

Tapping Affordability: *Water and Sewer Bill Relief for Older Adult Residents*

Water is one of our most fundamental human rights and basic needs. Unfortunately, aging infrastructure and market forces have rapidly increased the costs of water and sanitation, which forces hard choices on low income consumers and those on fixed budgets, including many older adults.

Though there are some fixed costs built into the water delivery system, the prices of water and sanitation are ultimately set at the local level. As such, there are wide variations in base costs and in the sorts of affordability and assistance plans adopted by communities.

Water administration is complex, and it may require some digging to understand your community's policies. However, the good news is that, because water policy is set at the local level, residents can have a real influence on the programs offered to older adults.

Community Examples:

- **Somerville, MA:** Discounts of 25% on water and sewer bills are available to seniors age 65 or older who meet designated income limits; are owner-occupants of their residential dwelling for at least 5 years; and have had their primary residence in Massachusetts for at least 10 years.
- **Boston, MA:** Discounts of 30% for senior owner-occupants 65 years or older who live in residential dwellings for between one and four families, but the discount is limited to the water portion of the bill
- **Philadelphia, PA:** As an alternative to assistance through discounts, Philadelphia has pioneered a new approach called the Tiered Assistance Program (TAP), an affordability plan which caps water bill amounts depending on household income tier.
- **Seattle, WA:** Discounts to income-qualified seniors of 50% on their water and sewer bills. The discounts are available to owners or renters who have an account in their own names. Seattle also offers eligible seniors a credit on their electric bill if their landlord pays their utilities
- **Portland, OR:** Offers a senior discount of \$63.20 on the water portion of a bill and \$110.57 on sewer/storm-water management charges, for a total of \$173.77 on a 90-day bill. The city also has a program called Home Forward, to add up to \$500 in eligible assistance per year for each household-in-need, to be used to assist renters in multi-family units deal with the impacts of increased water and sanitation costs
- **Baltimore, MD:** suspended the practice of placing liens on homes based on outstanding water and sewer charges.

More Information:

- If specific information cannot be found online, one option is to call the phone number listed on the water bill to inquire about affordability and assistance programs, including potential discounts.
- The Community Advisory Board to the Massachusetts Water Resources Association (MWRA) publishes an annual water and sewer retail rate survey that provides information about many communities in Massachusetts, and also includes partial information on discounts. Annual Water and Sewer Retail Rate Survey (2018): <https://mwraadvisoryboard.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2018-Water-and-Retail-Rate-Survey.pdf>.
- Further context and references are available in the Northeastern Law report "[Drop in the Bucket: Water Affordability Policies in Twelve Massachusetts Communities.](#)"