June 10, 2021

The Honorable Bill Quirk  
Chair, Assembly Committee on Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials  
State Capitol P.O. Box 942849  
Sacramento, CA 94249-0020

Re: SB 222 (Dodd) Framework for Statewide Water Affordability Assistance Program – SUPPORT (as amended on May 20, 2021)

Dear Assemblymember Bill Quirk:

As organizations that work directly with or in partnership with frontline communities, we write to register our strong support for SB 222 (Dodd). SB 222 would help preserve and provide access to affordable water for all Californians by establishing a long-needed framework for a statewide water affordability assistance program.

Water is the most basic form of PPE, yet millions of Californians face a looming threat of water shutoffs. In April 2020, California Governor Gavin Newsom issued an Executive Order banning water shutoffs statewide for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic state of emergency. The moratorium was the right thing to do — no one should lose access to water because of the inability to pay, especially amid a global pandemic. But, the shutoff moratorium is a temporary measure. The threat of water shutoffs stemming from water unaffordability has not gone away in the long term.

The water sector has long lacked a universal affordability state program for low-income households. It is critical that we quickly address this severe gap in our safety social net as a lack of water access is proven to have devastating health impacts. Additionally, we already have existing equivalent affordability programs for other utilities, such as gas and electricity. The average Californian family paid around 45% more per month for drinking water service in 2015 than in 2007. Over 50% percent of Californians have a water service provider that does not offer water rate assistance to low-income customers. For water systems that do, enrollment rates are typically low. More broadly, less than 20% of the state’s low-income population served by community water systems currently receives benefits from a low-income rate assistance program. Public water systems face various hurdles, including financial and constitutional, limiting their ability to address this massive issue. SB 222 uniquely addresses these challenges to ensure universal access to a low-income water affordability program.
SB 222 is directly informed by and builds on prior legislative action to address our current water affordability crisis. In 2015 the California Legislature passed AB 401 (Dodd), which required the State Water Board to create a plan for a statewide water affordability program and was released in early 2020 and helped inform this legislation. **SB 222 would establish a long-needed framework for a statewide water and wastewater affordability assistance program.** Specifically, this bill would do the following:

- Establish Water Rate Assistance Fund in the State Treasury to assist low-income ratepayers and ratepayers experiencing economic hardship in California with their water and wastewater services through direct water bill assistance, water bill credits to renters, and water crisis assistance
- Direct the Community Services and Development Department, in consultation with the State Water Board, to create program regulations and an annual expenditure plan for the water affordability program via a public process.
- Authorize the Department to provide funding to water systems and 3rd party technical assistance providers for direct water bill assistance.

Funding to provide water affordability assistance can come from state and/or federal sources. Significant funding for water affordability needs has already been secured federally — $638 million provided in December 2020 and $500 million provided in March 2021 — and legislation is moving in Congress that proposes to provide more permanent funding. With a high likelihood of additional funding being secured in the future, it is appropriate for the Legislature to instruct the relevant state agencies to prepare and weigh in at the policy level as to how the state should manage this funding to ensure equitable access for all Californians to water affordability assistance. No less importantly, the need for water affordability assistance is not going away — it has been a major challenge and gap in our utility safety net for decades and water affordability challenges will only continue to increase due to the rising cost of water. The pandemic has dramatically increased attention to the lack of a statewide water affordability program, and there is a real urgency to address it.

**Access to affordable water is a racial justice and equity issue -- and without action, our water debt and water shutoffs crisis will prevent California from achieving an equitable COVID-19 pandemic recovery.** The time is now to address these urgent challenges facing our state. We must fully realize and implement the Human Right to Water, which was established under AB 685 (Eng, 2012) so that every Californian can have daily access to safe and reliable drinking water. SB 222 provides a path forward to help achieve this goal during and beyond the pandemic. For the above reasons, we urge your AYE vote and support. For questions or more information, please contact Jennifer Clary at jclary@cleanwater.org, Michael Claiborne at mclaiborne@leadershipcounsel.org, and Uriel Saldivar at uriel.saldviar@communitywatercenter.org.
Sincerely,

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CC:
The Honorable Bill Dodd, California State Senate District 3
The Honorable Lena Gonzalez, California State Senate District 33
The Honorable Scott Wiener, California State Senate District 11
The Honorable Richard Bloom, California State Assembly District 50
The Honorable Robert Rivas, California State Assembly District 30
The Honorable Lorena Gonzalez, California State Assembly District 80
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