



March 10, 2026

Learning Session

Avoiding Water Shutoffs

Part 1: Lessons and Best Practices from Chicago

With support from:



WELCOME!

While you wait ...

- Please introduce yourself in the chat - your name, personal pronouns if you'd like to share, org, where you're based, and the native land you reside on.
- Please use the chat box for questions during the speaker presentations.
- Please fill out the post-webinar survey so we can improve!



ABOUT RIVER NETWORK

River Network grows and strengthens a transformational national network of water, justice, and river advocates.

We envision a powerful and inclusive movement that ensures abundant clean water for all people and nature to thrive. We believe that joy and hope for our planet flows through our rivers.

Meet the network and search our Water Protectors Map on our website!

rivernetwork.org



THE RESOURCE

ArcGIS StoryMap



Introduction 



“The practice of shutting off water is a very clear disruption of water access, with really significant impacts for people and questionable value to utilities.”
- Anna-Lisa Gonzales Castle, Elevate

The benefits of keeping the tap on go far beyond drinking water. Think about how you use your water each day: washing your hands, cooking dinner, flushing the toilet, washing your clothes, watering your garden, and so much more. At-home water supply impacts sanitation: water access decreases the spread of disease and strengthens the economy. When [water access is expanded](#), it can lead to increased economic productivity and reduced healthcare costs.²

Imagine a Future Where Everyone Can Access Water

Water is a human right. But access to clean, safe, and affordable drinking water is not guaranteed in the United States. River Network envisions a future where everyone can afford to pay for the clean, safe, and reliable water coming out of their taps, where no one’s water is shutoff because of their inability to pay, where communities have adequate resources for water infrastructure maintenance, and where drinking water contaminants do not threaten public health. This vision can only become reality if community advocates and utility leaders feel equipped with the knowledge, capacity, and confidence to advocate and implement equitable access to clean drinking water and influence decision makers at the federal, state, and local levels.

We’re not alone in this vision. According to a 2023 [Water Hub poll](#), 74% of voters support banning water shutoffs so that lower-income families can maintain water access even when they fall behind on their water bills.¹

