



EQUITABLE WATER INFRASTRUCTURE TOOLKIT



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The cost of water is rising throughout the United States. For the past two decades, water and wastewater service bills have grown much faster than other household expenses; in fact, the rate of increase is faster than almost any economic measure, including private university tuition.

Utilities charge customers for treating and transmitting water, and discharging wastewater. Ideally, the utility recoups a surplus and uses reserve funds to implement cost- and resource-saving innovations such as conservation rates, customer affordability programs (CAPs), and energy efficiency measures at its treatment plants. In municipalities with growing populations or service areas, infrastructure investment revenues can generally be recouped through appropriately-set service utility charges (i.e. full cost-of-service water rates), however, many municipalities reached their peak population in the mid-20th Century and have since lost a large percentage of their population (due in part to the loss of a local industry).

Now water and wastewater systems are overbuilt, and community water supplies, and stormwater and wastewater systems, need vast and critical infrastructure

investments. But with little new, growth-based revenue, utilities are struggling to find the necessary funds to maintain services, and reduce flooding and main breaks that can result in significant water loss; a Chicago Tribune study found that communities around Lake Michigan lose 30 percent or more of their water due to faulty infrastructure, a level of system inefficiency that has real financial implications.

As water affordability becomes increasingly compromised, low-, moderate-, and fixed-income households have been most severely impacted. When assessed as a share of income, their water bills can be five times greater than those of high-income households; in some cases, such as in Detroit, and Flint, Michigan, drinking water service charges for low- and fixed-income residents were 40 percent of their income.

Those who cannot pay their water bills face dire consequences that can damage credit, terminate service, and create public health emergencies. In the aftermath of thousands of water shut-offs across the country, international social justice groups unanimously stated that access to clean water — a basic human right established by the United Nations — had been grievously violated.

The aforementioned factors conspire to both increase the risk of system failure and create an untenable cost burden on ratepayers.

River Network determines 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 water 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.



This River Network Equitable Infrastructure Toolkit is a one-stop shop for community stakeholders, advocates, and leaders to:

- Identify the factors that affect water affordability
- Become familiar with water infrastructure funding and financing mechanisms; and
- Understand the role and impact of local, state and federal entities.

With this knowledge, we hope that you will recognize and work to influence equitable water infrastructure investment opportunities, practices, and policies, and then, help to address, direct, remedy, and improve outcomes.

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This report can be found at www.rivernetwork.org



River Network empowers and unites people and communities to protect and restore rivers and other waters that sustain all life. We envision a future with clean and ample water for people and nature, where local caretakers are well-equipped, effective and courageous champions for our rivers. We believe that everyone should have access to affordable, clean water and healthy rivers.