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Oakland County teams with United Way for Southeastern Michigan to launch water affordability program

As National Drinking Water Week begins, county unveils public-private initiative to help struggling residents access water payment resources

MADISON HEIGHTS, Mich., May 6, 2024—Oakland County residents with higher incomes who are struggling with paying their water bills and meeting other water-related needs due to a temporary hardship now have a new resource to tap to avoid shutoffs, fix leaks and ensure access to affordable water.

Oakland County Water Resources Commissioner **Jim Nash** unveiled the Hardship Assistance Program at a news conference at the George W. Kuhn Training Facility in Madison Heights that also included recognizing National Drinking Water Week, which runs May 5-11.

Nash was joined at the event by Oakland County Executive **David Coulter**; Oakland County Commissioner **Ann Erickson Gault**; State Sen. **Stephanie Chang**; **Darienne Driver Hudson**, CEO, United Way for Southeastern Michigan; and other local leaders.

"In our ongoing efforts to ensure all Oakland County residents have access to affordable water, we've collected data that reveals a significant need to provide a safety net for hardworking families whose incomes are too high to qualify for existing water assistance programs," Nash said. "These are people who earn above the federal poverty line but who often struggle to afford basic needs, including full and consistent access to affordable water for their families."

Erickson Gault said the new program can help with gaps in existing water assistance programs.

"Crisis eventually strikes for all of us, and the existing water assistance programs leave gaps in supporting families who may be doing OK now but are one emergency away from being unable to pay their water bills," Erickson Gault (D-Troy) said. "Access to healthy, safe and clean



drinking water is a basic human right, and I am happy that through this partnership, ARPA funding will go far in ensuring we're meeting the needs of our communities."

Designed in partnership with the United Way for Southeastern Michigan, the innovative program seeks to support residents facing temporary financial challenges—particularly the 22% of Oakland County residents living in households unable to qualify for assistance under federal poverty guidelines but still facing hardships.

"We are grateful to partner with the Water Resources Commissioner to administer the Hardship Assistance Program for residents in Oakland County," said Hudson. "Our partnership expands access to water assistance for families who typically are not eligible for other assistance programs."

United Way for Southeastern Michigan recently began accepting applications for assistance and has already approved a few early applicants.

Natalie Burke of Southfield couldn't be more grateful. She recently was directed to the program after a devastating house fire temporarily put her in a financial bind. Burke, who has lived in her home for more than 30 years, was vigilant about paying her bills. But the fire came not long after she started a new job and hadn't yet earned any paid time off, meaning less money to make ends meet as she needed days off to deal with the consequences of the fire.

"We are glad we were able to quickly provide her the support she needed, even as the program had just begun," Hudson added.

Funded by \$300,000 in federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) – Local Fiscal Recovery Funds from the Oakland County Board of Commissioners, the Hardship Assistance Program was developed to support residents facing temporary financial challenges, ensuring water service access, enhanced plumbing and prevention of tax certifications that could result in foreclosure.

To sustain the program beyond the initial ARPA dollars, Oakland County Water Resources and the United Way for Southeastern Michigan are seeking donations to this program from individuals, philanthropic organizations and public entities.

"Every resident deserves access to clean and safe drinking water," said Oakland County Executive Dave Coulter. "And Commissioner Nash's dedication to ensuring water affordability for all, alongside Commissioner Erickson Gault, Sen. Chang, Dr. Hudson, and their teams, is pivotal in addressing this crucial equity challenge."



In Oakland County, about 8% of households live at or below the federal poverty line. Another 22%—up 4 percentage points since 2019—have household earnings within 300% of that level, putting them within the parameters of the Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) standards used to determine households who may be struggling to make ends meet. The ALICE standard currently is \$93,600 for a family of four, \$61,320 for a two-person household and \$45,180 for a single individual.

The program is available to all Oakland County residents using municipal water and/or sewer services. Benefits are provided on a first-come, first-served basis with an initial household cap of \$2,000. Hardship Assistance Program benefits can include:

- Plumbing repairs to address water loss contributing to increased usage.
- Bill assistance for up to three months of water and/or sewer services.
- Help eliminate past-due balances.

About the Oakland County Water Resources Commissioner's Office

The Oakland County Water Resources Commissioner's office is dedicated to protecting public health and safety, preserving natural resources and a healthy environment, maintaining reliable, high-quality service, ensuring the value of investment and contributing to economic prosperity. We set goals that encourage efforts to meet or exceed local, state and federal water quality standards, environmental regulations and safety requirements within our control. To learn more about us, visit oakgov.com/affordability.

About United Way for Southeast Michigan

United Way for Southeastern Michigan, a member of the United Way Worldwide network and an independently governed 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, works to help households become stable and ensure children have the support they need to thrive. For more than 100 years, United Way has been a leader in creating positive, measurable and sustainable change in communities throughout Southeast Michigan. United Way works in partnership with donors, agencies and corporate and municipal partners to help families meet their basic needs of housing, food, health care and family finances, and ensure children start school ready to learn and graduate ready for life. To give, advocate, volunteer or learn more, visit UnitedWaySEM.org.

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