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## **SOCIAL JUSTICE, ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS APPLAUD GOVERNOR CUOMO'S PROPOSAL TO BAN WATER SHUT-OFFS DURING STATES OF EMERGENCY**

(Albany, N.Y.) On Tuesday, Governor Cuomo released his Article VII Transportation, Economic Development, and Environmental Conservation budget bill, which includes language to prohibit utility disconnections, including water shut-offs, during states of emergency. In May 2020, in response to the fiscal crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, the State Legislature passed, and the Governor signed into law, legislation carried by Senator Parker and Assemblyman Mosley that established a moratorium on utility disconnections until March 31, 2021.

Advocates representing social justice, senior, environmental, and consumer organizations applauded the Governor's proposal to ensure water and other vital utility shut-offs and other potentially harmful collections activity do not take place during any state of emergency, particularly as the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic continue to upend the livelihoods of millions of New Yorkers.

Water shut-offs are a practice that many utilities employ when households are unable to pay their water bills, disproportionately harming low-income communities and communities of color. For example, from 2015 through March 2019, the City of Buffalo terminated water in over [17,000 instances](#). In 2016, Suffolk County Water Authority disconnected water service for [one percent of its customers](#), affecting 9,553 people.

**Liz Moran, Environmental Policy Director for NYPIRG, said,** "During a global pandemic, the importance of access to clean water couldn't be clearer, which is why the Governor's proposal to prohibit water shut-offs during states of emergency is both worthy of support and based on common-sense. We applaud the Governor for this move and now urge the Governor and the Legislature to come together to ensure long-term water affordability measures are put in place."

**Rob Hayes, Director of Clean Water at Environmental Advocates NY, said,** "We applaud Governor Cuomo for championing protections for New Yorkers who can't afford to pay their utility bills. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown so clearly, no one should ever have their utility service shut off. Water, electricity, and heat are simply necessary for survival. We look forward to working with the Governor and the Legislature to include other permanent policies in this budget to make water affordable and ensure customers are not left drowning in unescapable water bill debt."

**Food & Water Watch Senior Organizer Eric Weltman said,** "Water affordability and utility shut-offs follow a pattern of prejudice, affecting low-income communities and communities of color first and worst. With Governor Cuomo's proposal, New York continues to lead the way in ending these unfair shut-offs and ensuring water for all. We celebrate this move, and call on Senator Schumer and our Congressional leaders to act swiftly in extending such protections across the country."

**Supervising Attorney Kevin Quinn of the Center for Elder Law & Justice, said,** "As an organization that serves to protect the rights and well-being of older adults throughout Western New York, the Center for Elder Law & Justice commends Governor Cuomo's action to ensure that all will have access to essential utilities like water during states of emergency. We look forward to reviewing the implementation of this plan so that affordable water will be made available to all."

"The Western New York Law Center, providing low-income individuals free legal services in civil cases, applauds the Governor's recent, historic announcement to provide continuing access to water and other utilities to all individuals during emergencies," **said Steve Halpern, Staff Attorney at the Western NY Law Center.** "We are especially sensitive to this issue in this part of the state because in the first five months of 2019 the Buffalo Water Board shut off water to over 1,000 customers who fell behind on their water bills."

**Rich Schrader, New York Policy Director at NRDC, said:** "Nothing could be more important than ensuring people have access to clean water, especially Black, Brown, and low-income communities most at risk of having their taps run dry. Prohibiting water shut-offs helps ensure that when an emergency strikes, no New Yorker is left behind – that is the epitome of New York Tough. The Governor is right to heed the lessons of this public health crisis in order to be prepared for the next. New York can also build on this nation-leading protection to create a permanent water affordability program that ensures safe water is always accessible to everyone, regardless of income."

**Kristy Meyer, Associate Director of Freshwater Future, said:** "We appreciate Governor Cuomo's commitment to ensure New Yorkers have running tap water during the state of emergency. Access to clean, safe, and affordable water is essential to good public health. As we start to climb out of this global pandemic, we must take the time to create a water affordability program that includes affordable water rates, debt forgiveness, and emergency water utility bill assistance to ensure people have access to tap water."

**Richard Berkley, Executive Director of the Public Utility Law Project of New York, said:** "We applaud Governor Cuomo's continued leadership and commonsense actions to protect New York utility consumers during this unprecedented public health and economic crisis. In an average

year, energy utilities shut off approximately 250,000 households across New York, and water arrears lead to foreclosures, shutoffs, and exposure of low-income households to child protective services over lack of water. During this period of public health emergency, we cannot allow vulnerable New Yorkers to be unhoused or threatened with an inability to wash their hands and stop the spread of COVID-19.”

While advocates applaud the governor’s proposal, they recognize the need to promote access to affordable water for all, and thus have joined together to make the following recommendations:

1. Quickly roll out a new program of financial assistance to low-income water customers, using federal funds allocated for that purpose in the federal COVID-19 relief package signed into law in December 2020. Building on that initial funding, New York should create a permanent low-income water affordability program.
2. Prohibit water shut-offs due to inability to pay regardless of a state of emergency. Water is *always* a necessity for good public health, a fact which has only been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Require utilities to offer Arrearage Management Plans to New Yorkers who fall behind on their bill payments so that no one becomes buried in utility bill debt.
4. Prohibit the placement, selling, and execution of water and sewer liens, which can lead to foreclosure, during the shut-off moratorium and recovery period.
5. Require utilities to publicly report data on shut-offs, unpaid bills, and more.