

March 16, 2020

Governor Gretchen Whitmer  
George W. Romney Building  
111 S Capitol Ave,  
Lansing, MI 48933



Dear Governor Whitmer,

We extend our deep appreciation for your collaboration with the City of Detroit to provide for the safety and well-being of residents through your statewide plan to respond to the COVID-19, coronavirus. Your prompt activation of the State Emergency Operations Center on February 28th was an important step to address this public health crisis in a comprehensive manner.

Specifically, your leadership in establishing a moratorium on shutoffs and restoring water service to disconnected customers was another critical initiative to ensure that low-income households could take steps to safeguard themselves through hand-washing and home sanitary measures. Now, one week after your Detroit press conference, we wish to alert you to concerns we have based upon our more than 12 years of experience of working alongside and on behalf of impacted residents. Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, a founding member of the People's Water Board Coalition (PWBC), has been engaged in water rights work with low-income households for more than 20 years.

Firstly, we are deeply concerned that Detroit officials are unable to carry out your March 9th instruction to restore water and sanitation services to all of the estimated 9,500 disconnected households. We are aware of homes that have been without DWSD service for weeks, months and *years*. Consequently, these homes have considerable lead service line and residential plumbing problems characterized by corroded and burst pipes; water heaters lined with dangerous deposits; water-borne microbial contamination in the lines from stagnant water and raw sewage; and lead contamination in plumbing and fixtures.

Secondly, the COVID-19 crisis has caused a frenzy among customers in the GLWA and DWSD regions who are buying bottled water in mass quantities from wholesale suppliers, warehouses and retail stores. This is causing low-income, residents without water service to compete (unsuccessfully) with residents who have safe, clean tap water.

As water rights advocates who for years have worked to aid impacted households, we cannot acquire water nor sanitizers (including bleach and disinfectants) to distribute for emergency assistance. Rubbing alcohol, aloe gel, and other essential ingredients are hard to find for homemade remedies as well.

Thirdly, the City of Detroit is turning on water in homes where possible and prioritizing water meters installations where needed. However, local officials have no plan or capacity, as we have surmised, to address the magnitude of ensuring that all estimated 9,500 disconnected residents in the immediate future will have potable water for drinking, hygiene and sanitation. We believe many households will never regain residential water service.

We are in a frightening and dire state of crisis and urgently request these seven responses through the authority of the Office of the Governor:

1. Since you've declared a State of Emergency, please use your powers to deploy federal and state resources. Government aid would include the logistical expertise and capacity of the National Guard, as well as the deployment of water system personnel and plumbers from across the state; and a wider posting of public health information in non-digital formats accessible for low-income residents such as newspapers, billboards, leaflets and bus signs.

2. Establish immediately public water stations across the City of Detroit where residents can acquire gallon jugs of water, and where community groups can pick them up for delivery to homes that do not have the capacity to get it themselves. Also, (re-)establish government-funded water stations in Flint, Benton Harbor and other impacted communities across the state. Moreover, we strongly request that this water be derived from municipally sourced packagers and *not* from profit-making bottlers that thousands of Michigan residents have opposed in EGLE public hearings.
3. Make available at these water stations, gallon containers of bleach as well as sanitizers, disinfectants, and paper towels for impacted households to clean their homes properly.
4. Direct Michigan DHHS to expand and extend State Emergency Relief (SER) benefits to include more resources, less restrictions and quicker responses for benefits to include water heater replacements, water payment assistance (particularly when the moratorium ends), and essential household water line flushing; and to cease mandatory child protective service reporting requirements of households without water.
5. Extend the moratorium on shutoffs indefinitely and especially until DWSD has confirmed that it has been in contact with residents at EVERY disconnected home, and made significant efforts for restoration and plumbing repairs.

Additionally, as the immediate crisis is alleviated:

1. Ban future water shutoffs on vulnerable households, i.e., those where babies, children, pregnant women, elders, persons with disabilities and/or chronic health conditions reside.
2. Enact a statewide, low-income based water affordability program assessed on a household's ability to pay. This will allow impoverished customers to enroll in sustainable payment plans without service interruption.

Your urgent response will help ensure the COVID-19 public health risks in Detroit are contained, and that the city does not experience a man-made crisis in similar effect as Flint.

With deep appreciation,

People's Water Board Coalition

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#### **People's Water Board Coalition Member Groups**

AFSCME Local 207; Baxter's Beat Back the Bullies Brigade; Brightmoor Connection Food Pantry; Boggs Center – Detroit; Cities of Peace Detroit; Detroit Greens; Detroit Jews for Justice; Detroit People's Platform; East Michigan Environmental Action Council; Ecumenical Theological Seminary; For the Love Of Water; Food & Water Watch; Great Lakes Bioneers – Detroit; Highland Park Human Rights Coalition; Immaculate Heart of Mary; Michigan Emergency Coalition Against War and Injustice; Michigan Citizens for Water Conservation; Michigan Coalition for Human Rights; Michigan Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Network (MUUSJN); Michigan Welfare Rights Organization; Moratorium NOW; Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development; Sierra Club; Sisters of Mercy; St. Peter's Episcopal Church; United Church of Christ – Detroit Area Social Justice Team.

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