

October 26, 2023

Dear Representative Pohutsky and the Natural Resources, Environment, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation Committee:

My name is Sylvia Orduño and I'm a Detroit resident and community organizer with the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization for over 26 years. More recently, I am the director of the People's Water Board Coalition of over 3 dozen grassroots and advocacy organizations working with impacted people on water and sanitation affordability for residents across the state.

I have worked deeply and intensely with thousands of residents who have been impacted by unaffordable water, sewage, and drainage bills and the tragic health and housing consequences that follow when people are denied these basic human needs and rights. I have been in dozens of Michigan residents' homes witnessing their dire situations and working on cases with water departments, program administrators, and DHHS staff as we've advocated for benefits, debt forgiveness, and other programs and services to help vulnerable residents survive. Thriving has oftentimes felt like a luxury.

I also know that these problems are not unique to Detroit, Highland Park, or Hamtramck residents. The water affordability problem is in reality a statewide crisis that is worsening as utilities of all sizes grapple with infrastructure costs that get transferred to residents through bonds, loans, and rate increases. Climate change, water contamination, and the migration of residents to Michigan from water insecure parts of the nation are posing new challenges that will exacerbate existing payment and collection problems from residential customers and water providers as communities and utilities experience environmental and economic changes.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that when poor households are left to languish with water insecurity, we all will struggle through public health risks. Plus, our community water systems cannot function adequately to ensure they can be solvent and strong purveyors of clean, safe drinking water and sanitation.

But what I most want to convey to you today is the critical nature of the water affordability bill package before you. I hear some commenters tell you that the result of the lengthy and in-depth stakeholder process that resulted in these bill drafts are not measures and outcomes for affordability but are assistance. That is false and suggests that this committee's decision to support the bill package is a matter of semantics or that the bills' objectives are elusive.

Instead what you have before you is the result of what happens when democracy and consensus among allies and challengers can come together to work for a common good and meet the needs of vulnerable people for tangible benefits and a greater good. In this case, specifically for statewide water affordability benefits through strong and extensive policy provisions for lasting household affordability.

I wholeheartedly ask you to support the bill package that Sen. Chang has valiantly championed and skillfully led through a unique stakeholder process that many of us doubted would result in the successful package that you have before you today.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and leadership for a better Michigan!