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For \$2 a month, our plan will keep Michigan water affordable | Opinion

Gary Brown and Sylvia Orduno Detroit Free Press

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We've [debated water affordability](#) in southeast Michigan for decades. Now, we're doing something about it.

This fall, state Sen. Stephanie Chang will introduce a package of bills that will provide a new funding source for water affordability programs statewide, create a framework for income-based program and protect low and moderate-income households from losing service for non-payment.

This crucial program will require a new — and sustainable — revenue source. The legislation calls for all municipal water customers statewide to pay a \$2 per meter monthly fee, [similar to the Michigan Energy Assistance Program](#) established more than a decade ago with strong bipartisan support during the Snyder Administration. Under our plan, any local water utility can adopt a water affordability plan, and apply for these funds to support it.

Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services will administer the program, with support from the Treasury Department.

We believe the affordability plan must be income-based for households [up to 200% of the federal poverty level](#) — \$55,500 a year for a family of four — and that the customer's total bill for water, sewer and drainage services does not exceed 3% of household income. This funding will also [pay past due bills](#), and assist with plumbing repairs to reduce usage to conserve water. This legislation will keep rates affordable

for all customers by decreasing the uncollected debt expense — built into local rates — that covers the costs when customers cannot afford to pay their bills.

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government piloted the [Low Income Household Water Assistance Program](#), which helped the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department launch its [Lifeline Plan](#) last summer. While LIWHAP does not have continued funding, the gap is widening between what many customers can pay, against what utilities must charge for their operations. This includes important services such as replacing outdated water infrastructure, removing lead service lines, treating the water that comes to customers' homes to make it safe to drink, and providing stormwater solutions to reduce basement flooding. Statewide research and reports attest to the growing experience of water insecurity and unaffordability in cities and towns across Michigan that require solutions beyond local governments' capacity and resources to respond.

DWSD's Lifeline Plan has three income tiers. About 86% of Detroit enrollees are receiving an \$18 fixed monthly bill, forgiveness of past due bills and plumbing repairs. Nearly 23,000 Detroit households have been enrolled, demonstrating that a robust water affordability program is sorely needed — and can be effective. Through this legislation, every low and moderate-income household in Michigan will have an opportunity to receive similar benefits.

This is an unprecedented collaboration between government, water advocates, social service agencies and philanthropy, all working together to craft life-changing legislation for Michiganders who are unable to afford their monthly water bills.

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While we still have work to do on other water system issues, we wholeheartedly stand together in support of this package of legislation. We are encouraged by the

variety of stakeholders that have been at the table for several months, and the disciplined nature of our discussions to build solutions for shared problems. We strongly urge state legislators to support the package of bills and for constituents to contact their representatives. They will make a meaningful difference in the quality of life for affected Michigan residents and ensure that water systems can work better for community health and other core needs.

We applaud Sen. Chang for her persistence, patience, wisdom and leadership, and are excited about the support we've received among her colleagues. Michigan has been a long-time leader in bringing national visibility to the water crisis, and strategies that call for federal partner responses. This package of bills crafts solutions among diverse communities with common concerns, and offers a collaborative model that our Great Lakes state can be proud to share.

Gary A. Brown is director of the Detroit Water & Sewerage Department. Sylvia Orduño is managing director of the People's Water Board Coalition and community organizer at the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization.