

COVID-19 Water System's Customer Assistance Program Requirements

Governor's proclamation [20-23.7](#), Ratepayer Assistance and Preservation of Essential Services, requires all energy, telecommunication, and water utilities to develop a COVID-19 Customer Assistance Program to ensure customers impacted financially by the COVID-19 pandemic maintain essential services after the utility shut-off prohibition expires on the termination of the COVID State of Emergency or October 15, 2020, whichever comes first.

Our goal is to support community water systems assist their customers and ensure all people have access to safe and reliable drinking water. This guidance will help community water systems meet the requirements of the governor's proclamation; but does not alleviate the customer's obligation to pay their utility bills. Additional [guidance](#) is available to assist customers and encourage them to work with their utilities to continue to have access to safe and reliable water.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why are water systems required to have COVID-19 customer assistance programs?

Since the beginning of the pandemic in mid-March, utilities were encouraged and then prohibited from using the collection methods of utility shut-offs and charging re-connection and late fees. While this ensured that Washingtonians maintained essential services during the pandemic, these prohibitions did not help utilities or customers position themselves for a longer term payment strategy. As Washington starts its economic recovery, we must continue to ensure those financially impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic can maintain essential services.

As Washington begins its economic recovery, the COVID-19 pandemic has not waned. Potable water is a critical public health service. Lack of water in the home prevents handwashing and the capacity to maintain a clean home. Good hygiene, like washing hands with soap and water, is key to preventing the spread of the virus. Safe and reliable water service is vital in this effort.

What is a customer assistance program?

A customer assistance program is any system to assist customers in need in paying their utility bills. This includes:

- Discounted Rates – Establish regular discounted rates and fee schedules for customers in need. See East Wenatchee's ordinance [Rates for Senior Citizens, Low-income Citizens, and Disabled Citizens](#)

- Bill Forgiveness Programs – Establish a bill forgiveness program for customers experiencing unforeseen economic hardship or waive certain fees for low-income customers. See City of Washougal’s [Emergency Utility Assistance Program](#) resolution.
- Payment or Deferred Payment Plans – Negotiate payment plans with customers in need to pay-off past due bills over an agreed upon timeframe. See City of Bremerton’s City Code on [Deferred Payment Plans](#).
- Voluntary Donations Programs – Some water systems can establish a customer donation program that funnels donations through a third party non-profit entity that distributes funds to eligible customers. See the City of Lacey’s [Utility Assistance Program](#) in partnership with the Community Action Council of Lewis, Mason, and Thurston Counties (CAC), which administers the program.
- Partner with a third party non-profit – Establish a relationship with a third party non-profit entity, such as the Salvation Army, your local community action agency, or other non-profit, to provide payment help to customers in need.

Who is required to develop a customer assistance program?

The proclamation’s guidance requires that all community water systems develop and advertise their customer assistance programs.

Many water systems may already have less formal customer assistance programs. Small systems should start working with all customers behind in payment to develop a plan to continue water service now and into the future.

Are publicly owned water systems allowed to develop customer assistance programs? Isn’t this considered a “gift of public funds”?

Washington’s State Constitution allows gifts of public funds in “support of the poor and infirm”. Under the RCW regulating municipalities, water and sewer districts, counties, public utility districts, municipal corporations or quasi-municipal corporations providing utility services, it is legal and encouraged to offer reduced utility rates for low-income customers.

The Utility and Transportation Commission (UTC) regulates for-profit water system’s rates. Are for-profit water utilities allowed to have customer assistance programs under the UTC regulations?

The Governor has suspended some of the UTC rate restrictions. This allows the use of ratepayer dollars to provide customer assistance to other ratepayers who are impacted by COVID-19. The Office of Drinking Water will continue to work with our UTC partners to help you navigate the requirements.

What are the first steps to developing a Customer Assistance Program?

If already existing, water systems should review their current customer assistance programs to evaluate if they are applicable to the COVID 19 response. Many water systems have customer assistance programs for their most vulnerable customers. Some programs provide assistance to seniors or the disabled, while others include low-income customers. Water systems are encouraged to review their existing eligibility requirements and expand these programs to include those experiencing financial impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic.

What are the benefits to the utility in developing a customer assistance program?

Developing a customer assistance program has many benefits. Having a customer assistance program allows for the system's governing body to charge appropriate utility rates without concerns that the lowest income customers will no longer be able to afford this essential utility. Keeping your rates low to be able to assist these customers only hurts your water utility in the long run. Customer assistance programs support those in need, while allowing you to charge the appropriate rates needed to operate your system.

