

Rep. Tlaib Statement for the Record – E&C Legislative Hearing 5/25/2021

Thank you to Chairman Pallone for his leadership on water issues and for making clean, affordable water for every American a top priority of this committee.

Most of us take water for granted. We turn on a faucet at any time of day and water comes out – for drinking, cooking, bathing, cleaning. For most of us, a life without water is unimaginable. Nobody has to tell you that water is a human right.

And yet, at the start of this pandemic, thousands of families in my district were living in homes without running water, relying on bottled water and rain water to live. More than 100,000 homes in Detroit have experienced a water shutoff in the last ten years. And it's not just Michigan. In Virginia, more than 500,000 residents are behind on their water bills; in Pennsylvania it's 183,000. Across the country, many have seen water rates increase by more than 30% in less than a decade. A 2016 nationwide assessment estimated that 15 million Americans have experienced a water shutoff, a shocking 1 out of every 20 households.

Meanwhile, in this context of rapidly increasing unaffordability, more than half of all Americans live in states without any water shutoff protections – during the pandemic or beyond. Hundreds of millions of Americans are at risk of losing their access to water if they fall behind on their bills. This is an unacceptable reality in the richest country the world has ever known.

Congress must take immediate action to respond to our water crisis, and I'm encouraged today to see so many bills tackling our problems from different angles.

Early this year I was proud to reintroduce H.R. 616 – the Emergency Water is a Human Right Act – with Congresswoman Dingell and 85 cosponsors. This bill makes clear that no person in the U.S. should be forced to survive without safe and clean water access, let alone during a pandemic that has claimed millions of lives worldwide. Emergency Water is a Human Right:

- Prohibits service providers from disconnecting or interrupting a household's water or gas/electric service during the COVID-19 emergency period, and requiring the reconnection of disconnected households.
- Ensures water affordability protections for low-income households by authorizing \$1.5 billion in grants to pay water bills and the creation of a household drinking and wastewater assistance program.

With COVID variants spreading and vaccination rates slowing, now is not the time to ease up in the fight against this pandemic. We should ensure no person is without running water by passing H.R. 616 as soon as possible.

It is important, though, that we do not lose sight that this water affordability crisis didn't start with the pandemic and won't end with it either. That water is a human right doesn't change when we're on the other side of this pandemic. That's why H.R. 3292, introduced with Congresswomen Dingell and Blunt

Rochester, is so critical. It creates an even larger, \$4 billion water debt relief program within the EPA, moving us closer to an America where nobody goes without water simply because they can't afford it.

And moreover, we cannot continue to treat the symptoms without treating the causes. Water debt isn't created out of thin air, it's created by unaffordable rates and insufficient supports for low-income households. That's why it's so important that H.R. 3293, also introduced with Congresswomen Blunt Rochester and Dingell, moves our country towards treating the water affordability crisis with the urgency it deserves by jumpstarting permanent water affordability programs across the country.

As we consider all of the bills in today's hearing – including those addressing critical issues like PFAS detection and treatment and lead service line replacement – I hope we keep in mind some critical guiding principles.

Water is a human right. No one can live without it, no matter their income. Every person has a universal, permanent, inalienable right to drink clean, safe water where they live. Policy should conform to this truth. We cannot allow states or utilities to leave people behind. We can't let red tape be a barrier to protection, people shouldn't have to jump through hoops to keep their water flowing.

Our current water crises – contamination, unaffordability, shutoffs – were created by conscious policy decisions over time. They are interconnected. They can be solved. This moment is a water reckoning, and the policy choices we make must be sustainable and long-term. We can no longer kick questions of human rights down the road.

Thank you all for your hard work and leadership.