

Ensuring safe, affordable water for all

Access to safe, affordable water and sanitation is a basic human right. Yet, across the United States, communities face mounting threats to their water security, including from the rising costs of water and wastewater service.

U.S. water affordability crisis

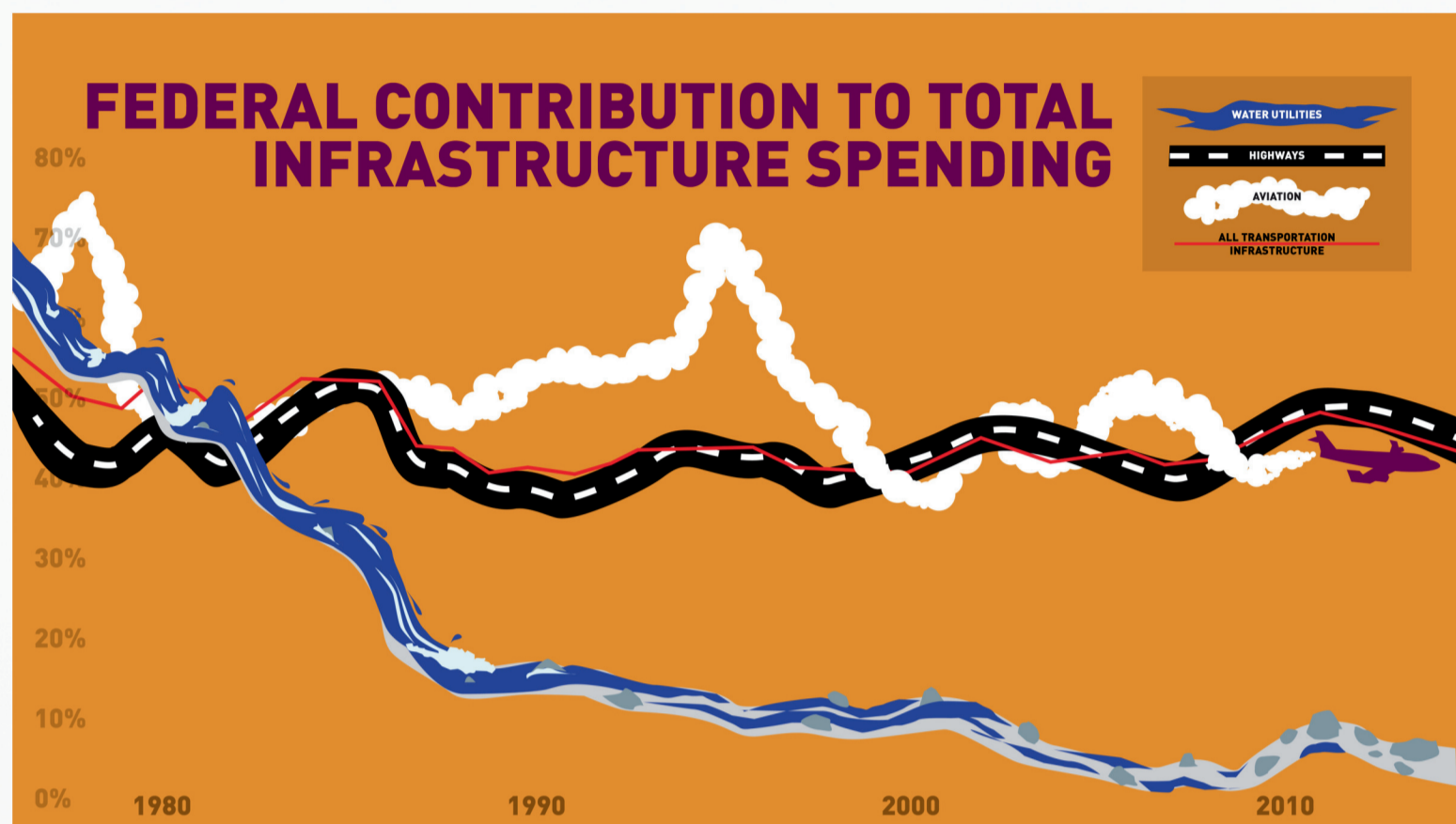
Our water and wastewater systems are stressed from decades of disinvestment. Before the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the share of federal funding for water utilities fell from over 60% in the 1970s [to below 10%](#), while other infrastructure spending remained largely the same.

At the same time, the cost of maintaining and upgrading water infrastructure, ensuring safety, and responding to the climate crisis has fallen on states and

localities, utilities, and ultimately ratepayers. An [American Society of Civil Engineers and Value of Water analysis](#) found the U.S. needs to invest \$109 billion a year over the next 20 years to fix the water infrastructure gap.

Water rates are rising exponentially, [faster than inflation](#) and all other utility costs. In an [American Water Works Association survey](#), 1 in 3 respondents reported struggling to pay their water bill on time. Faced with rising and unaffordable bills, households risk debt, having their water shutoff, or even losing their home.

