



United Way
for Southeastern Michigan

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Good morning, Chair Morse, Majority Vice Chair Martus, Minority Vice Chair Green, and members of this subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about water affordability in Michigan. My name is Sean Scane, the Director of Utility Services at United Way for Southeastern Michigan. For those of you not yet familiar, we are an impact-focused, community-based nonprofit with a broad portfolio of work and investments across Wayne, Oakland, Macomb and Washtenaw counties, including a variety of direct-service programs and over 100 funded partner organizations. We seek to strengthen our community by improving household stability and ensuring that every child has what they need to thrive.

As of January 2023, our United Way has been the administrator of the Water Residential Assistance Program through the Great Lakes Water Authority for Oakland County. We are committed to providing timely, sustainable solutions for our clients and partners. Since we became the WRAP administrator for Oakland County, approximately 936 households have been enrolled in the program. Through WRAP enrollment, clients are enrolled into an income-based water assistance plan that allows a payment towards past-due arrears, while also providing ongoing assistance through a monthly bill credit to ensure affordability. Since we have started administering this program in Oakland County, we have seen demand for these services increase as clients become more aware of them.

The greater Southeast Michigan region is home to over four million people, 39% of whom fall below the ALICE threshold – a widely used relative poverty measure based on an individual's or family's ability to fund a basic, no-frills monthly survival budget. That's more than one in three households who struggled to afford basic needs- including water within their home.

When people cannot afford to pay, they face potential loss of water services, added economic hardship, and grave risks to both individual and community health. Our team hears these calls every day from residents in Oakland County; we hear the anxieties, worries, and exhaustion of families who are desperate to find assistance that can ensure one of our most essential needs, water, stays available to them. We must ensure that funding is available for vulnerable individuals and families who may not have the ability to pay and are facing a water shutoff.

United Way for Southeastern Michigan also administers the 2-1-1 community helpline for our region. This is an essential part of our human service infrastructure which provides information and referrals from professional community care advocates who can quickly connect those in need to nearby support and resources. The service is available throughout the entire state – meaning someone can dial 2-1-1 from anywhere in Michigan and receive support 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. Every year, our region's 2-1-1 alone receives approximately 195,000 connections from individuals needing assistance. In the last year, approximately 8,400 total referrals were made for water payment assistance. We see this need for water assistance continue to grow.

Last year, the legislature appropriated \$60 million to help pay for water bills: \$25 million in the January 2023 supplemental and \$35 million in the fiscal year 2024 budget. We want to thank you for taking this step and for acknowledging the unaffordable water bills that threaten access to water for many Michiganders. As we continue to engage with many of you and several of our partners who have testified today on the water affordability legislation led by Senator Chang, we must not let those seeking resources to pay their water bills fall through the cracks. We respectfully request level funding of \$60 million for FY 2025 to help ensure that water remains on in vulnerable households throughout the state. As others have mentioned we do not anticipate requesting ongoing appropriations once the Water Affordability legislation passes-which we hope it will with your support. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today and for your continued leadership in protecting those who are unable to afford safe, clean drinking water. If you have any questions, please let me know and now I'd like pass it to my colleague Shayla Zimmerman.

Good morning, Chair Morse, and members of this subcommittee. My name is Shayla Zimmerman, I'm the Associate Director of Special Projects for community impact at United Way and I am a resident of Detroit in Wayne County.

I've had the honor of managing various projects at United Way for Southeastern Michigan for 2.5 years. During this time, I've loved working in collaboration with our utilities team to build out United Way's water assistance program for Oakland County. It has been a rewarding and full-circle experience for me. I've had the opportunity to truly advocate for under-resourced communities, build a program that is culturally sensitive and accessible, and do everything in my power to keep families' water from being shut off. And this year, in collaboration with the Water Resource Commissioners office, we can expand water assistance to help even more ALICE families.

Something you might not see when you look at me is that I grew up in poverty, mostly living with my grandparents on the East Side of Detroit, but moved around almost every year with my divorced, young parents. Growing up, my mom worked in the medical field, and had a hard time keeping up with raising four kids and holding down a job. We experienced a lot of financial hardship. Our electricity was shut off and we were evicted from many homes and apartments, more times than I can count. I vividly remember the day a water department worker came to our door to shut off our water. I was about 16 years old at this time and was watching my two-year-old brother and two sisters around 10 years old, it was hot, and our power was already shut off. So, I answered the door, with my brother on my hip, to a man in overalls, holding a large wrench, who said "I'm here to shut your water off, are your parents around?" I explained that I didn't know anything about this, my mom was at work, and I was watching my younger siblings. I watched him through the window as he started to dig into the front yard, exposing a pipe, to turn the water off, but then he went in his van, and spent a good amount of time talking on the phone. Some time passed, and he came back to my door and handed me a piece of paper with a phone number on it "I am not going to shut your water off today. Give your mom this number and tell her we can help." I thanked him and he left without shutting off our water.

At the time, I was too young to understand the weight of his actions, and now I reflect on his kindness and advocacy. He probably looked into mine and my young siblings' eyes and knew he couldn't go through with his orders. He probably risked his job to advocate for us to his boss, and he decided that he would choose to be a good neighbor, not just someone that followed directions. He probably knew what it meant for us young kids to not have water. He probably knew our health would be at risk - we wouldn't be able to bathe, brush our teeth, or drink water. I don't even know this utility worker's name - but now that I work to advocate to keep people's water on and ensure our client services teams are supported - I honor him and his choice in my work every day. Thank you again for this opportunity to share my personal testimony and why water is so important to all of us.