planning is included?
 - Are the planned projects addressing current community problems such as flooding?
 - Are the planned projects addressing future issues related to climate change, for instance?
- Over what timeframe are investments planned for?
- Where are investments made?
 - Are they equally distributed throughout a community (i.e. investment is planned for and occurs everywhere regardless of higher need in some places)? Or are they equitably distributed throughout a community (i.e. investment is planned for and occurs in areas with higher need, such as areas with older infrastructure or a higher prevalence of flooding or water main breaks)?
- Can you tell if the projects are too large for the current and projected growth rates of the community?
- If too large, will that lead to unnecessarily high rates for customers, especially low-income ones?
- Is the utility taking advantage of the lowest interest rates to fund these projects over time?

Visit the [Utilities](#) section for a more in-depth review of utility management models.

(Intermediate, Utility)

Consider alternative decision-making and system management models

After reviewing utility asset management plans and other related documents, you may consider whether the existing way of doing things is ideal, especially as it related to affordability outcomes; perhaps an integrated water resource management or service sharing model may yield better results.

Browse reports and plans, and visit your local government and/or utility websites to get a sense of how decisions are made, see if you map out the process. If you can't find the information, consider reaching out to the utility or your elected official for guidance.

- Is it clear what the decision-making process is like? What is it? What informs infrastructure investment decisions?
- Think about the ways in which you would like your water system to be managed differently. Make a list of your top priorities e.g. fixing leaky pipes, reducing costs, implementing a conservation or efficiency program, using green stormwater infrastructure. Then think about how your utility might achieve these outcomes (e.g. water loss auditing, service sharing, etc.)

Research rate structure and billing practices

To find out what type of rate structure your utility uses, visit your utility and/or local government websites, or by reaching out to your elected official or utility operator. What type of rate structure does your utility use?

What kind of rate structure do you have?

- Flat Rates
- Decreasing Block Rate
- Increasing Block Rate
- Uniform Rate

What kind of rate structure would you like to have? Why?

- Flat Rates
- Decreasing Block Rate
- Increasing Block Rate
- Uniform Rate

Calculate how affordable your water bill is using the [CNT water bill calculator](#).

Use information in the [Utilities](#) section to understand the components on your water bill. Consider the factors on the bill that might drive up the total amount (e.g. charges other than water, billing frequency, etc.)

Based on what you've learned, would you deem this to be an equitable rate structure? Why/why not?

(Beginner Utility)

Compare your water rate structure to that of a different community (perhaps one in which you know people so you can get a firsthand account of their relationship to the water utility). Which utility makes [equity-informed decisions](#)? If the other community is more equity-informed, consider the socio-economic similarities or

differences between your communities: Could your community implement a similar process and achieve more equitable rates? Refer back to the [Utilities](#) section for more information about equitable rate setting and CAPs.

(Intermediate, Utility)

Speak with others in your community/organizations about their priorities, and come to a consensus on your collective priorities. After coming to decision, begin planning how your group will plan and act to affect this change.

Develop a Working Relationship with Your Utility

An advocate who wants to gain a better understanding of an issue, present an alternative, or object to a project or procedure, should start by contacting a utility staff member. A good decision-making board recognizes the knowledge and experience that staff hold as the ones most familiar with the utility. The board depends on the staff to present it with well-vetted options.

In general, contacting and working with staff early in the process results in more openness to collaboration and better-designed projects. River Network is developing a [trust-building resource](#), and some general tips follow:

- Sometimes, budgeting and program redesign decisions are made “behind closed doors,” followed by a perfunctory and minimally impactful public comment period. This may limit the extent of your influence — if you can find one, work with a coalition that has a relationship with the utility and/or local government decision-makers to find out how to best submit input and make priorities known early on.
- When possible, utility staff usually prefer to be approached before a major funding decision is being voted on or announced at a public meeting. Reviewing board meeting minutes and upcoming meeting agendas online can give an advocate notice of these decisions.
- Some utilities list staff contact information online. If that is not the case, calling a main number and describing your interest should get you connected to the relevant staff person who works in your interest area; in some cases, a caller may first have to go through public relations staff.
- Email the relevant person and then set up a phone call or in-person meeting.

