

Memo

To: Seattle City Councilmembers
CC: Meg Moorehead, Central Staff
From: Jean Godden
Date: March 1, 2013
Re: No Child Without Water Initiative

Legislation

I am proposing legislation that will modify [SMC 21.76.065\(C\)](#) to make qualifying households containing a minor¹ eligible for an emergency assistance credit twice every 12 months. In other words, a household that received an emergency assistance credit within the past 12 months will be eligible for a second credit if they can demonstrate that a child is in the home.

Given Seattle Public Utilities' (SPU) bi-monthly billing cycle and timeframe for issuing bill delinquency and shutoff notices, this change will, in practice, allow low-income households with minor children to avoid water shutoff.

No Child Without Water

This initiative is based on a simple premise: no child should lack access to clean drinking water and sanitation. In 2012, SPU shutoff water to 138 households registered in the low-income Utility Discount Program (UDP).² Fifty percent of these low-income households – 68 in total – contained children.

Although water shutoff is a drastic measure, it is justifiable when adults are bearing the burden of their decisions or misfortunes. The City does offer support and subsidies to those who are disadvantaged or scraping by, but also expects adults to find the means to pay their bills.

¹ A person is no longer a minor after reaching the age of 18.

² There are approximately 13,800 households enrolled in the UDP. Eligible low-income customers receive a 50% discount on their SPU bill.

However, such a drastic measure as water shutoff is troubling when one considers that children may bear the consequences of others' actions. A child is not responsible for paying a utility bill or managing the family budget. Yet, when water is disconnected, the child suffers just the same. And the impact of disconnecting water to a home is severe. The toilet no longer functions properly. You cannot shower or bathe. There is no clean water to wash your hands or clean dishes. This is a burden that no child in Seattle should have to endure.

Background

Last year, when I took over as chair of the committee overseeing SPU, I began to hear anecdotes about children living in homes in which the water was shutoff. Teachers told me about students showing up unwashed to school. Human service providers relayed stories of families stealing water from neighbors' hoses in order to bathe and drink. Families on the verge of having their utilities disconnected wrote and called my office pleading for help. These anecdotes alerted me to the problem, but I didn't know the magnitude or have a sense of how to best address it. What was clear was that there are children living in homes lacking access to clean water and sanitation – and this is unacceptable. No child in Seattle should be deprived of access to clean water and sanitation while at home.

In June, my office began working with SPU to find a way to ensure that no child in Seattle lacks access to clean water. This proposal is the result of nine months of study and collaboration between my office, nonprofit organizations, SPU, and the Human Services Department.

Why This Fix Makes Sense

Under current law, a household (1) eligible for the low-income utility discount program, (2) that has received notice from SPU that payment must be made to prevent disconnection, and (3) makes a payment arrangement for the remainder of any unpaid balance is eligible for an emergency assistance credit up to \$340. This emergency payment can only be accessed once per year.

This is a generous subsidy, one reflective of Seattle's commitment to protecting and enhancing the health, safety, and general welfare of its people. However, for 68 low-income families with children it was insufficient.

Cost

If this legislation was in place for 2012, and all 68 eligible households took advantage of the credit, it would have cost SPU \$23,120 (68 x \$340).