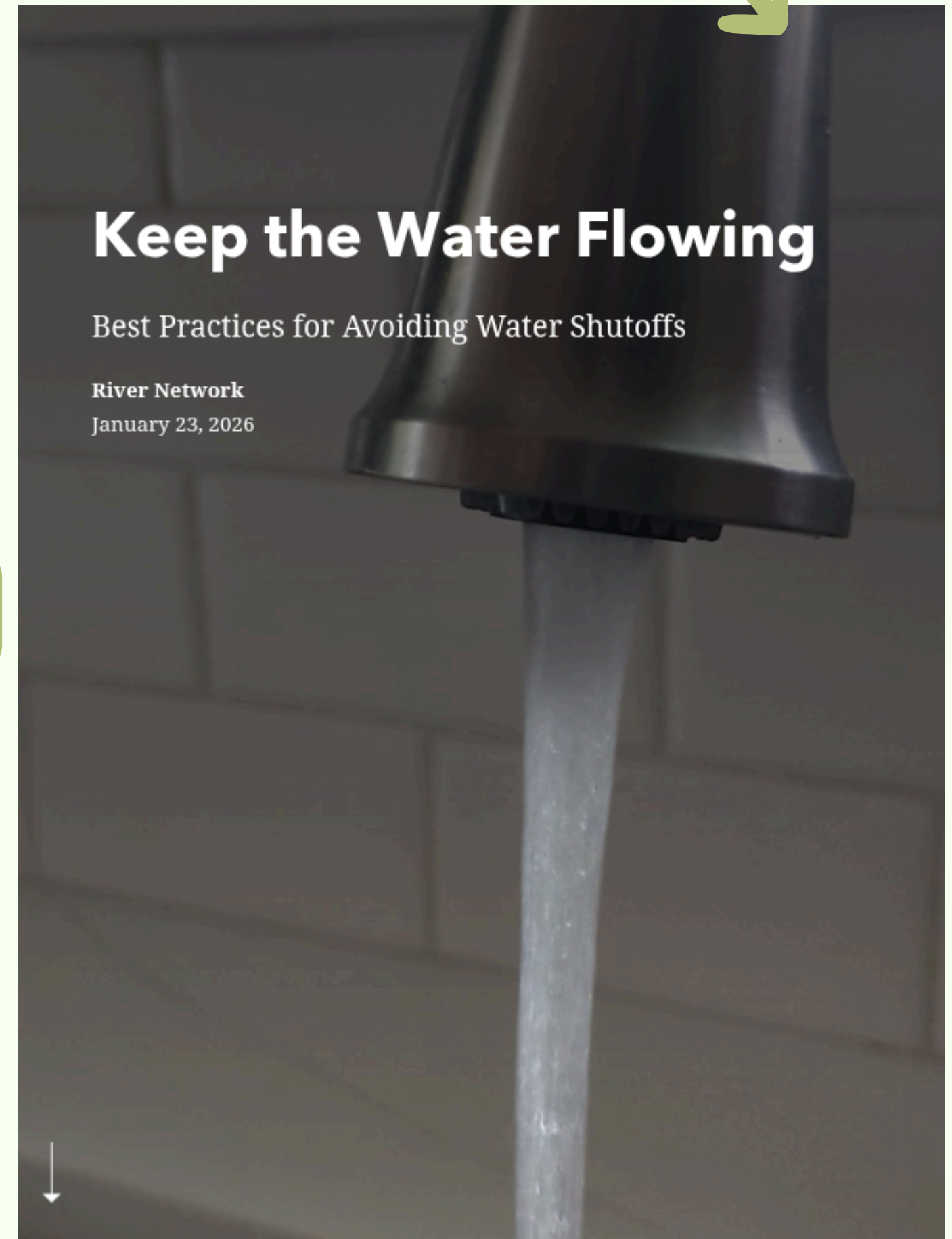


74%

of voters support banning water shutoffs so that lower-income families can maintain water access even when they fall behind on their water bills.

River Network 6

Two Formats



PDF

WHY FOCUS ON WATER SHUTOFFS?

The Problem

Rising Costs & Water Affordability

Water affordability is a growing issue.

Water utility bills are increasing faster than other household expenses and exceed the rate of inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price, and that number is only expected to rise in the coming decades. According to a national survey of water utilities in 2023, an average of 20% of households are in debt to their water utility. **10% of households in the US face affordability concerns.**

“EPA estimates that between 12.1 million and 19.2 million households throughout the U.S. lack access to affordable water services. Nationally, the cost of unaffordable water service bills ranges from \$5.1 billion to \$8.8 billion. This represents between 9.2% to 14.6% of total households in the U.S.”

Water Affordability Needs Assessment: Report to Congress



Water shutoffs are a visible symptom of an underlying, widespread condition of unaffordable water.

Disrupting a household's access to water has a cascading series of negative effects.

3 CASE STUDIES, 10 BEST PRACTICES



Chicago, IL



DeKalb County, GA



San Antonio, TX

Reducing or Eliminating the Practice of Water Shutoffs: Recommendations at the Local Level

Easier to
Implement

1. Be proactive & communicate early and often
2. Shift shutoff notification and disconnection timelines
3. Establish consumer protection policies
4. Create or improve assistance programs that work for the most vulnerable customers
5. Collect data consistently & transparently to understand your community's water affordability needs
6. Establish debt forgiveness or repayment plans
7. Establish rate structures that enable all to afford their water bills
8. Advocate for local ordinances that prohibit the use of water shutoffs due to customer's inability to pay
9. Centralize utilities' administrative needs & pursue regional collaborative structures
10. Tap into state and federal funding for affordability planning & critical infrastructure upgrades

More
Effort to
Implement

Plus: Advocate for state and federal solutions (see Appendix A)



**ANNA-LISA
GONZALES CASTLE**

Director of Water Policy

Elevate



**KATHERINE
WHEELER**

Deputy Director

**City of Chicago
Dept. of Finance**

**With support
from...**



**LAKESHA
GAGE-WOODARD**

Director of Public Affairs

**City of Chicago
Dept. of Finance**

GUEST SPEAKERS

Elevate's Vision

Elevate seeks to co-create a world in which everyone has clean and affordable heat, cooling, power, and water in their homes and communities –no matter who they are or where they live.



