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Mayors Commission on Water Equity asks Congress to invest \$58 billion to create a cross-agency “Lead Safe Communities” fund

\$46 billion would be used to replace lead pipes and \$12 billion to address other sources of lead

CHICAGO, April 29, 2021 – The Mayors Commission on Water Equity requests \$58 billion to create a cross-agency “Lead Safe Communities” fund to support state programs to replace lead service lines and lead plumbing, fixtures, and paint in homes and schools. Leading Great Lakes mayors presented this and other water equity funding priorities to Congressional leaders in a briefing held today.

“Water is a cornerstone of public health and a thriving economy,” said Waukegan, Ill. Mayor Sam Cunningham, Chair of the Mayors Commission on Water Equity. “Yet, across the Great Lakes region, communities are buckling under the costs of aging, and sub-standard water infrastructure, with low-income and communities of color shouldering a disproportionate share of the burden. This funding is desperately needed.”

“Historical patterns that generated inequality in our region, such as segregation, discriminatory housing practices, economic dislocation, and disinvestment, have also fostered disparities in water services,” said Chicago Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot. “Communities of color and lower-income people in the region tend to be concentrated in areas with lower-quality infrastructure and more severe environmental challenges, and Congress must provide the resources to ensure water equity.”

Much of our region’s water infrastructure was built over a century ago. Repairs and modernization is in order,” said Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett. “Upgrading water systems in the United States is projected to cost approximately \$1 trillion over the next 20 years, with nearly \$200 billion needed in the eight Great Lakes states. This poses significant challenges for many communities, particularly older cities with diminished finances, and large low-income populations.”

“The time is now,” said Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan. “These issues have been lingering for decades and we have a great opportunity right now to protect public health, create jobs, and ensure safe infrastructure for our grandchildren.”

The Mayors Commission on Water Equity asks Congress to invest:

- ***\$1 billion to map all lead service lines.*** The Lead and Copper Rule revisions finalized in December 2020 require public water systems do a full inventory of their service lines to understand which properties may be at greater risk of lead exposure. Congress should fully fund the complete mapping of all lead service lines in the United States, on both public and private property, so stakeholders can have full awareness of the scope of the lead problem. Congress should also include resources for technical assistance for low-income communities to gain access to and deploy this federal funding.
- ***\$58 billion to create a cross-agency “Lead Safe Communities” fund, with \$46 million to replace lead pipes and \$12 billion to address other sources of lead.*** To affordably address lead service lines on both public and private property, this fund will support states programs to identify and replace lead plumbing, fixtures, and paint in homes and schools, and augment funding for interim corrosion control treatment measures. This fund should include funding directly to low-income homeowners through the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund to supplement the support provided through the support this fund would provide to utilities. Funding should be accessible to less resources small and mid-size communities, and Congress should consider waiving local match requirements as applicable.
- ***\$8 billion to create a permanent Low-Income Household Drinking Water and Wastewater Emergency Assistance Program.*** Congress should create a new permanent assistance program to meet the full need of low-income customers and the utilities that serve them. Congress should also provide technical assistance so that the funding is accessible to communities who need it most can access funding and administer assistance programs.
- ***\$100 million in technical assistance to support utilities with equitable rate design.*** The upfront costs of changing utility rate structures or implementing assistance programs as stopgap measures are high and can prevent utilities from pursuing more equitable rate designs that ensure all can access water services regardless of income. Congress should create a program and provide technical assistance grants to help utilities create and administer customer assistance programs (CAPS) and design more equitable rate structures within the confines of relevant state laws.
- ***\$10 million to expand the Water Workforce Development grants program.*** Congress established the Federal Water Workforce Development Grants as a pilot program several years ago. Now that the program is up and running, Congress should make it permanent and expand funding to invest in targeted internship, apprenticeship, pre-apprenticeship, and post-secondary bridge programs. These funds should be targeted to nonprofits, educational institutions, and utilities that have high retirement rates and are located in areas with high unemployment, large low-income populations, rural areas, and large communities of color underrepresented in the water workforce.
- ***Focus the \$56 billion modernization plan on climate resilient water infrastructure.*** The Biden Administration’s American Jobs Plan calls for \$56 billion in grants and low-cost flexible loans to modernize aging drinking water, stormwater, and wastewater systems. That funding should be explicitly focused on building climate resilience rather than reinforcing the same ill-prepared systems that disproportionately allocate water-related climate burdens to low-income and communities of color.

Convened by the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, the Mayors Commission on Water Equity advises on solutions to water equity challenges facing Great Lakes cities. The commission includes Mayor Sam Cunningham, Waukegan, Ill. (Commission Chair); Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot, Chicago, Ill.; Mayor Mike Duggan, Detroit, Mich.; Mayor Jerome Prince, Gary, Ind.; Mayor Tom Barrett, Milwaukee, Wis.; Mayor Wade Kapszukiewicz, Toledo, Ohio; Mayor Sheldon Neeley, Flint, Mich.; Mayor Billy McKinney, Zion, Ill.; and Mayor Joe Schember, Erie, Pa., as well as Mayor Gino Moretti, Saint-Anicet, Quebec.

There is also strong voter support for investing in water infrastructure. A March 2021 Value of Water Campaign poll of over 1,000 registered voters found that the highest single federal priority for voters was “ensuring a reliable water supply” (83 percent rated this as extremely or very important). This was followed by “addressing water contamination” (77 percent) and “rebuilding the nation’s infrastructure” (72 percent).

About the Mayors Commission on Water Equity

The mission of the Mayors Commission on Water Equity is to advise the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative on issues, opportunities, and solutions to water equity challenges facing Great Lakes and St. Lawrence cities. The Commission seeks to deepen the Cities Initiative’s understanding of the water equity issues and recommend a Mayor’s Policy Agenda for Water Equity to strengthen water equity for all residents, with specific focus on communities that face significant challenges in receiving clean, safe and affordable drinking water.

About The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative

The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative is a binational coalition of close to 100 U.S. and Canadian mayors and local officials working to advance the protection and restoration of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River. The Cities Initiative and local officials integrate environmental, economic and social agendas and sustain a resource that represents approximately 80 percent of North America’s surface freshwater supply, provides drinking water for 40 million people and is the foundation upon which a strong regional economy is based.

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