If the staff does not respond to you after repeated

Conservation – Conservation is a sustainability practice that focuses on reducing water use to preserve natural resources

Source Water Protection– Utilities and private wells draw source water from rivers, streams, lakes, and springs — source water protection includes a wide variety of actions for safeguarding or improving the quality and/or quantity of drinking water sources and their contributing areas.

email/phone contact, then consider your first communication being at the public meeting. Note that there is usually a sign-up list where you would need to enter your name before the meeting in order to be allowed to make a comment.

- Begin to familiarize yourself with “industry-speak” to prepare for when you meet with utility staff. For example, whereas a customer might use the phrase “water conservation” to talk about using less water, utility staff may use “source water protection” to highlight the environmental benefit of conservation, especially in a regulatory compliance context. See the Glossary to help you prepare. When you meet with utility staff, ask them to explain if they use words or phrases you are not familiar with, or to explain concepts and issues with language that the general public is familiar with rather than “industry-speak.”

Share Your Feedback and Insights

Based on your research, identify the key areas where you believe the utility can improve practices, and come up with a plan to present this information to the utility and other local decision-makers.

- If water loss is an issue you are concerned with, advocate for improved water loss management — by reducing losses in the system, utilities save money and customers avoid water loss-related billing increases.
- If flooding is an issue, advocate for green stormwater infrastructure as a solution (as opposed or in addition to grey infrastructure updates), because it provides a broad array of community benefits beyond its explicit purpose.
- Consider environmental justice and equity provisions

(Intermediate, Infrastructure)

Review Executive Order 12898 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations), which broadly directs federal agencies to address disproportionately high and adverse health and environmental impacts on low-income and BIPOC populations; develops strategies to implement environmental justice efforts; and promotes nondiscrimination in, and increased access to, federal programs. When you are advocating for equitable and affordable water infrastructure outcomes, you can remind decision-makers of these federal priorities.

(Advanced, Infrastructure)

Work with the local water utility to consider how planned projects may impact environmental justice, especially with respect to funding programs like the State Revolving Fund.

Explore available and possibly untapped financing and funding opportunities

(Intermediate, Infrastructure)

After reviewing the [multi-source funded projects](#) section in the [Infrastructure](#) section, encourage utility staff to pursue these types of funding arrangements.

(Intermediate, Infrastructure)

Applications that include partnerships and collaboration among multiple organizations tend to score higher. Advocates can boost the chances that a local government receives 319 funds by helping to develop these partnerships.

(Advanced, Infrastructure)

Advocates can encourage their utilities to take out low-interest loans to amortize large costs over time to keep rates affordable.

Explore/recommend improved financial and asset management practices and equitable and affordable rate structures

(Advanced, Infrastructure)

Work with third party financial advisors or a utility advisory board and monitor whether utility PAYGO funds remain intact for their original purpose. Also, monitor whether unreasonable fund transfers are occurring between the general fund and the water utility enterprise fund.

Consult other resources and examples to understand how local governments can make the needed changes in their financial accounting and asset management systems.

Groups such as the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) are producing articles and conference sessions on how to adapt to including green infrastructure in financial documents and systems.

In fact, in 2017 GFOA gave DC Water the Award for Excellence in Government Finance for the city's Environmental Impact Bond. The article "[Crosswalking between Gray and Green Infrastructure for Budget Officers](#)" also offers some tips on adapting the local government budget process to green stormwater infrastructure.



Encourage utilities to more effectively improve water affordability with a two-pronged approach: reduce how much money customers are paying and reduce overall costs of managing the water system. This could look like advocating for equitable rate structuring and customer assistance programs, while asking for improved asset management and equitable investment practices . (Learn more about how Utilities can influence affordability outcomes in the [Utilities](#) section.

(Advanced, Affordability)

Reach out to utility staff or review previous public meeting minutes and public announcements to find out when water rate setting occurs.

Work with local utilities during the rate setting and affordability program design processes to ensure that decision-makers are considering equity and affordability outcomes. Some strategies that advocates might suggest during the process include the following:

- Developing rate structures based on household's income.
- Setting a lifeline rate, or an affordable rate for a minimum, necessary amount of water used for daily life and charging higher rates for more water used.
- Creating customer assistance programs (CAPs). Some examples to offer to the utility include a flexible water payment programs, forgiveness of past debt after consistently paying a lower rate over a period of time, bill discounts, or free access to water conservation and efficiency fixtures, helping to reduce water use and lower water bills. (Learn more about [CAPs](#) in the [Affordability](#) section.