ELEVATE

Pillars of Our Water Work

**Universal Access to Safe, Clean,
Affordable Water**

**Excellent Water Service and
Healthy Water Systems**

**Resilient and Sustainable
Source Waters**



ELEVATE

Elevate Water Team



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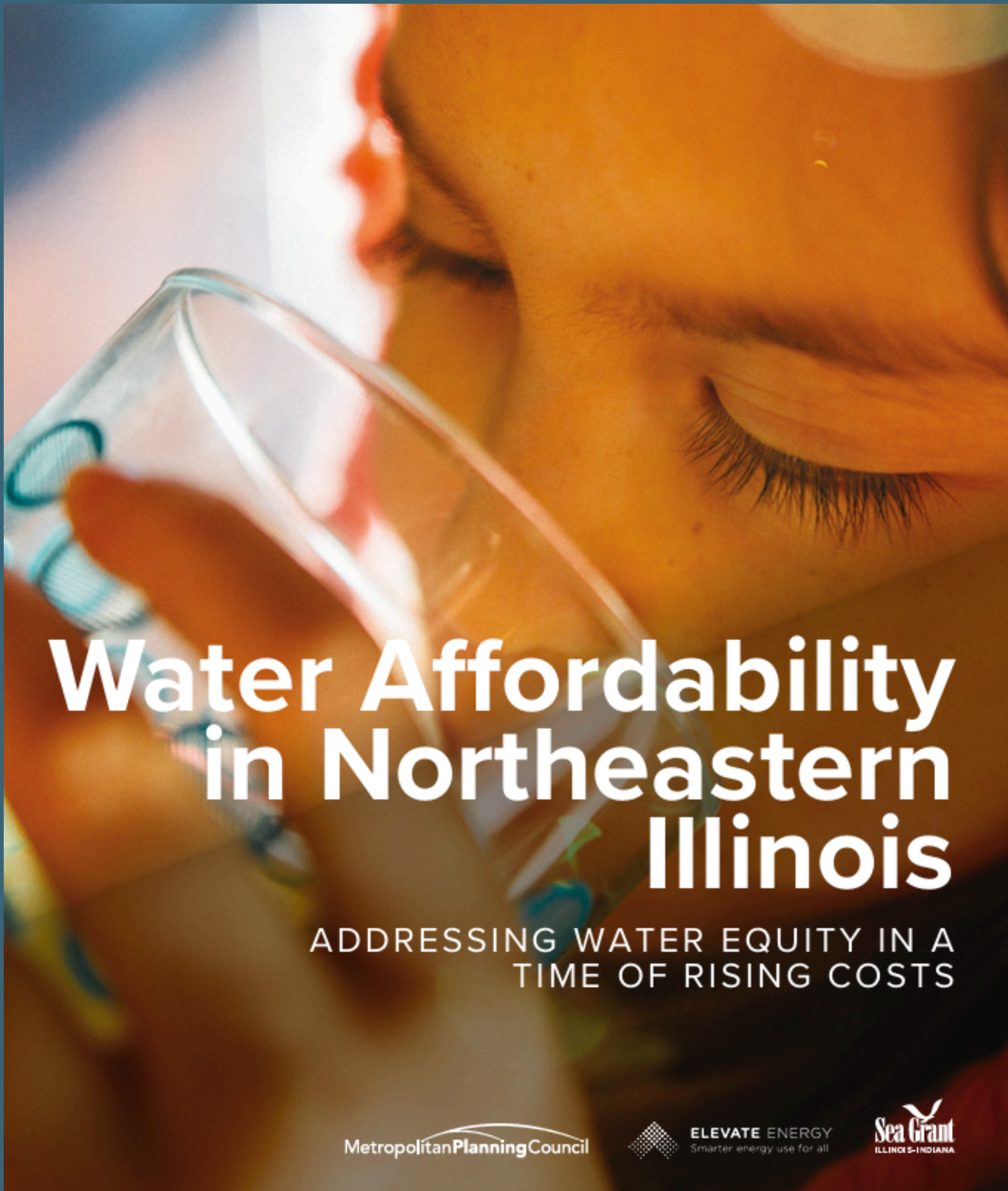


