

Michigan House of Representatives – October 26, 2023
Natural Resources, Environment, Tourism and Outdoor Recreation – Public Comments

I am Mary Ellen Howard, a Sister of Mercy and a retired public health nurse. For 20 years I was Director of St. Frances Cabrini Clinic, the oldest free primary care medical clinic in the US, serving uninsured adults. Many of our clients were between ages 50 and 65—in part-time, minimum wage jobs, with no benefits. They lived below the federal poverty level, and could not afford to pay out of pocket for the medical care and prescriptions they needed to control their chronic diseases, and to stay alive.

I became aware of the problem of water shutoffs when our patients would tell me that because they could not afford to pay their escalating water bills, their water had been shut off. These patients had a variety of health issues: diabetes, cancer, disabilities, COPD, open wounds that wouldn't heal, and many took prescriptions that could result in dehydration. They needed access to clean affordable water—or the care we provided would be futile. I wrote letters to area water utilities, pleading to have the water turned on and laying out the consequences to the patient's health if they continued to have no access to tap water. I was successful in getting the water turned back on for these few patients, but I could see that my few letters were not the answer to the growing problem of water shutoffs in our state. That year 50,000 Detroit households were shut off in Detroit, regardless of who lived there—babies, children, the elderly, sick, pregnant.

When I retired in 2014, I joined the People's Water Board Coalition, a grass-roots movement addressing primarily the affordability of water, as it was clear that poverty was the root cause of the shutoff problem. It was clear also to the United Nations representatives who visited Detroit in 2014 to respond to reports that citizens were being denied the human right to water. And it was clear to Governor Whitmer that water is essential to public health, when she declared a moratorium on water shutoffs across the state during the Covid pandemic.

We need a long-term solution with an ongoing source of funding. Assistance programs are not the answer; they might help get the water turned back on this month, but when next month's bill arrives, it too is unaffordable, and soon the water will be shut off again.

In 2023, with HBs 5088-5093, we have an opportunity to fix the current unjust, unhealthy situation for the citizens of Michigan. The bills are the result of months of intense work by a diverse coalition, of more than eighty stakeholders from across the state, led by Senator Chang. They give us an opportunity to enact a program that we believe will be nationally recognized as a model, and we ask you to pass them into law for the good of the citizens of Michigan. Thank you.

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