Additionally, establishing customer assistance programs can reduce water shut-offs and re-connection calls. Water shut-offs and re-connections take staff time and have administrative costs for your utility. By helping customers stay connected to your water system, through customer assistance programs, you may save the water system money in the long term.

Who is eligible for the COVID-19 Customer Assistance Program?

Each utility establishes eligibility requirements for its customer assistance program. The COVID-19 Customer Assistance Program eligibility must include all customers impacted financially by the COVID-19 pandemic. The water system could determine the documentation needed for eligibility or simply could extend the program to all customers with delinquent accounts since March.

What are the requirements of the COVID-19 Customer Assistance Program?

Basic principles that provide assistance to those who are experiencing economic hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- All programs must be reviewed in a public process, or approved by the governing body of the water system, consistent with their standard practice, and prominently posted on a public website, if available.
- Programs must be designed to ensure customers maintain access to essential services during the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Utilities should offer long-term payment arrangements for those directly affected by COVID-19 to allow customers to recover successfully from the unexpected economic impacts of the pandemic. Six to eighteen months, or longer may be appropriate, considering each customer's unique circumstances.
- Programs should encourage customers with delinquent accounts to contact the water system to apply for the customer assistance program. The water system must make efforts to contact these customers directly with door hangers, phone calls, and emails.

How do we communicate our customer assistance program with our customers?

If possible, customers with delinquent accounts should be contacted directly. All customers should be notified of available assistance programs by one of the following methods:

- Provide a direct URL for the customer assistance program web page (if one exists) either by mail or email.
- Direct email or mail providing a copy of customer assistance program

- Mail a hard copy of the customer assistance program as a bill stuffer.

What can we do if the customer refuses to apply for our customer assistance program or engage in communication with us about late payments?

At this time, you cannot disconnect any customer for non-payment. The proclamation states customers and utilities are “expected to continue to communicate in good faith with one another, and to work together, on the timing and terms of payment and repayment solutions.” Utilities should ensure they have the policies and procedures in place to address various scenarios once the proclamation is rescinded and the moratorium on disconnections is lifted. We advise you work with your legal counsel.

Do we need to send our customer assistance program to Office of Drinking Water for approval?

No, the Office of Drinking Water will not be approving your COVID-19 customer assistance programs; but you should be able to provide documentation of the program upon our request. We may also reach out if we receive customer complaints.

What else does the proclamation require?

In order to better identify the need, the proclamation requires that all water systems respond to the [Utility Economic Impact and Infrastructure Needs Survey](#), and any subsequent updates. This survey has been reopened to allow for more systems to meet this requirement. If you already completed the survey you do not need to resubmit the information.

We are working on a subsequent survey with Department of Commerce’s System Improvement Team (SYNC). This survey will help us understand the types and funding of customer assistance programs throughout Washington that were already in place before the COVID 19 pandemic and inform us of the gaps for the future.

How do I get technical assistance in developing my customer assistance program?

The Office of Drinking water is developing guidance, templates, and best practices for customer assistance programs. We will be developing a webpage to house this information. You can contact us directly with your questions by emailing: DrinkingWaterCustomerAssistance@doh.wa.gov.

Additional resources and examples of customer assistance programs in Washington can be found on Municipal Research and Services Center (MRCS) [website](#).

More COVID-19 Information and Resources

Stay up-to-date on the [current COVID-19 situation in Washington](#), [Governor Inslee’s proclamations](#), [symptoms](#), [how it spreads](#), and [how and when people should get tested](#). See our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) for more information.

A person’s race/ethnicity or nationality does not, itself, put them at greater risk of COVID-19. However, data are revealing that communities of color are being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19- this is due to the effects of racism, and in particular, structural racism, that leaves

some groups with fewer opportunities to protect themselves and their communities. [Stigma will not help to fight the illness](#). Share accurate information with others to keep rumors and misinformation from spreading.

- [WA State Department of Health 2019 Novel Coronavirus Outbreak \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [WA State Coronavirus Response \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Find Your Local Health Department or District](#)
- [CDC Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Stigma Reduction Resources](#)

Have more questions about COVID-19? Call our hotline: **1-800-525-0127**. For interpretative services, **press #** when they answer and **say your language**. (Open from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.) For questions about your own health, COVID-19 testing, or testing results, please contact your health care provider.

To request this document in another format, call 1-800-525-0127. Deaf or hard of hearing customers, please call 711 ([Washington Relay](#)) or email civil.rights@doh.wa.gov.