

Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works
Witness Testimony
of
Congresswoman Lisa Blunt Rochester

Oversight Field Hearing on “Identifying Unique Challenges for Small, Rural and Disadvantaged Communities in Accessing and Maintaining Drinking Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Assistance”

October 15, 2021

Good morning Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, members of the Committee, and fellow witnesses.

I want to first thank Chairman Carper and Ranking Member Capito for calling this important hearing and for giving me the opportunity to speak about the unique challenges that households in small, rural, and disadvantaged communities face every day to secure clean drinking water and wastewater services.

I also want to thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for their leadership--and for the work that they have done to help communities across the country access and maintain clean and affordable drinking water and wastewater services.

I also want to recognize the Committee for the important bipartisan work they have accomplished this past year. The Drinking Water and Waste Water Infrastructure Act of 2021, which passed the Senate earlier this year, includes a provision that would establish a pilot program at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to assist low-income communities with their drinking water and wastewater utility bills and help fund upgrades to aging drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. This is an important step to provide long-needed improvements in water quality and accessibility for the communities that need it most.

Water accessibility and affordability in the United States have been a mounting crisis for years. I've seen it firsthand in communities across Delaware. During my time in the Governor's office, I started working with the Ellendale community, a small community in Sussex County with less than 500 residents. For decades households across Ellendale have been dealing with contaminated well water.

Nitrate, iron, and other pollutants in private wells have forced Ellendale residents and communities like Ellendale to use bottled water, not only to drink, but to cook, to clean, and to bathe.¹ In Delaware, around 173,000 residents use private wells and in Sussex County, almost half the county's residents are dependent on private wells.²

¹ <https://www.delawarepublic.org/post/new-federal-water-law-help-clean-local-supplies-defend-beaches-expand-port>

² <https://whyy.org/articles/disconnected-thousands-in-delaware-lack-access-to-safer-public-water/>

Some communities are in such remote and rural areas that even if they wanted to connect to a public water system, they are unable to do so. Despite this, and even though more than 13 million households rely on private wells for their drinking water, the federal government does not provide recommended standards or criteria for private wells.³

Ellendale has been fighting for decades for access to clean drinking water, and a new public water system that will provide safe, clean, and reliable water to the residents is finally in sight—but the problem doesn't end when a community has access to a public water system.

Water must be affordable. Aging infrastructure and the rising costs of drinking water and wastewater services have culminated in rapidly rising water bills for public systems—and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the problem.

In the midst of a public health emergency of unprecedented scale, access to clean drinking water and sanitation services has never been more important. The pandemic is projected to cost water and wastewater utilities nearly \$30 billion, and consumers are expected to shoulder this cost in the form of increased bill payment—on top of the worst recession since the Great Depression and widespread job insecurity.⁴

Last month, the Energy & Commerce Committee passed a measure to include \$500 million to assist low-income households with their drinking water and wastewater bills during the ongoing pandemic. But even after the pandemic ends, low-income households will continue to need assistance.

In almost every part of the country, families are struggling to pay their utility bills, a reality that is disproportionately affecting low-income communities and communities of color.

That's why earlier this year, I introduced H.R. 3293, the Low-Income Water Customer Assistance Programs Act of 2021. This bill would address this complex problem head on by establishing a nationwide, permanent program to assist low-income households with their drinking water and wastewater bills. I am proud to have introduced this bipartisan legislation with my colleague from New York, Representative John Katko, and my colleagues from Michigan, Representatives Debbie Dingell and Rashida Tlaib.

I was even prouder when the bill passed the House of Representatives earlier this year. This legislation will provide much needed relief to struggling families and give our community water and wastewater systems the reliable revenue stream needed to plan for and afford regular maintenance and upgrades to keep our water and environment safe.

Every Delawarean and every American, regardless of race, income, or zip code, should have access to clean, safe, reliable, and affordable water. It is a basic right and is essential to public health – but right now, far too many Americans are being deprived of it.

³ <https://www.epa.gov/privatewells>

⁴ <https://www.nacwa.org/docs/default-source/resources---public/water-sector-covid-19-financial-impacts.pdf>

We have an opportunity to right that wrong. We have an opportunity to make real and lasting improvements across our drinking water and wastewater systems. Access to water is a basic need that we can and should deliver to all Americans.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.