



Fund Drinking Water Infrastructure to Reduce COVID-19 Disparities

Sara Hughes, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

The COVID-19 outbreak has taken on some distressing patterns: African American communities are being infected and dying at a disproportionately high rate; hotspots of infections are emerging in some of the country's older cities including Detroit, New York City, and New Orleans; governors in the Midwest and California have had to issue moratoriums on water service shutoffs to ensure people have access to running water. Underpinning these patterns is a drinking water infrastructure system in the United States that is outdated, unequal, and inadequate for ensuring public health. While regular hand washing and frequent cleaning are critical to preventing the spread of COVID-19, such practices are impossible without regular, affordable access to water. The serious financial difficulties the pandemic has caused for many people, especially to communities of color, has put access to safe drinking water at greater risk. **In order to safeguard access to drinking water, state and federal governments should not just temporarily halt water shutoffs but commit to investing in drinking water infrastructure for those who need it most.**

My research shows that funding for drinking water infrastructure, and for supporting local water systems more generally, is key to addressing drinking water disparities and more important than tightening drinking water safety regulations. Federal financing for drinking water infrastructure is inadequate, which is forcing water utilities to increasingly rely on water rates and municipal bonds for needed infrastructure upgrades. Raising money through these avenues can be politically challenging, and particularly difficult for small or already debt-burdened communities. The result is often persistent underinvestment in needed drinking water infrastructure, and water rates that are increasingly unaffordable for city residents. This critical need for federal funding has been recognized by the 80 members of Congress who signed a letter April 7 requesting that funding be provided to help cover water bills and the costs associated with restoring water services to households that had had their water turned off.

In many cases states also need to rethink their approach to municipal financial distress. State revenue sharing with local governments has steadily declined throughout the US over the last 20 years. At the same time, many states have aggressive policies for addressing municipal financial distress, and research has shown that these policies disproportionately affect minority communities. The impacts of COVID-19 are expected to exacerbate local financial challenges. To ensure equitable and safe drinking water access, state and federal governments must safeguard municipal financial stability without reducing the capacity for service delivery by providing additional funding. City governments cannot "cut" their way to financial health.

Building healthy communities starts with renewed commitment to investing in twenty-first century drinking water systems and supporting cities as they navigate systemic financial challenges.