

Testimony of Maureen Taylor
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Before the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment

Hearing entitled:

“The Clean Water State Revolving Fund: How Federal Infrastructure
Investment Can Help Communities Modernize Water Infrastructure and
Address Affordability Challenges”

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MICHIGAN/GROUND ZERO WATER CRISIS:

Good Morning Chairman Defazio, Ranking Member Graves and members of the committee. My name is Maureen Taylor and I am the State Chairperson for the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization a state chapter of the National Welfare Rights Union which advocates for public assistance recipients and low-income people. The Michigan Welfare Rights Organization works to build a social movement by bringing together people directly affected by water problems, grassroots leaders, community attorneys, researchers, educators, artists, and policy makers to strategize on solutions provide clean, healthful water regardless of income. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today to share a bit about the water affordability challenges facing citizens in the State of Michigan, particularly the City of Detroit and offer a few suggested solutions.

The epic changes in the relationship between working people the world over and the traditional means of survival have altered the progression of humanity permanently. Since the age of industrialization, blue-collar America has only known one process of existence – you work, you earn a paycheck, you spend it on those things you need to live, you run out of money, so you return to work – the cycle repeats. Cities like Cincinnati, Chicago, Gary, Flint, Highland Park, Pontiac, Detroit and others all have similar histories which have tied these locations to industries that required massive numbers of laborers.

Detroit, and near-by communities, built cars for the world and that world was connected to automobile manufacturing and all the ancillary items required to keep that industry thriving. From 1914 when Henry Ford advertised the first \$5/day opportunity for those willing to work on the assembly line, blue-collar workers especially those in unions established a pattern for the nation to follow...eight-hour days, extra pay on weekends, holiday pay, time off for vacations, healthcare benefits, academic benefits, etc. Municipal, school, and most other employees duplicated contracts that mirrored employee/employer negotiations set in factories. The quality of life for millions have been tied to these relationships from 1914 to 1984...just over 70 years.

The standard of living for working people started to change in small, imperceptible ways in the mid-1980's that were coupled with population declines forced by massive losses of hi-paying jobs. With the onset of hi-tech manufacturing methods, the die was cast. Detroit went from 1.9 million residents to just over 700,000 today. With the population on the move, why keep so many schools open or teachers working since

millions will never need basic educational skills ever again? With the population on the move, why maintain the notion that people are entitled to affordable housing since most will not be needed at work? With the population on the move, why not tie healthcare, or public transportation, or simple community safety, or access to clean water and sanitation to the notion that these items must be paid for? The concept of access to clean water and sanitation even for the poorest among us, has always been a “common” viewed as something owned by humanity as a rule. It appears that the new rule allows for the “torture” of working people who live on fixed incomes that normalizes mass water shutoffs as part of the “new normal”.

In 2014, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Dept. started the most recent and egregious campaign of mass water shutoffs that targeted only low-income, residential customers who were two months behind in payments or \$150 in arrearages. In June of that year, rumors started to surface about poisoned public water in Flint, MI. Both issues marked the genesis of long nights of terror for blue-collar workers, a night that has not yet ended. Such practices were not new to those in the American “rust-belt” but never before had the ferocity and scale reached such depths.

When the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department began this aggressive campaign, The Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) established a water shutoff water hotline to try to assist citizens who were threatened with water shutoff. We received forty or more calls per hour regarding water shut offs. As part of our work we have seen children living in homes without water. Parents with children, whose water services are terminated, fear Child Protective Services because if Child Protective Services is notified, it can result in a child or children being removed from their home. We saw this happen in a case where a Detroit Water and Sewage Department customer who lost her job, had her water shut off; and then her children were taken and placed in foster care by social services. The situation in Detroit is untenable, I have personally assisted with moving families into homeless shelters or church basements to obtain temporary shelter until water is restored.

Despite multi-level battles to stop these draconian practices, residents have not been able to deter the moral bankruptcy of water shutoffs or water poisonings. Attempts to “privatize” what has always been a “public common” held in trust has only been slowed. The City of Detroit is focused on re-classifying access to clean water and sanitation as a commodity to be bought and sold, supported by the notion that if you can’t pay for it, residents can’t have it...SCANDALOUS! The City of Highland Park, a suburb of Detroit, was first to feel the pain of “water privatization” attempts that came

on the heels of that community losing more than 50% of its population. Elected officials have no other answer. All elected officials, all genders, all party affiliations, and all nationalities label then sell-off city assets that once belonged to the people as a means to balance the financial books during challenging economic times. The falsely declared “bankruptcy” in Detroit sealed our fate and made city assets open game to having these re-classified items to be sold. I don’t live in a bankrupt city...I live in a city that was bankrupted!

In early 2014, the initial numbers being targeted for mass water shutoffs was 59,990. Since those days, Detroit has seen upwards of 100,000+ disconnections. We have been left with no choice but to fight for our lives as we try to envision what a different kind of world might look like that won’t punish poor people because they are poor!

To be threatened with shutoff, a household must be two months behind in payments, or merely \$150 in arrears...SCANDALOUS!! When water is turned off, neighborhood issues surface. When water is turned off, children can be removed from the household and placed in foster care. When water is turned off, infectious diseases increase connected to the build-up of surface algae and other contaminants that grow on the inside of water pipes surface and are passed from household to household. No one hears our cries, no one sees our tears.

We are left with creating methods of survival as the only option for Detroit, for Highland Park, for Flint and for the other cities and townships across the country who are facing shutoffs. The government answer to how to treat poor people, poor children, poor retirees, poor disabled persons, and poor veterans is to deny access to clean water. God Bless America, Land That I love...

As possible solutions I offer the following suggestions which our coalition has shared at previous hearings and in written testimony:

- A federal mandate to establish a uniform policy on water and sewerage affordability, based on each residential customer’s ability to pay.
- A federal dedicated source of funding to the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund and renew the Build America Bonds Program to address aging water and sewerage infrastructure, which is but one of the reasons for rising costs, passed on to residential customers.

- Federally funded bill payment assistance for those with the lowest incomes that pay a high proportion of household income for home energy to meet their immediate need for home energy
- Federal consumer protections for water service, including shutoff procedures that require sufficient notice, shutoff prohibitions for vulnerable households with minor, elderly, pregnant, or disabled persons, and water quality.

Recommended solutions specific to Detroit, Michigan include:

- Stop all water and sewerage shutoffs until DWSD has implemented policies and procedures addressing shutoffs by implementing the original Detroit Water Affordability Plan (2005) created by expert Roger Colton.
- Immediately assess of the number of Detroiters living in homes without water, including a survey of the number of children, disabled, elderly and other at-risk citizens, with a review of public health and safety issues.
- Restore all water service and then determine eligibility for assistance programs, in one stop, including federal and state assistance. Only if it is determined that the person has the ability to pay, but has not, will the water and sewerage services be terminated.
- Create a comprehensive DWSD Policy and Procedure for shutoff of residential and commercial accounts.
- Declare an amnesty on Detroit criminal prosecutions for “alleged water thief”; instead evaluate these Detroiters for financial assistance based on what Detroiters can afford to pay. Turn an alleged criminal into a contributor.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to share a bit about the water affordability challenges facing citizens in the State of Michigan, particularly the City of Detroit and offer a few suggested solutions.