Caroline Pakenham
Director, Water Programs

Water Affordability

- **Cook County Water Affordability Program** – bulk debt relief, technical assistance, pilot funding
- **Cook County Leak Repair**– leak repairs and debt relief
- **Research and Pilot Projects** – community water affordability analyses
- **Policy and Strategy** – developing and advancing recommendations at multiple levels of government



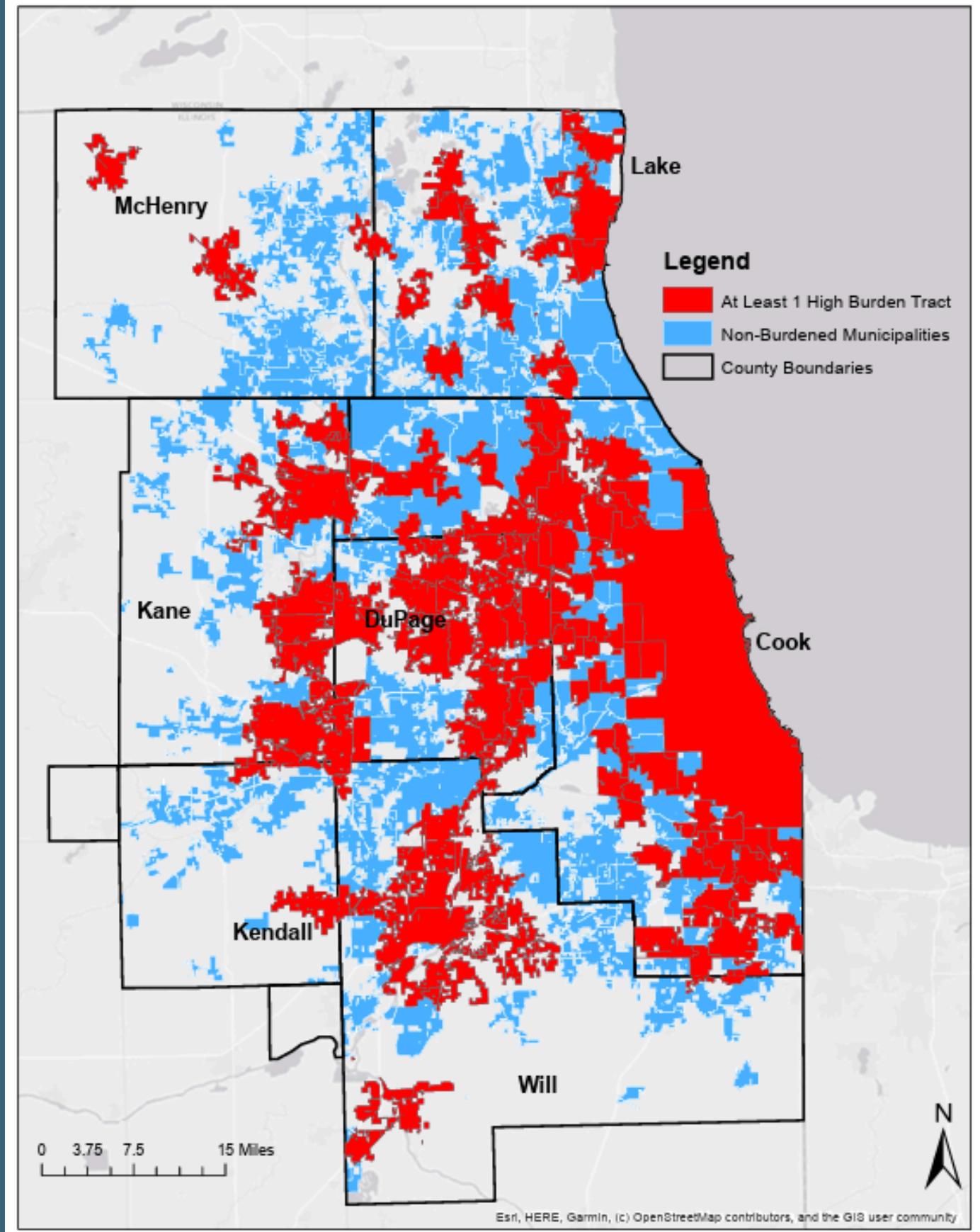


Water Affordability in Northeastern Illinois

ADDRESSING WATER EQUITY IN A
TIME OF RISING COSTS



Figure 4. A Widespread Issue: Municipalities with at Least One High Water Burden Tract for Lowest Income Earners



City of Chicago Water Affordability Analysis (2022)

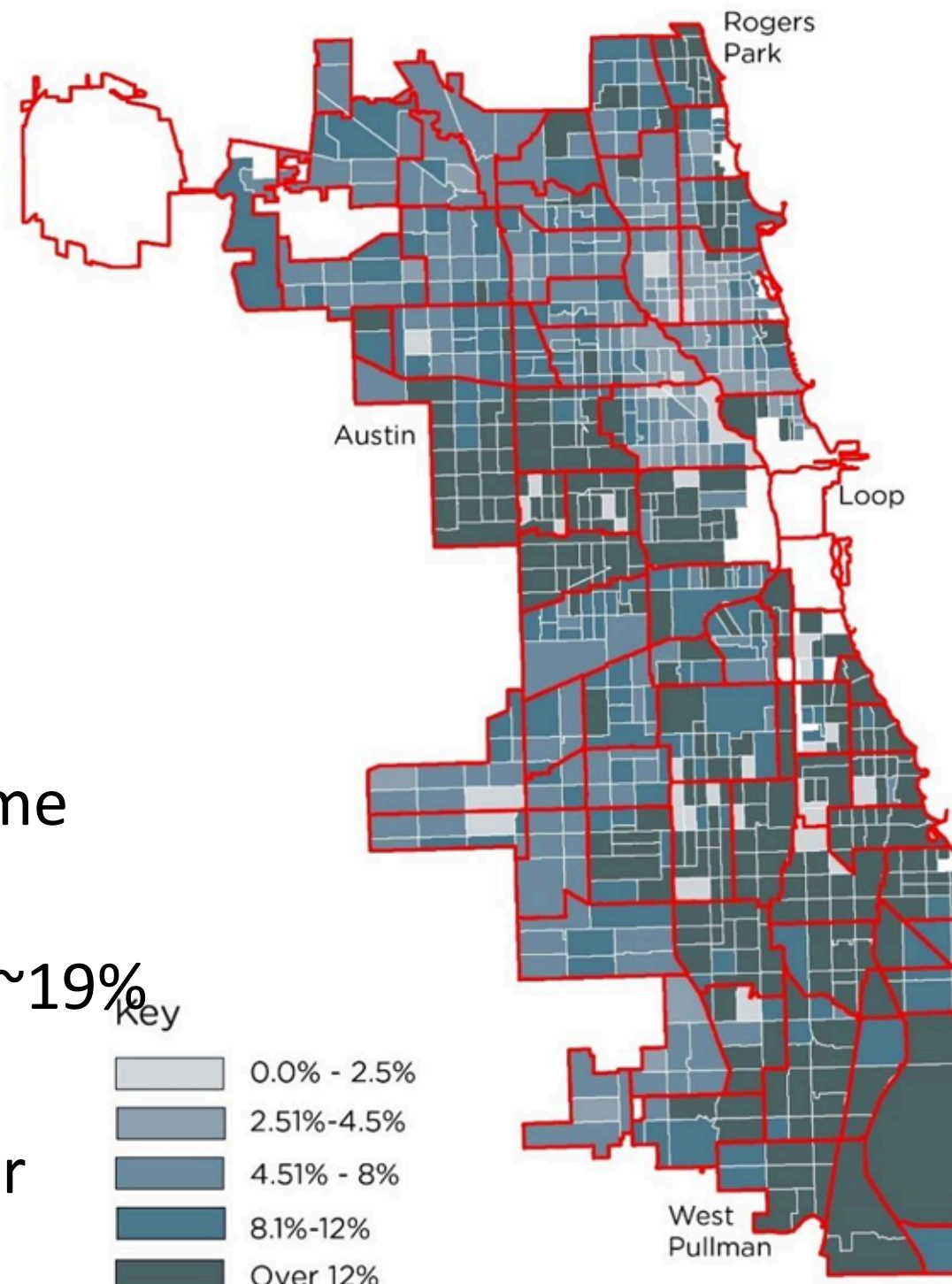
Analysis:

