



Calvin S. Hawkins, II
Chair
At-Large Council Member

April 16, 2021

Hon. Larry J. Hogan, Jr.
Governor – State of Maryland
State House
100 State Circle
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: Support for Water-Specific Customer Assistance Programs

Dear Governor Hogan:

I write to you on behalf of the County Council and our mutual constituents experiencing financial distress due to the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission Water's (WSSC Water) customers who are unable to pay their water bills.

WSSC Water has been severely impacted by the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic: as of February 2021, there were 87,000 past due accounts with a past due amount of \$64 million dollars, almost doubling the number of dollars, as compared to the 72,000 past due accounts with a past due amount of \$36 million in February 2020. This revenue shortfall will be borne by WSSC Water's customers in future years.

Even with this financial challenge, WSSC Water continues to suspend late fees and service disconnections, which it has done since March 2020, in an effort to protect public health during this global crisis. Through their existing customer assistance programming, WSSC Water helps our most vulnerable constituents. In the Fiscal Year 2022 proposed budget includes \$3.3 million to bolster this help. In addition, the WSSC Water Fund provides up to \$500 annually to customers who need the most help. While these programs provide some help, they are a proverbial "drop in the bucket" as compared to the challenges that our constituents face as evidenced by WSSC Water's past due statistics.

Unfortunately, water utilities have received limited support in State funding for their assistance programs. In Maryland, WSSC Water and other water utilities throughout the State have received no financial support for low income customer assistance programs. This year the adopted Maryland *RELIEF Act* provides \$83 million for electric and natural gas utility customer assistance; funds will be used to eliminate the arrearages of past due accounts. The legislation provides no similar funding for water utilities, who are now left to struggle with historic revenue shortfalls. We must collectively advocate for federal and state assistance that appropriates funding for low-income and other customer water utility assistance programs in the State and County.

Similar challenges exist at the federal level. *CARES Act* funding designated for housing relief can be used to pay water utility bills, and many jurisdictions created their own water utility-specific programs, such as was done in Anne Arundel and Hartford counties. But those funds were limited and pulled from overall housing relief funds. There is a glimmer of hope at the federal level. In December 2020, Congress appropriated \$638 million for a new *Low-Income Water Utility Bill Assistance* program, similar to the low-income energy assistance program; an additional \$500 million was appropriated in the *American Rescue Plan Act*. While this program is to be applauded, unlike the low-income energy assistance program, this low-income water assistance program is not permanent. We must collectively advocate at the federal level for the establishment of a permanent assistance for low-income and other customer water assistance programs to help with water and wastewater utility bills for those impacted by the pandemic.

During this COVID-19 pandemic we must continue to collaboratively identify and advocate for ways to support for our most vulnerable customers and ensure that WSSC Water has the funds necessary to bolster their customer assistance programs. We look forward to your continued support for our mutual residents and your prompt response. Thank you again for your efforts and we stand ready to assist as needed.

Sincerely,



Hon. Calvin S. Hawkins
Chair, County Council

cc: Hon. Bill Ferguson, Senate President, Maryland General Assembly
Hon. Adrinne Jones, Speaker of the House, Maryland General Assembly
Hon. Joanne Benson, Chair, Prince George's Senate Delegation
Hon. Ereik Barron, Chair, Prince George's House Delegation
Hon. Angela D. Alsobrooks, County Executive
Hon. Marc Elrich, County Executive
Hon. Tom Hucker, President & Members, Montgomery County Council
Members, Prince George's County Council
Carla Reid, General Manager, WSSC
Tara Jackson, Chief Administrative Officer, Prince George's County