The burden of unsafe and unaffordable water falls on low-income communities and communities of color. [Black communities](#) have been disproportionately impacted by failing infrastructure and aggressive water shutoff policies, facing [higher rates of water disconnections](#). Farmworker communities in [California](#) pay twice for safe drinking water because their taps are contaminated, forcing them to rely on [more costly](#) bottled water.










San Jerardo Cooperative, California

Ileana Miranda serves as General Manager of the San Jerardo Cooperative in rural Monterey County, California. This farmworker community, established in the 1970s, has struggled to access safe and affordable water for decades. Nitrate and arsenic contamination left the community's well water unsafe to drink. After years, San Jerardo was able to drill a new well and add water treatment with funding from the state, yet affordability remains a looming concern. The average annual income for families in San Jerardo is only [\\$20,000](#), yet many pay over [\\$115 per month for water](#). With these critical safety updates, keeping the water meter on for the community, regardless of how much water is used, is now more expensive. Water rate assistance is key to making sure San Jerardo families don't have to choose between paying their water bill and other critical services.

Moving from assistance to affordability

We must ensure every family in the U.S. never has to choose between access to safe drinking water and sanitation and other essential household needs, like food, power, or medicine. Federal policy to advance water affordability includes increasing federal funding to maintain and update critical infrastructure, designing water bills that are reasonable and account for a household's ability to pay, and national water bill assistance.

Water bill assistance is one important component of a broader affordability agenda, lowering water bills, providing debt relief, and using other measures to reduce the water cost burden for low-income households. The public strongly supports water affordability and assistance. 9 in 10 U.S. voters agree access to safe, affordable water is a human right and [75% support](#) a permanent federal water bill assistance program. The Water Equity & Climate Resilience Caucus urges Congress to establish and fund a permanent, national low-income water assistance program to help those families who are struggling with water bills.

Affordability	Assistance-only
 <p>Water shutoffs and debt are eliminated, ensuring the human right to water for all.</p>	 <p>Reduced bills for households meeting eligibility criteria, such as income or disability.</p>
 <p>A level of investment in water systems from rates, state, and federal funding that keep water affordable for all customers.</p>	 <p>Reliance on states and/or utilities to opt-in, burdening smaller utilities and limiting availability.</p>
 <p>Programs use automatic enrollment and benefit levels keep water costs below 3% of household income.</p>	 <p>Does not address long-term affordability or needed workforce and infrastructure improvements.</p>
	 <p>Existing programs can be difficult to apply for and don't always provide adequate benefits.</p>

Current State of Federal Action

In response to the pandemic, Congress temporarily created the first-ever federal water debt relief and bill assistance program. The [Low Income Household Water Assistance Program](#) (LIHWAP), provided \$1.14 billion to states, Tribes, and territories, benefiting over 1.4 million low-income households needing help to pay their water or wastewater bills or restore water service. As a pandemic relief measure, LIHWAP funding ended in 2023.

LIHWAP relied on states and utilities to opt-in, creating a burden for utilities that lacked adequate staff and technological capacity to implement it independently. While LIHWAP and the patchwork of local, utility, and state assistance programs have helped thousands of families, they will not bring down the rising cost of water, provide ongoing assistance, and have not reached everyone in need.

In November 2021, Congress also passed historic investments in water systems to fix failing infrastructure, replace lead service lines, and address pollution from toxic forever chemicals through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. The bill also established an unfunded, 40-city water bill assistance pilot program at the EPA. A step forward, we need a federal commitment to water affordability to address this growing crisis.

National Action for Water Affordability

The United States needs a national commitment to safe, affordable water and sanitation for all by:

- Establishing and funding a **permanent federal low-income water bill assistance program** at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that, combined with other programs and investment, makes the human right to water a reality for us all.
- **Ending water shutoffs** that deny water access based on the inability to pay.
- **Sustaining federal investment** in drinking water and sanitation infrastructure that ensures the cost of repairing and updating water systems does not fall on low-income ratepayers and exacerbate existing water affordability challenges.
- **Targeting federal investment** and oversight in low-income, rural, and communities of color that have faced historic disinvestment, pollution, and the impacts of flooding, fire, and drought.
- **Passing the Water Data Act** to close the gaps in understanding of household cost burdens and water system capacity, and to allow for allocation of federal funds in an equitable manner.

About the Water Equity & Climate Resilience Caucus

The [Water Equity & Climate Resilience \(WECR\) Caucus](#), anchored by PolicyLink, is a national network of nearly 70 organizations centering frontline communities of color and low-income communities in working to achieve water equity and climate justice.

The WECR Caucus facilitates the development of a shared agenda grounded in the leadership of frontline communities to address the growing climate emergency and threats to water security. The WECR Caucus's priorities are to secure safe and affordable drinking water and equitable infrastructure systems for all; support communities impacted by rising water, flooding and drought; target education, workforce development and business opportunities in a climate-resilient water system; and integrate arts and cultural work into movement building, organizing and policy change.