- 8.9 million water bills for 577,000 residential customer accounts
- 21 residential building types
- 445,000 Payment Arrangement records representing 111,000 accounts
- 202,000 Run Continuous (potential leak notification) letter records representing 68,000 addresses

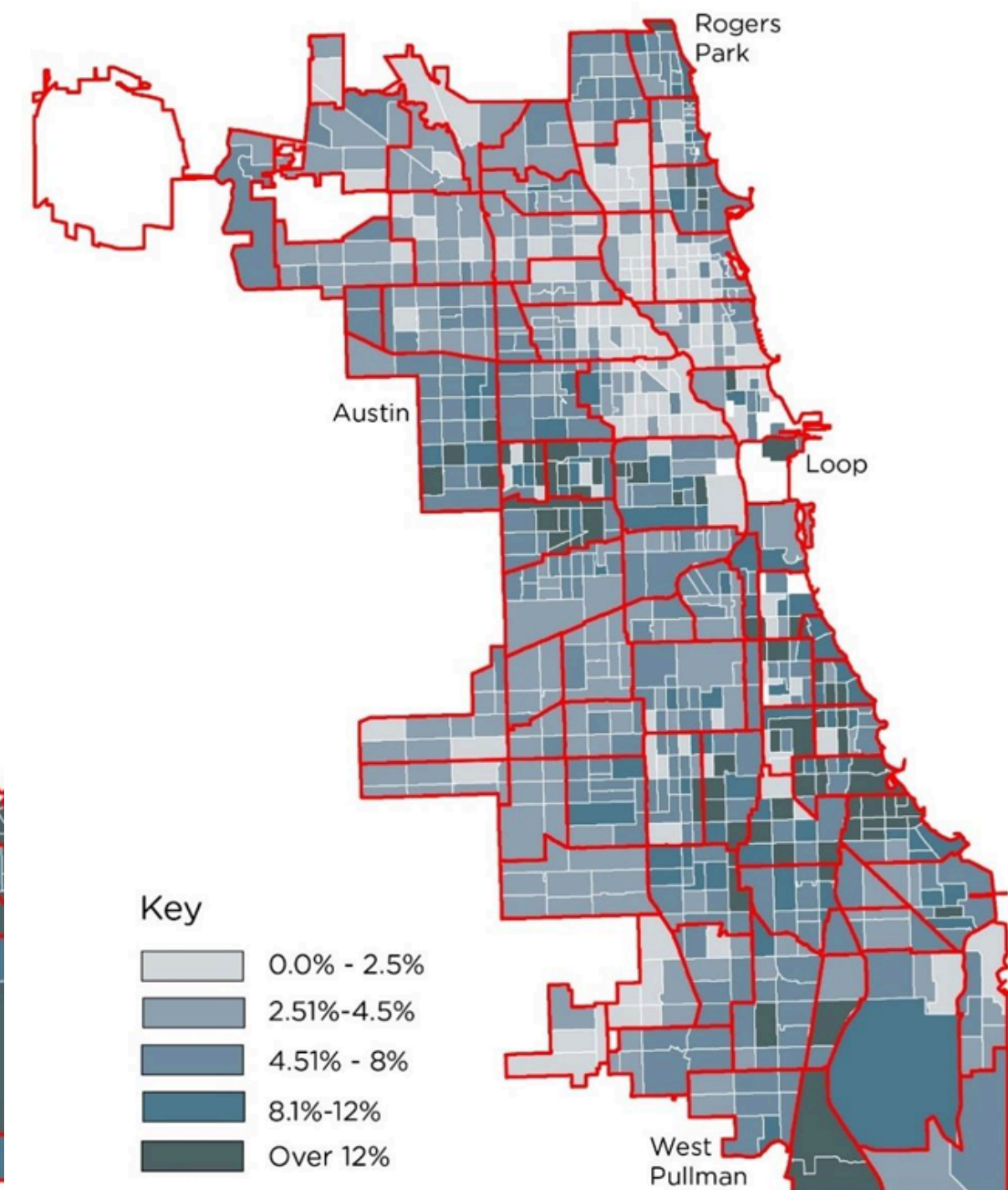
Findings:

