



Living Without Water: A Story of Water Unaffordability

Water is a human right and a necessity, yet many people are forced to live without water because of the unaffordable cost.

Sharon Adams grew up in Chicago's Chatham neighborhood. Today, she lives in the same house that she was raised in and knows her community well. Sharon is committed to creating a strong neighborhood - in fact, she ran for office to be the local alderperson of her ward.

Like many people in Chicago and elsewhere, Sharon has faced utility bills that were unaffordable. Sharon recalls "paying as much as I could for as long as I could," but in the early 2010s, Sharon's unpaid water bills and late penalties added up to almost \$12 thousand. The unpaid sum was impossible for Sharon to pay off. Left with very few choices, she had to let her water service get shut off.

After her service was shut off, Sharon lived without water for about two years. Her electricity was also shut off due to non-payment during that time. Her community supported her, allowing Sharon to use their homes to bathe and cook, and she was able to stay periodically with neighbors when she

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Sharon Adams

needed to. Sharon reflected that these were "really some hard times" for her to go through.

Sharon continued to receive bills from the water department, which she kept even though she knew she couldn't pay them. One day she noticed that the City had cut her bill from \$12 thousand to \$1,200. Around this same time, Sharon started receiving a little more income through her social security benefits payments and was able to start paying off the water bill. Once she paid off the sum, the water department reconnected her water service.



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Unfortunately, Sharon discovered that the pipes in her home had developed leaks and other issues during the time water was shut off. When water is not regularly flowing through in-home plumbing, harmful bacteria can grow, and metal pipes can corrode and develop leaks. Elevate worked with Sharon to replace her leaky pipes, water heater, and problematic fixtures in her kitchen and bathroom, and provided her with bottled water while repair work was underway. After repairs were complete, Elevate connected Sharon with follow-up water quality testing to ensure her water was safe for cooking and drinking.

Key Takeaway

Unpaid water bills can lead to late fees and penalties. Subsequent water shutoffs – especially when disconnected for an extended period of time – can result in additional expenses, such as costly repairs before service can be restored. In this way, water affordability issues can lead to other challenges for impacted homeowners, further compounding their ability to maintain access to this vital resource.

Sharon is now able to pay her water bills regularly, but advocates for others: “I imagine that others, especially seniors, will struggle with the cost to pay for water.”

Want to Learn More?

Elevate works with municipalities and water utilities to research water affordability challenges and explore strategies for tackling the challenges in those communities. Visit ElevateNP.org/Water-Affordability to learn more about our latest research.