Prepare for and attend public meetings and board meetings

As mentioned above, it is best to contact a utility staff member to ask questions and raise concerns ahead of a public meeting. If you do not get a response, or you have already had extensive discussions with staff, then making a public comment at a meeting may be in order; in some cases, the staff may even suggest that you make a public comment.

You can find the time and location of the next meeting on the website for the utility. Apart from local-government specific websites, “directories” may exist for the state as a whole. Each state also has some sort of league of municipalities or municipal association. There are also

Though the act of appearing for a meeting and making comments in person is a powerful gesture, advocates may preface this with written comments to the staff/board, providing a heads-up so that staff can prepare responses, if appropriate.

similar associations for counties. In some cases, these associations provide a “directory” with a summary of all of their local government members that includes information about staff contact and meetings. For example, you can find information on the small community of Blakely, Ga. via the [Georgia Municipal Association](#), but, not all associations may offer this service of posting meetings.

Once you’ve identified the location and date of the meeting, determine whether you want to submit oral or written comments, or both.

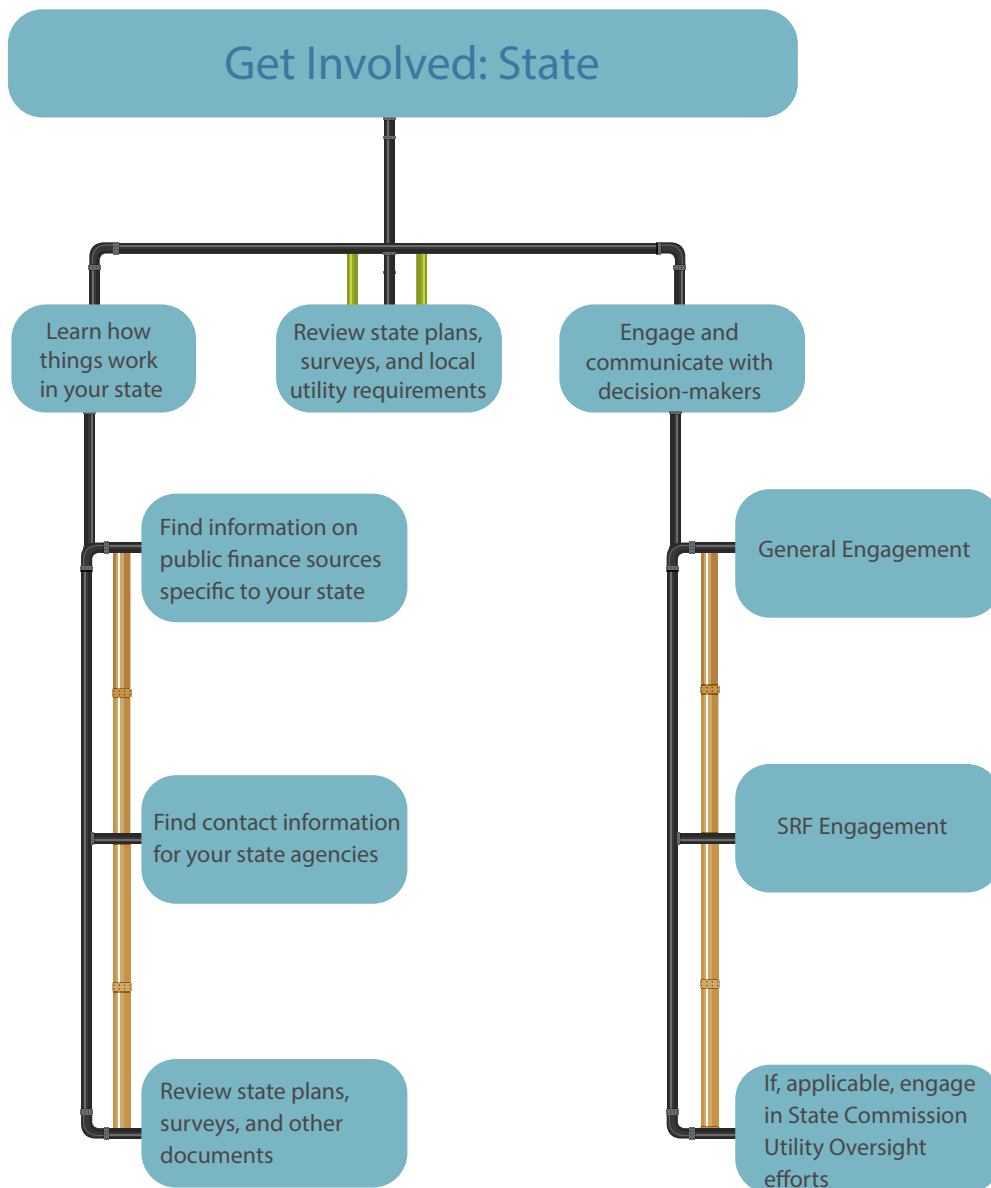
- Take a look at the agenda. Meeting agendas vary by utility. To make an informed vote, the governing board may be supplied with background documents on the topics being discussed.
- Request any background documents you see listed on the agenda; these can be requested by email or phone.
- Review these documents as well as past meeting minutes, and other publicly available documents on your utility or local government websites.

