



GREAT LAKES AND ST. LAWRENCE
CITIES INITIATIVE
L'ALLIANCE DES VILLES
DES GRANDS LACS ET DU SAINT-LAURENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative Awarded \$250,000 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Grant to Advance Safe Drinking Water in Four Great Lakes Communities

CHICAGO, IL — December 9, 2025 — The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative announced today that it has been awarded a two-year, \$250,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to accelerate equitable lead service line replacement (LSLR) planning and financing in marginalized Great Lakes communities.

Across the region, many municipalities continue to face challenges in their ability to remove lead service lines. Communities with limited technical capacity or financial resources often struggle to access state revolving loan (SRF) funds because the required upfront planning, engineering, and application work can be cost-prohibitive.

“This grant represents a critical opportunity to advance water access in communities that have faced the greatest barriers to removing lead pipes,” said Cavalier Johnson, Mayor of Milwaukee and Mayors Commission on Water Access Co-Chair. “Across the Great Lakes, too many residents still live with the daily risk of lead exposure from drinking water simply because their community cannot afford the planning work required to compete for state and federal funding. This pilot project helps level the playing field.”

With support from RWJF, the Cities Initiative will launch a new model designed to reduce barriers and expand access to critical funding by identifying up to four marginalized or under-resourced communities in need of lead service line replacement (LSLR) planning and SRF application support. The project will partner with an engineering firm to provide no-cost planning, design, and application services, while also engaging state and local partners to streamline pathways to SRF funds. In addition, the Cities Initiative will facilitate regional knowledge-sharing to highlight equitable and innovative approaches that can accelerate LSLR across the Great Lakes Region.

A cornerstone of the project is a third-party guarantor model, piloted for the first time in the Great Lakes. Under this model, a selected engineering firm partner will provide communities with the planning and design work needed to submit SRF applications without requiring any upfront local cost. RWJF will serve as the guarantor, reimbursing the engineering firm for pre-loan costs if a community’s project is not selected for SRF funding, removing financial risk for both the provider and the community.

“Too often, communities with aging infrastructure and high levels of need are left behind simply because they lack the staff or funding to even begin the application process,” said Shawyn Patterson-Howard, Mayor of Mount Vernon, NY and Mayors Commission on Water Access Co-



Chair. “This partnership with RWJF is transformative. It gives smaller and historically marginalized communities a fair shot at securing the resources required to protect public health and build long-term water security.”

Scaling Equity and Innovation Across the Great Lakes

The Cities Initiative will also convene a cross-jurisdictional learning cohort to help participating communities and other communities across the region share best practices, build local capacity, and strengthen their long-term infrastructure resilience.

“This Great Lakes pilot offers a replicable model for other regions across the country,” said Jon Altenberg, CEO of the Cities Initiative. “RWJF’s leadership allows us to bring high-quality technical support to communities that need it most while removing the financial barriers that have kept too many from accessing critical federal and state dollars.”

About the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative

The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative is a multinational coalition of municipal and Indigenous government executives representing communities in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Region who are working to promote economic prosperity in our communities and protect our fresh water for the benefit of current and future generations. With more than 400 communities represented, the Cities Initiative is leading the way in advancing the environmental, economic, and social health of the region by addressing issues impacting its residents.

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