COVID-19 Planning—Suspension of Water Shut-Offs and Expanded Customer Assistance Programs

3/25/2020

On Wednesday March 18, 2020, Governor Jay Inslee called on public utilities to suspend water shut-offs for failure to pay, waive late fees, and expand customer assistance programs for people impacted during this State of Emergency. See Inslee’s economic relief package for businesses, workers, tenants and families.

Your water system costs money to run, but many utilities in Washington State and in other states have suspended water shut-offs due to failure to pay. This State of Emergency calls for payment flexibility to make sure there are clean conditions in the homes and that safe water is available. Access to safe and reliable water will help to slow the spread of the new coronavirus.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Should our water customers still pay their regular bills during the COVID-19 outbreak?
   a. Yes. As you know, your water system costs money to run. But many customers may be worried about their finances in the coming months with increased unemployment and a slowing economy. Consider maintaining the existing payment structure when possible for your customers and your water system.

2. Why should our water system temporarily halt water shut-offs at this time?
   a. Many people are being asked to stay at home during this pandemic. This increases the need for water in their homes.
   b. Lack of water in the home prevents handwashing and the capacity to maintain a clean home. Good hygiene, like washing hands with soap, is key to preventing the spread of the virus. Safe and reliable water service is vital in this effort.
   c. In this State of Emergency, restaurants, bars and other businesses have lost money and unemployment will likely increase. As a result, more of your community members will experience financial hardship or are worried about financial hardship. If you don’t stop shut-offs during this time, you could see an increase in failure to pay leading to shut-offs. This will strain your (possibly already limited) staff.
   d. Shut-offs have an administrative cost. If you temporarily halt shut-offs, you will save administrative and bill collection costs.
   e. Shut-offs can create risk to your staff from prolonged time in the field. A suspension on water shut-offs will limit unnecessary exposure to your staff.

3. Shut-offs are an important tool in our water system toolbelt to ensure that our customers pay. Is suspending our water shut-off policies a form of discriminatory billing?
   a. Failure on the part of a customer to pay a water bill for their services means that other customers bear those additional costs. But there are some situations, such as a public health emergency, that call for flexibility in billing practices.
b. The Governor has suspended some of the Utility and Transportation Commission rate restrictions. This allows the use of ratepayer dollars to provide customer assistance to other ratepayers that may be impacted by COVID-19.

4. **How can we help customers that may be underemployed or out of work due to the pandemic?**
   a. Suspend late fees.
   b. Offer payment assistance through your water system’s Customer Assistance Program.
   c. Expand the eligibility requirements of your Customer Assistance Program in order to reach people affected by the pandemic.

5. **If my utility starts experiencing a decline in revenue as a result of the declared State of Emergency, will there be financial help from the state or federal government?**
   a. We don’t know at this time. While some of your financial concerns may eventually be addressed on a federal, state, or regional level, it is important to start the financial discussion and plan now.

6. **We can’t offer payment assistance and we don’t have enough money in our reserves to deal with customers who fail to pay. We still want to support our community members impacted by the pandemic. What other options do we have?**
   a. Offer a flexible payment plan. Flexible payment plans can vary, including adjustable bill dates, incremental payments, or payment deferral.
   b. Instead of shutting water off as a tool to collect late payments, try to increase your contact with the customer. Try to contact the customer in many different ways and many times.

7. **What else can we do to?**
   a. Restore service and waive reconnection fees to homes and business connections that have previously been shut-off due to failure to pay. Handwashing is vital to slow the spread of COVID-19.
   b. In order to encourage payment while following recommendations for social distancing, allow payments by credit card. Waive credit card fees your water system may apply.

If you have any more questions, please call your ODW Regional Office:

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<th>Northwest Region</th>
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<td>509-329-2100</td>
<td>253-395-6750</td>
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**Additional COVID-19 Resources**

- [DOH Coronavirus (COVID-19) webpage](#) — daily updated information and resources.
- [Local Health Jurisdictions](#)
- [Workplace and Employers](#)
- [Persons Who are at Higher Risk for Serious Illness](#)
- [Communities and Community Organizations](#)
- [Stigma Reduction](#)
- [How Can I Be Prepared for a COVID-19 Outbreak?](#)