This can take a lot of time but will give advocates important context for the discussions, making them focused on the questions and suggestions they want to offer. Arriving on time is important to avoid disrupting the meeting. If you are unable to attend a meeting because it interferes with your job or other obligations, consider submitting a written statement in advance, or reach out to local groups working on these issues to see if they are attending or can attend and raise up your concerns.

GET INVOLVED: STATE

State governments have a significant role to play in moving the needle on water sustainability, affordability and equity outcomes. Often administering federal programs and/or federally sourced funding and financing, states can sharpen the sometimes-broad federal guidance, ensuring that local communities have clear guidance and support to implement successful local affordability initiatives.

Additionally, many states can hold utilities accountable for meeting water affordability, safety, and quality standards. This section begins with a short tutorial on how to find information on federal funding and financing opportunities accessible by your state. Then it suggests actions to advocate for improved affordability standards, better leverage SRF funds, and work with utility regulators.



Learn How Things Work in Your State

Find Information on Public Finance Sources Specific to your State

It is important to understand the relation between the federal requirements for spending funds from programs like State Revolving Fund (SRF) and Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) versus the role the states have in shaping these programs (refer back to the [Infrastructure](#) section for a refresher).

With this understanding, you may be able to suggest project types that your state does not regard as eligible or high priority. Many federal programs offer state-specific guidance (the Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act being one main exception), so advocates should find out about their state's approach to each program. In addition, some funding sources, like the Appalachian Regional Commission, are only available to certain geographic areas.

To find a state-specific list of funding sources, advocates have the following main options:

[EPA Water Finance Clearinghouse](#)

This web-based portal helps communities identify funding sources for their state. It can also be used to tease out which sources fund different types of water projects, or which demographic criteria relate to each source.

The portal includes two searchable databases: one has funding sources for water infrastructure, the second contains resources, including reports, websites, and webinars on financing mechanisms and approaches that can help communities access capital for their water infrastructure projects. It appears that the different funding sources update the information at the Clearinghouse webpage themselves, thus, there may be some discrepancies on how current the information is.

[The Environmental Finance Center Network Smart Management for Small Water Systems Project](#)

For several years this network of Environmental Finance Centers published a [table of Funding Sources by State or Territory](#). This resource requires updates and maintenance to stay current and these updates are dependent on funding from an EPA grant for small water systems.

By clicking on a specific state from a map of the United States, an advocate could download a PDF table with the following headings:

Organization - *e.g. South Dakota Department of Environment and Natural Resources*

Program (key words) – *e.g. wastewater*

Eligibility – *e.g. Government Entity (yes/no); Non-Profit (yes/no); For Profit (yes/no)*

Purpose or Use of Funds – *e.g. The Clean Water State Revolving Fund (SRF) Program was established to provide low interest loans to governmental entities for clean water and non-point source pollution control projects. Government entities such as a municipality are eligible to apply. Eligible projects must be on the State Water Plan prior to submitting the funding application.*

How to Apply – *e.g. Applicant must submit an original application to the department, which can be accessed on the website. Applications must be postmarked or received on or before the first day of January, April, July, or October.*

Website – *e.g. <https://denr.sd.gov/dfta/wwf/consolidated/consolidated.aspx>*

Contact* – *e.g. Mike Perkovich, denrinternet@state.sd.us, 605-773-4216, 523 East Capitol Pierre, South Dakota 57501*
**Helpfully, contact information is provided for a specific person in each program.*

The Small Community Water Infrastructure Exchange (SCWIE)

This is a network of funding officials related to the Council of Infrastructure Financing Authorities (which is an association of states SRF programs). While its focus is on issues related to small water systems, SCWIE also maintains a list of contact information for the public finance programs for water and wastewater in each state. SCWIE has a very small staff and there may be a lag in updating the contact information on this website.