- LQI earners pay on average ~10% of income for water
- Majority Black low-income residents pay ~19% of income
- Non-metered residents pay \$500 more for water on average

Water Burden for Lowest Income Quintile Households



Nonmetered Accounts



Metered Accounts

Cook County TAP is a resource hub to accelerate healthier water in Cook County communities.

Cook County TAP is a **free** technical assistance program that helps municipalities develop lead service line replacement programs and implement water affordability best practices. We provide the resources you need to create affordable and effective initiatives that reduce lead in drinking water and decrease residential water costs—from starting a program and securing funding to encouraging participation from your residents. The result is a well-designed program that will improve the health and well-being of your community.

You'll find educational resources, upcoming webinars and training sessions, updates on funding opportunities, and more.



Policy Solutions for Water Affordability and Access

- Local water systems can advance water access through shutoff protections, assistance, rate reform and efficiency, and more
- State policy reform to enable local action, funding to lower water system costs, and deliver household assistance
- Federal infrastructure funding to keep costs manageable while establishing a Low-Income Household Water Affordability Program

Get in Touch

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Water Debt Relief Assistance Programs in Chicago

Department of Finance
Utility Billing & Customer Service





Utility Billing & Customer Service Overview

- Billing & customer service for approximately 494,000 accounts
- Charge approximately \$1.5 billion per year
- Process approximately 69,000 Full Payment Certificates (FPCs) per year
- Receive approximately 214,000 calls (for agents) per year, with approximately 95% answered
- Administer the Utility Billing Relief (UBR) and Leak Relief Pilot (LRP) Programs
- Process senior sewer exemptions
- Process and remit annual senior sewer rebates



DOF

Status Quo Pre-Debt Relief

- Water rate increases 2012 – 2015
- Garbage charge in 2016
- Water & sewer tax in 2017
- Cyclical Payment Plans
- Water shut offs for nonpayment paused in 2019
- MeterSave program paused in 2019



DOF

Utility Billing Relief (UBR)

- Launched in April 2020
- Additional enrollment methods launched throughout 2020
- Eligibility
 - Homeowner must reside in a SFR, 2-flat, or 3-flat
 - Must meet income requirement
- Program Benefits
 - No penalties or debt collection
 - 50% rate reduction
 - Debt forgiveness
- Results as of March 5, 2026
 - Approximately \$42.9 million forgiven
 - Approximately \$46.6 million in savings due to 50% discount
 - Over 15,000 households currently enrolled in the program
 - Over 33,000 households have participated to date
 - Nearly 90% success rate for enrollees

DOF Water Restoration Program

- Launched in mid-2020



- Water Efficiency
- Utility Assistance
- Water Affordability
- Energy Efficiency

NTT Data

- Customer Communication
- Billing Assistance
- Restore Facilitation



- B-Box Repair
- Water Restore
- Posting Flushing Flyers
- Microbiological and Lead Sampling
- Free water pitcher filter



