

The Epoch Times

Advocacy Groups Call for Moratorium on Water Shutoffs Amid COVID-19 Outbreak

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April 1, 2020 Updated: April 1, 2020

Amid already existing calls for a country-wide moratorium on water shut-offs during the COVID-19 pandemic, clean water advocates in California urged state leaders on March 30 to impose an immediate statewide moratorium on water shut-offs. The state has long been battling a water crisis.

There are over 148,000 public water systems in the United States run by private companies, municipalities, and others, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and while the country [faces] the pandemic, these water providers will keep facing questions about shutting off water supplies on non-payment of bills in places with no moratorium.

“Vulnerable communities across California in both rural (like Tulare and Fresno Counties) and urban (like Los Angeles County) locations, who are largely low-income families and people of color, face the possibility of imminent disruption to their water service due to inability to pay,” said a group of nine California based water advocates in a statement on Monday.

The advocacy group said one million Californians lack access to safe drinking water, and the CCP virus pandemic compounds this crisis as the next monthly billing cycle approaches.

“How can we stop the spread of COVID-19 and protect our communities if people don’t have access to clean water?” Susana De Anda, the Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Community Water Center, a non-profit agency that’s part of the advocacy group, said in the statement.

The crisis is aggravated in communities with contaminated water that cannot find bottled water in stores. Michael Claiborne, Senior Attorney with Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, told The Epoch Times in a statement that hundreds and thousands in California get tap water contaminated by arsenic, uranium, nitrate, and bacteria.

“COVID-19 has exacerbated this existing disparity in water access. Communities and households with unsafe tap water rely on bottled water for drinking, cooking, and sanitary purposes. Because of widespread stockpiling, grocery stores and corner markets do not have bottled water in stock,” said Claiborne.

The senior attorney shared the story of a grandmother in Pixley who has to regularly drive 20 miles to the city of Tulare because the local stores have no stocks of water left.

“In stopping at many grocery stores and markets, she is also exposing herself to possible infection despite being in a high-risk age group and acting as a caretaker for her grandchildren. This situation is so unsustainable that she is considering moving in with her daughter in Visalia until the state of emergency is over,” Claiborne told The Epoch Times.

State Governor Issues Orders

State Governor Gavin Newsom issued an executive order on March 16 that authorized local governments to prevent utility shut-offs for Californians affected by COVID-19.

“People shouldn’t lose or be forced out of their home because of the spread of COVID-19,” said Newsom in a statement.

“Over the next few weeks, everyone will have to make sacrifices—but a place to live shouldn’t be one of them. I strongly encourage cities and counties take up this authority to protect Californians,” he said.

The water advocates’ group welcomed Newsom’s order, asking the California Public Utilities Commission to monitor measures taken by utility providers to prioritize customer protections on utilities such as water. However, the group said that more needs to be done to ensure safe drinking water for all.

“We applaud those utilities who have not only placed a moratorium on shut-offs during the pandemic but which are turning the water back on for those whose water service was turned off prior to this crisis,” Jennifer Clary, Water Program Manager at Clean Water Action said in the statement.

“Those who were struggling before this emergency hit need help even more now. We urge the governor to ensure that all residential water providers follow this example,” she said.

Calls for Nation-wide Moratorium

The EPA, in a statement, said that it supports states and cities that have already issued orders to ensure people’s accessibility to clean water for drinking and hand washing during the pandemic.

“Many drinking water systems are discontinuing service cut-offs, restoring service to customers whose service was previously cut-off, and refraining from imposing penalties for non-payment. EPA recommends widespread adoption of these practices, which provide critical support for public health,” the government agency that works to protect clean air, water, and land for Americans, said in a statement.

A group of Congressmen on March 11 had also urged congressional leaders to provide relief for those facing high water bills during the pandemic.

“In a survey of the 500 largest water systems in the country, it was found that on average Flint, Mich. residents paid about \$864 a year for water service, nearly double the national average. But Flint is not alone,” said the 12 congress members in a letter.

“In other communities nationwide, high water rates have especially hurt low-income households, who pay a disproportionate amount of their income for water service,” said the congress members.

In early March, Food and Water Watch, another non-profit advocacy organization had called for a nationwide moratorium on water shut-offs amid the coronavirus pandemic. They allege that in the past few years, data shows that 15 million Americans had experienced water shut-offs. The Epoch Times couldn't independently verify these statistics.

The state of Michigan has set-up a COVID-19 Water Restart Plan for those who want their water turned on. “If you sign up before April 9, you don't have to put any money down. The State of Michigan will cover it for you!” the state administration said in a statement.

Atlanta, Phoenix, Birmingham, Alabama, and St. Louis are the other states that have suspended water shut-offs amid the pandemic, according to ProPublica.