Statewide Support Groups

A main function of SCWIE is that it helps to maintain communication among the funding coordination bodies in each state. Most states have a group where the staff of the various funding programs listed above meet and coordinate their funding activities. The level of structure

and formality of these groups varies from state to state. In some states, the groups open up their meetings to the public which can be a venue for advocates to attend and make comments.

Find contact information for your state agency and department heads/regulators

[Clean Water State Revolving Fund](#)

[Drinking Water State Revolving Fund](#)

Review State Plans, Surveys, and Local Utility Requirements

(Beginner, Infrastructure)

Review the [Clean Watersheds Needs Survey](#) to be informed of the needs that your state has reported.

(Beginner, Infrastructure)

Visit the Intended Use Plan (IUP) for the state to find out what percentage of the 31 percent set asides are being used. (Learn more about DWSRF set-asides in the [Infrastructure section](#).)

(Beginner, Utility)

Download a 2-page summary on your state from the [Navigating Legal Pathways to Rate-Funded Customer Assistance Programs: A Guide for Water and Wastewater Utilities](#) publication to learn how water utilities are regulated.

(Beginner, Utility)

Some states require utilities to conduct water audits annually; others are more lax. You can find out what your state requires regarding water loss tracking by visiting [NRDC interactive map](#).

(Intermediate, Utility)

Look up your regional council (RC) or councils of government (COG) to find out what types of assistance they offer to utilities and whether your utility is taking advantage. In some cases, they provide free or low-cost assistance to utilities applying for water infrastructure funding. There is not a national searchable database for where to find local or regional councils, but advocates can look up their state and “council of governments” to find state specific resources.

Engage and Communicate with Decision-Makers

(Intermediate, Utility)

Reach out to the state public service commission, or advocacy and investigative office. In general, the latter type of organization “represents the state’s public interest” in utility regulation. Share your advocacy work with staff and ask how the regulatory office can further the efforts with either current regulations or new regulations.

General Engagement

(Intermediate, Affordability)

Refresh decision-makers about Executive Order 12898 (Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations). Push for the following measures when advocating (writing or calling) for improvements from your state representatives:

- establish affordability standards.
- enact policies that incentivize local affordability efforts and remove barriers to affordability.
- prioritize funding and low-cost financing for use toward affordability outcomes.
- increase funding for infrastructure investments and low-cost financing or grants to help minimize direct investment costs passed on to ratepayers.
- advocate for a uniform water loss auditing system.
- institute water loss prevention and efficiency programs

(Intermediate, Infrastructure)

Advocates should encourage their state EPA program manager to answer the EPA Infrastructure Needs Survey and Assessment with detail and specificity because the more “need” a state demonstrates, the more federal funding the state will receive.

SRF Engagement

(Beginner, Infrastructure)

Contact the [SRF program managers](#) for your state and see if it has the state 20 percent match in hand to receive the federal money.

- Call/email the program manager and state that you support state efforts to secure a 20 percent match if the state does not currently have this earmarked in the budget.

(Beginner, Infrastructure)

Review the [list of states](#) that are currently exercising SRF leveraging options (selling bonds, issuing SRF-back loan guarantees to utility borrowers, or providing municipal bond insurance). If your state is not on the list, ask your state SRF manager to consider this option.

(Intermediate, Infrastructure)

Review the state's intended use plan (IUP) online to familiarize yourself with state priorities for SRF funding

Typically, information about your state's IUP can be found on the state SRF webpages. Use a search engine to look up "[state name] intended use plan."

Ask your SRF managers about the process for changing the existing IUP, or at least request that your input be considered for the next IUP. Attend relevant public meetings that SRF managers are required to host regarding the IUP to ask questions and make comments on how the state is spending SRF money.

(Intermediate, Infrastructure)

Ask state legislators about taking advantage of leveraging SRF dollars as bonds.

(Advanced, Infrastructure)

Make the case to your state SRF program manager for using DWSRF set-aside funds to provide case studies and training on addressing drinking water loss or other high incident drinking water problems, like water contamination, in the state.

