

January 31, 2024

The Honorable Timm Ormsby
Appropriations Committee, Chair
PO Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504

The Honorable June Robinson
Ways & Means Committee, Chair
PO Box 40438
Olympia, WA 98504

The Honorable Chris Corry
Appropriations Committee, Ranking Member
PO Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504

The Honorable Lynda Wilson
Ways & Means Committee, Ranking Member
PO Box 40417
Olympia, WA 98504

Dear Chair Ormsby, Chair Robinson, Ranking Member Corry, and Ranking Member Wilson,

Maintaining affordable drinking water and wastewater utility bills is a key priority for local governments, public utilities, and customer advocacy organizations across Washington. Although water is a fundamental human need, there is minimal federal assistance for low-income customers. As one-time federal funding for the Low Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) is set to expire in March of this year, we believe the state has a role in ensuring all residents in Washington have adequate access to affordable water services.

The undersigned support a budget proviso to study the need for water utility assistance and make recommendations for the design of a statewide drinking water and wastewater utility assistance program. This effort would mirror a similar effort funded by the Legislature in 2023 for low income energy utility assistance. This funding would deepen our understanding of how many customers struggle to pay their water bills and how a systematic approach to water utility assistance could support low income residents.

Please include \$300,000 in the operating budget for the Department of Health to assess the need for and feasibility of a statewide low-income assistance program for water utility customers. This proviso would be the first step towards a long-term solution for low income families to ensure reliable access to drinking water and wastewater services.

Suggested proviso language:

\$300,000 is provided solely for the department of health, with input from the department of commerce, to assess the need for and feasibility of a statewide low-income assistance program for water utility customers. The study must include, but is not limited to, the following elements: a summary of existing local, state, and federal low-income assistance; a review of low-income populations' water utility service cost burden; and recommendations for the design of a statewide drinking water and wastewater utility assistance program. The recommendations must include ongoing data collection on water-related assistance need of households, intake coordination and data sharing across statewide programs serving low-income households, program eligibility, multilingual services, outreach and community engagement, program administration, funding, and reporting. Before commencing the study, the agencies must convene a stakeholder group to advise the agencies throughout the study. The stakeholder group must include representatives from the governor's office, low-income advocates, wastewater system operators,

drinking water system operators, and other interested parties. By June 30, 2025, the department must submit the study to the appropriate committees of the legislature.

Thank you for your consideration. Please contact [Logan Bahr](#), Tacoma Public Utilities, or [Maggie Yuse](#), Seattle Public Utilities, with any questions.

Sincerely,



Cc: Kelly Cooper, Department of Health
Carrie Sessions, Governor Inslee's Office
Members of the Appropriations Committee
Members of the Ways & Means Committee
Lily Smith, Office of Program Research
Monica Fontaine, Senate Committee Services
Matt Bridges, Senate Democratic Caucus
Lisa Fenton, Senate Republican Caucus
Devon Nichols, House Democratic Caucus
Yoshi Kumara, House Democratic Caucus
Samantha Gatto, House Republican Caucus