

To whom it may concern:

I am providing written testimony regarding water bills in Baltimore City.

I am a social worker in Baltimore City. I work with people exiting homelessness and working towards housing stability. I have seen firsthand how the water billing system in Baltimore City has directly impacted residents; particularly those most vulnerable.

Humans need water to survive. We can only live about 72 hours without water. With that being said, the fact that the City charges its residents for the most basic of life giving substances is absurd. Since the Romans in 300 BC, it's been the government's role to provide clean water to the people. The water billing system in Baltimore City puts this very fundamental right in jeopardy.

If you insist on charging people for access to water, the first thing that needs to change is the billing address. Water is billed to the property owner. Often, those property owners pass that bill onto their tenants. However, the bill is not in the tenant's name. This causes a number of issues. First, any type of program or charity that would help low income clients pay utility bills would require the bill be in the client's name. This became particularly challenging when programs popped up to help people who lost income due to COVID. The person actually responsible for the bill, the owner, is not low income and is not applying for assistance. But the person actually paying for the bill needs assistance and can't get it.

I have also had clients deal with landlords who collect money for the water, but do not pay the water bill. They forward a copy of the bill to the tenant, and collect the amount due from the tenant and claim to pay the water bill themselves. However, I have seen many instances where this does not happen. The client is paying money for the water, but the water bill isn't getting paid.

My clients have also moved into homes with large back due balances, sometimes in the thousands. This is, again, because the bill is attached to the owner and not the tenant. In one case, the property owner decided with his new tenant he would send the bill to the home and have the tenant pay it directly to DPW. Conveniently enough for him, the \$1,200 back due balance was still on the bill and he led the client to believe this was her balance as the tenant and not his as the owner.

A decision needs to be made- who is responsible for paying the bill- the owner or the tenant? The bill needs to be in the name of the person paying it.

It's no secret that the water billing system has been unreliable for some time. People get bills at what seem to be random and arbitrary intervals. Sometimes monthly, sometimes quarterly, sometimes every other month. This makes it essentially impossible to budget and plan. Bills need to be predictable. Residents aren't allowed to pay bills at random intervals, so please don't send bills at random intervals.

Instead of giving giant for-profit businesses multimillion dollar tax breaks, use that money to give water to your citizens.

Thank you,

Rachel Gonzalez, LMSW

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