(Advanced, Infrastructure)

Advocates should look at how SRF subsidizations are implemented within a state, since it can have an important trickle-down effect, where ratepayers of local utilities may be spared sharp rate increases. Some steps to consider:

- Review the state's IUP to find how disadvantaged communities is defined.
- Look at the communities that are marked for receiving the subsidy – do they match your organization's view of frontline communities? Do they include communities with high POC percentages? Do hotspots of pollution or environmental injustice in your state appear on the list?

Leveraging – The practice of using funds from a given source to attract other investment sources for a project. For example, when looking at the Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act, common leveraging sources include SRF funds, private capital, and local investment, including bond issuance.

- If “no” to the above, your state SRF managers might need to reconsider its “disadvantaged communities” definition. (Review the bulleted list in the [Infrastructure](#) section for alternative and/or additional disadvantaged community criteria.)

(Advanced, Infrastructure)

Advocates can encourage their state SRF manager to take a wider interpretation of qualifying projects, or even provide financial incentives such as lower interest rates and principal forgiveness (partial grant) for green projects.

EPA eligibility criteria for projects are considered a guideline, and states are not obligated to be as broad in the projects that they fund, hence the term “at the discretion of each State.” Some states choose to stick to a narrower approach, funding more traditional gray infrastructure (e.g. pipes and treatment plants) instead of green infrastructure.

If Applicable, Engage in State Commission Utility Oversight Efforts

(Beginner, Affordability)

Using the information you learned in the Local Decision-Makers section, identify the type (private, public, regional authority) of water utility from which you receive water services.

(Beginner, Utility)

Write letters to the [regulatory utility](#) commissioners. A good practice is for a group of like-minded advocacy organizations to make their objections or suggestions together.

(Intermediate, Utility)

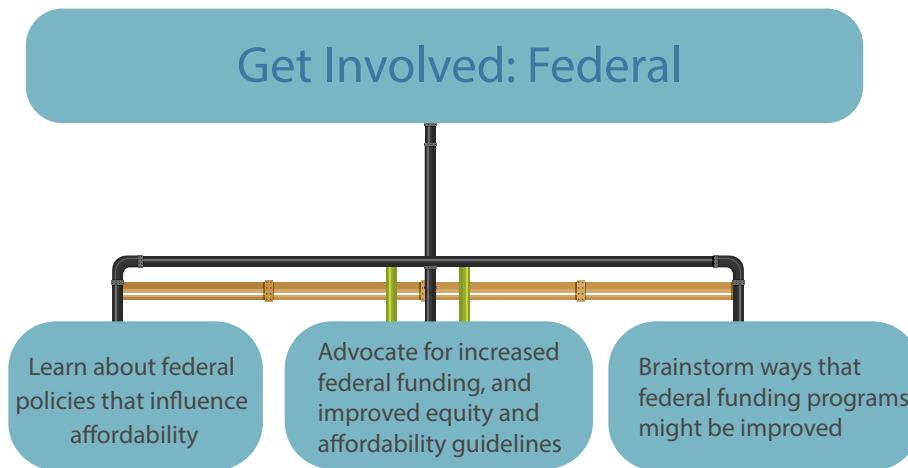
Just as with the local utility meeting, sign up and make comments at the meetings and rate cases of these commissions and state consumer protection organizations. It is helpful to reach out by email and/or phone before showing up at the public meeting and making comments there.

(Intermediate, Utility)

Attend rate case hearings to provide public input

(Advanced, Affordability)

Target state utility commissions (public utility commissions or public services commissions) when working with private water utilities when seeking affordable and equitable rates. Publicly owned water utilities are typically regulated by a local government or appointed governing board.



GET INVOLVED: FEDERAL

While local and state strategies for improving water affordability and equity outcomes are critical, the federal government has a role to play, as well. By increasing funding and low-cost financing, addressing water supply disconnections, or facilitating direct customer assistance programs, federal policies can often set the stage for water affordability and equity successes at the local level. To effectively influence decision-makers on desired policies, advocates should consider working with an organization or a coalition of groups (such as [Clean Water for All](#) or the [Water Equity and Climate Resilience Caucus](#)) to show broad support across stakeholder groups for a particular policy.