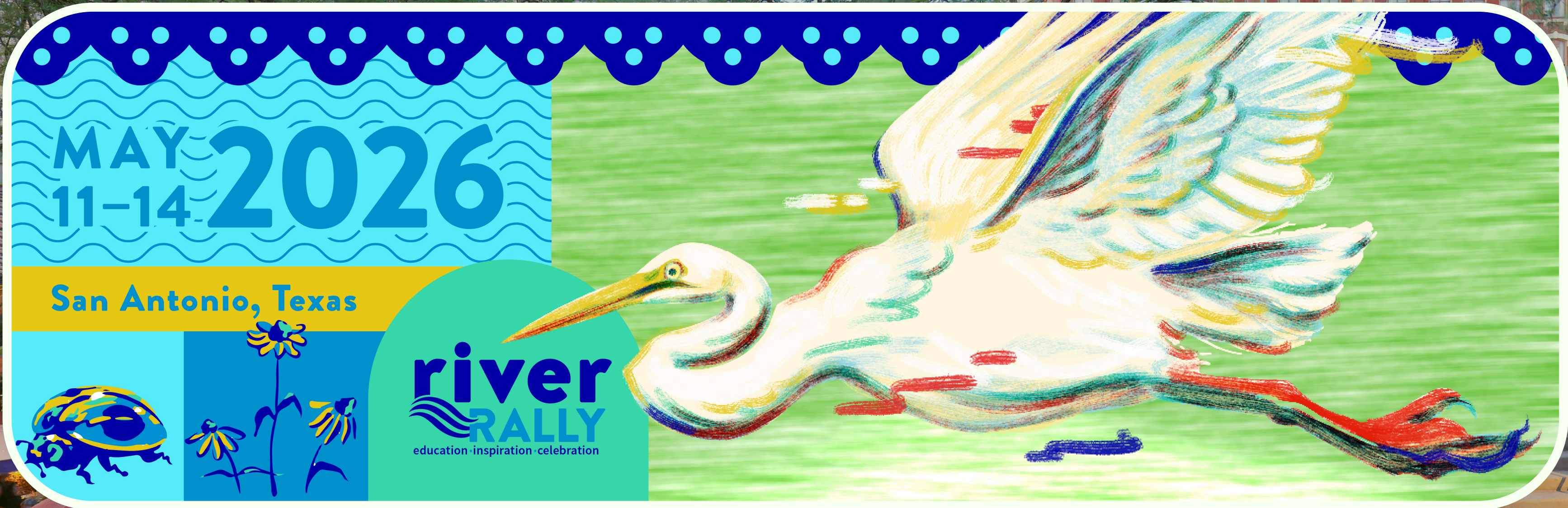
Leak Relief Pilot Program (LRP)

- Launched in January 2025
- Eligibility
 - Leak on outdoor underground service line confirmed by Chicago Water Management and repaired on or after 1/1/23
 - SFR, 2-flat, 3-flat, small commercial
 - Meter must be located outdoors
 - No proof of income required
- Benefits: reduce any bills impacted by the leak to an average of what the customer typically uses at the property
- Program website: [Chicago.gov/LRP](https://chicago.gov/LRP)

OPEN DISCUSSION

A low-angle photograph of a concrete water tower against a blue sky with light clouds. The tower has several circular levels and a red metal staircase on the side.

- **What questions do you have?**
 - Pop them in the chat or use the “raise hand” feature!



REGISTRATION IS OPEN!

May 11-14, 2026 in San Antonio, Texas

→ rivernetwork.org/river-rally

MEMBERSHIP

At River Network, we believe that equitable and enduring solutions start with community. Become a member to:

- Learn through publications, trainings, peer calls, and our resource library.
- Connect through our online community and topical peer groups.
- Stay ahead of the curve with the latest water news including success stories, solutions, and best practices for your water work.
- Amplify your impact.

For details on free & premium membership, visit:
rivernetwork.org/membership ←



THANK YOU!

This learning session will be available online.

We would love your feedback on this event!

bit.ly/RN-Feedback

