



Drinking Water Guide Fact Sheet: Taking Action

Key Points

- Several different theories of change may encourage government officials, community leaders, engaged members of the public, and others to take up the cause of advocating for clean, safe, and affordable drinking water.
- The Drinking Water Guide provides potential solutions to a variety of questions regarding individual and community action, as well as federal, state, and local engagement.
- Many tools are available to help support efforts around grassroots organizing and policy advocacy for drinking water and other environmental justice concerns.
- The online [Self-Paced Drinking Water Guide Training Series](#) provides advocates with additional activities and prompts to spur action.

What Theories of Change May Apply to Drinking Water Advocacy?

Environmental Justice

The First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, held in 1991, laid out [Principles of Environmental Justice](#) that uphold the values of the environmental justice movement. These include:

- Addressing the legacy of global colonization and oppression
- Re-establishing interdependent ties with the Earth
- Respecting all unique cultures, languages and beliefs
- Promoting economic alternatives for building safe neighborhoods.
- Demanding the right to participate as equals in decision-making
- Requiring that public policy is based on mutual respect and justice, free from bias

Environmental Justice is defined by the EPA as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” Many organizations and agencies incorporate environmental justice into their work, standards, and goals.

Water Equity & Justice

Related to, but more specific than environmental justice, **water equity** addresses the interrelated environmental, social, and economic aspects of ensuring safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable drinking water that meets the needs of all residents of a community. The Human Right to Water is an example of one policy tool that advocacy groups can promote to achieve water equity for current and future generations. Its resolution declares safe and clean drinking water and sanitation a human right.

"The human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity...The right to water is the right of everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable and physically accessible and affordable water for personal and domestic uses."



Water justice incorporates the forward-thinking goals of water equity while also addressing past and present discrimination that prevents certain groups from having fair access to safe and affordable drinking water. Therefore, achieving drinking water justice may require prioritizing the needs of certain groups of people to ensure everyone has access to the same resources as they relate to drinking water.

Historically underserved communities are more likely to lack secure access to water and sanitation services and are at higher risk during natural and human-made water emergencies (e.g. hurricanes, floods, drinking water system failures, etc.). A review of U.S. Census data and housing amenities found that Native Americans, Hispanics, and African Americans are all more likely than other groups to live without modern plumbing. To compound these issues, many vulnerable individuals fall into several categories. For example, elderly residents can also be low-income and have mobility challenges. Those that fall into multiple risk categories are also more likely to have trouble receiving, understanding, and responding to emergency instructions and to access available help.

How Does One Initiate Action in Their Communities and The Government?

The following questions are based on input from organizations focused on water advocacy and environmental justice through participation in an Advisory Committee, a series of peer calls, and individual outreach. The questions reflect the issues and concerns raised by these groups. The approaches recommended bring together elements of diversity and inclusion that offer guidance for developing and implementing advocacy efforts with authentic community engagement to help achieve fair outcomes for all.

Click on the links below to navigate directly to the question in the Drinking Water Guide.

Individual & Community Action



Water Quality

[My community has experienced a natural disaster \(earthquake, fire, flooding, hurricane, etc.\). How can I find out if my drinking water is safe?](#)

[There has been a spill, leak or other type of discharge in or near my community's drinking water supply OR there is suspicious activity in my area that might break water protection laws. What should I do and who should I notify?](#)

[There might be lead in my water, OR, the drinking water in my residence is discolored, smelly, or unpleasant to drink. Who can help me test my water?](#)

[Can I use a water filter or other device to make sure my water is safe to drink? How do I know what kind to use?](#)

[How can I help make sure my community is informed about a drinking water advisory or emergency?](#)



Services

[I received a notice about a problem with my drinking water. What does it mean?](#)

[My water bill is too high for me to pay. What can I do?](#)

[My water has been shut off. What can I do?](#)



Additional

[My drinking water comes from a private well. Where can I go for help?](#)

[I live on tribal lands. Where can I go for help?](#)

Local, State, & Federal Engagement



Rules & Regulations

[How can I encourage my state agency to revise drinking water rules or develop new guidance for managing drinking water? If these processes are already underway, how can I participate?](#)

[How can my organization participate when new national drinking water regulations are being developed?](#)



Funding & Affordability

[How can my organization advocate at the local, state, or federal levels for drinking water affordability and to prevent mass water shut-offs?](#)

[How can my organization advocate to increase state and federal infrastructure funding to ensure water is clean, safe and affordable for everyone?](#)



Additional

[How can I persuade my water system to address community-wide issues \(e.g., adjust unaffordable rate structures, improve water shut-off policies or improve or develop a plan to protect our drinking water source\)?](#)

[How can my organization advocate for increased water access for all in public spaces?](#)

Case Study

Alliance for the Great Lakes on Affordability

Over a two-year period, the [Alliance for the Great Lakes](#) held conversations with community members in Cleveland. In Fall 2018, the Alliance hosted a water affordability clinic with residents, system providers, and local community and environmental organizations. Participants shared concerns about rising, and at times unpredictable, water and sewer rates.

Local community members spoke directly with the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District and Cleveland Water in a roundtable discussion about water affordability. After the roundtable, residents were invited to address individual bill concerns face-to-face with Cleveland Water and Sewer District staff. Leaders of community organizations also learned about utility assistance programs that they can share with residents, and agencies connected around opportunities for collaboration. This important event was a response to community need, helped to raise awareness about affordability issues and connect residents to advocacy opportunities, such as Representative Fudge's Low-Income Sewage & Water Assistance Program legislation. To learn more, see Alliance for the Great Lakes, [Shut Up and Listen](#).

Additional Resources

The following additional resources can help further grassroots organizing efforts, policy advocacy, water/environmental justice, and other topics discussed in this fact sheet.

- The [Jemez Principles of Democratic Organizing](#), developed in 1986 by 40 environmental justice and health advocates working on globalization and trade. The Jemez Principles provide guidance for achieving equity and justice in collaborative and organizing efforts, such as making space for people who are directly affected, to speak for themselves.
- The [Social Vulnerability Index \(SVI\)](#) is a useful, free web-based tool developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The SVI can help communities identify areas where vulnerable groups may be concentrated, to ensure emergency outreach and communications reach everyone. SVI community maps include the location of schools, day care centers, nursing homes and hospitals.
- [Using River Network's Toolkits and Guides \(River Network\)](#).
- [Water Justice Toolkit \(American Rivers\)](#).
- [Public Communications Toolkit \(American Water Works Association\)](#).
- [Water Affordability Advocacy Toolkit \(Natural Resources Defense Council\)](#).
- [Digital Organizing Toolbox \(Community Action Works\)](#).
- [Water & Equity Mapping Tools \(River Network\)](#).
- [Draining: The Economic Impact of America's Hidden Water Crisis \(DigDeep\)](#).