Learn About Federal Policies that Influence Affordability

(Beginner, Affordability)

[Track the latest congressional legislation and EPA announcements](#)

(Beginner, Affordability)

Subscribe to the [River Network Federal Water Policy Update Peer Group](#)

(Beginner, Infrastructure)

Review the [Clean Water for All](#) fact sheets for additional advocacy strategies

(Intermediate, Infrastructure)

Review [Executive Order 12898 \(Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations\)](#) to develop framing for issues of water finance equity and make the case for federal legislation.

(Intermediate, Infrastructure)

Become familiar with the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) and the ways in which it significantly impacts availability of water infrastructure funding for states and communities. For example, research news articles on the current and previous year WRDA house-senate package to see what types of funding was approved for water investments. (Learn more about WRDA in the [Infrastructure](#) section.)

(Advanced, Affordability)

Identify one or two federal funding programs that might be helpful in tackling water affordability-challenges in your community, and learn about the federal policy and agency that houses the program. (You can find a list of federal programs in the Affordability section, [Federal Programs that Fund Water/Wastewater Infrastructure](#).)

Pay attention to eligibility requirements – is equity a consideration? Is the level of funding sufficient to meet the need? Consider working with others to organize a letter writing campaign, lobbying for improved eligibility criteria and increased funding.

(Advanced, Infrastructure)

Understand federal guidelines for set-asides and how states typically use them. Set-asides are an important area for advocates to understand because they are a common mechanism for the federal government and the states to encourage a specific type of water project. Instead of changing the overall SRF program, high profile project types can be targeted via the set-asides.

Advocate for Increased Federal Funding, and Improved Equity and Affordability Guidelines

(Intermediate, Affordability)

Working independently or with an organization or coalition, write or call federal legislators to advocate for increased funding for infrastructure investments and low-cost financing or grants to help minimize direct investment costs passed on to ratepayers.

[Find your Congressional representatives.](#) To support water affordability and equity outcomes, you can push for the following measures when lobbying to your federal legislators:

- Increase overall levels of water infrastructure funding including low-cost financing and funding for water infrastructure projects across the board.
- Create direct assistance, water efficiency, and water loss prevention programs.
- Discourage water shutoffs for customers who are unable to pay.
- To increase availability and flexibility of funding for local water infrastructure projects, push for WRDA changes.

Brainstorm Ways that Federal Funding Programs Might Be Improved

(Advanced, Infrastructure)

Develop your own federal grant for water infrastructure investment.

- What requirements would you include to make sure the projects improve water affordability outcomes?
- How would you structure eligibility requirements and criteria to ensure that those communities who would most benefit from support can gain access?
- What are the connections this Toolkit has made between federal funding programs and equitable and affordable outcomes? How would you include these in your grant program?
- Share your ideas with your congressional delegation and see how it might help push your ideas forward.

The following table is a useful tool to organize your thoughts and ideas.

Develop your own federal grant

Name of grant:

Grant features	Your ideas	Tips
Who can apply?		<p>Is the grant only available to communities in a specific region (e.g. Great Lakes Region)?</p> <p>Do you have to be a local government to apply? Nonprofit? Water supply utility? Consider other sectors as well.</p>
What are the goals of the grants?		<p>What outcomes are you hoping to achieve with this grant? Are they measurable?</p> <p>Beyond the primary grant goals, are there other aligned outcomes you might expect to see? (i.e. if your primary goal is improved water infrastructure, might you also expect to see water affordability outcomes? Increased jobs? Improved health outcomes?)</p> <p>Look back to the four key opportunities of federal funding from Water, Health, and Equity. These opportunities are summarized in the key take-aways subsection.</p>
Who does the grant seek to serve?		<p>Should the grant fund projects in low-income communities, tribal lands, rural communities, urban areas, etc.?</p>
What are the grant eligibility criteria?		<p>Who is eligible for funding? If the grant is available to utilities, do they need to serve a certain population?</p> <p>Are there any equity criteria (i.e., populations benefited are low-income or have been historically “disadvantaged?”)</p> <p>Are the funds earmarked for certain programs (i.e., customer assistance programs) or types of water infrastructure (i.e., treatment plants versus water mains)</p> <p>Look back to the list of programs in at the “Federal Programs that Fund Water/Wastewater Infrastructure” chart and review An Equitable Water Future and the Water, Health, and Equity report for ideas on eligibility</p>