



# Voices freshwater

2020 SERIES, ISSUE TWO

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## Inside This Issue:



### OPENING SOON

McKenzie Patrice Croom  
Flint Community Lab

Pellston Students Find  
Contamination with  
Freshwater Future  
Testing Program

## Community Water Councils Step Up on Water Issues

**B**efore the Flint Water Crisis, most people trusted that their municipality provided clean, safe drinking water. Now we know that residents must be engaged about the water systems in their communities. We cannot take for granted that the water from our tap is safe. With Freshwater Future's help, groups of people in many Great Lakes Communities are forming Community Water Councils to increase their knowledge and take the lead on water issues in their communities.

Water Councils are organizing and stepping up in cities and rural areas to ask critical questions about the safety and affordability of their drinking water. *What is the condition of the pipes and infrastructure? Are the rates affordable for all residents? What treatment systems are in place to remove threats such as toxic algae or contaminants? What are the drinking water standards needed to keep our children safe?*

The formation of Community Water Councils fits perfectly with Freshwater Future's mission to be a catalyst for community action that strengthens policies designed to safeguard the waters of the Great Lakes region. Since our inception, we have valued residents' knowledge and abilities and we advocate for their solutions. Through our programs and services, we support Community Water Councils by:

- Offering a structure to organize around water issues
- Providing technical assistance on water issues and policies
- Assisting with water testing and establishing Citizen Science programs
- Networking of Water Councils and water advocates to share and learn from each other
- Connecting Water Council leaders to elected officials and regulatory staff
- Training and leadership development to advocate for change
- Funding to support community solutions to improve water safety and access

Inside this issue are highlights of progress made by Freshwater Future and Community Water Councils in Chicago, Benton Harbor, Toledo, Detroit, Flint and Pellston, MI over the last few months to address a variety of water issues during the COVID-19 pandemic, including lead contamination, water access, affordability, and toxic chemicals. None of this work would be possible without our dedicated partners working in communities, as well as our supporters and funders.

Want to start a Water Council in your community?  
We'll help you get one started!  
Contact Brandon Tyus,  
[brandon@freshwaterfuture.org](mailto:brandon@freshwaterfuture.org)



**Recipient of  
2020 US Water Prize:**  
Freshwater Future and  
Flint Development Center for  
the McKenzie Patrice Croom  
Flint Community Lab

*Early Spring 2020, Toledo Water  
Council meets to actively engage  
community members*





## OPENING SOON—McKenzie Patrice Croom Flint Community Lab

**T**he Flint Community Water Lab is the first of its kind in the world to provide a trusted community-based laboratory for Flint residents for free water testing of lead and other pollutants. Through generous financial support, the Flint Community Water Lab will be a space open to the entire community that unifies residents around a common issue—the safety of water in residents' homes. Housed at the Flint Development Center, Freshwater Future has been honored to partner and

help turn this innovative project into a reality. Recently, the Flint Community Lab was recognized with the 2020 US Water Prize for Outstanding Cross-Sector Partnership.

The project's focus is on providing residents with knowledge about the safety of their water in their own homes. The lab will provide free water testing and resources in Flint to have the information they need to make decisions about the water in their homes. A celebration of the Lab opening will be announced soon.



Shelly Sparks, FDC Director, holds 2020 US Water Prize award.

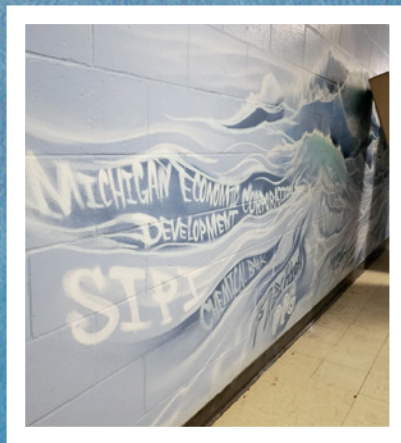
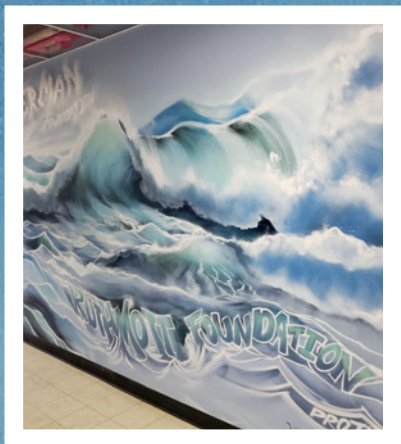
### Thank you to the following donors for their significant financial contributions to Flint Community Lab:

Thermo Fisher Scientific  
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Nalgene Water Fund  
Michigan Economic Development Corporation



Flint students are learning about lead testing and proper lab procedures.







## Affordable Water During and After COVID-19: Toledo Water Council

**R**amon Perez, Director of Junction Coalition and member of the Toledo Water Council, was already worried that his neighbors were struggling to afford their water bills before COVID-19 hit. After the toxic algal blooms in 2014 that made Toledo's water unsafe for days, the City upgraded water treatment and infrastructure including treatment for algal toxins causing increased water rates in Toledo, Ohio.

With the shut-down and layoffs during COVID-19, Ramon and other members of the Toledo Water Council wanted to make sure Toledo residents didn't face water shutoffs and asked the City for a moratorium on shutoffs.

In response to the active resident involvement through the Toledo Water Council, the City of Toledo and the Department of the Public Utilities announced in July they will be terminating water shutoffs due to nonpayment during

the pandemic. The Toledo Water Council further pushed the City Council for tenant protections from landlords threatening to shut water off as a tactic to force evictions and requested the city adopt a debt forgiveness program for water customers to help make water affordability a reality for all residents.

The shutoff moratorium, tenants rights, and debt forgiveness plans provide a foundation for the Toledo Water Council to request other affordability issues that are likely to arise from a recent regionalization of Toledo's water system that offers suburbs wholesale price for water while City residents pay retail rates. The City of Toledo recently requested proposals for the development of an affordability plan as part of the regionalization effort. Freshwater Future believes a comprehensive affordability plan that includes income indexed rates is an essential requirement for all systems.

## No Lead is Safe

**T**he U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has set the health goal for lead in drinking water at zero because of the harmful impacts to health from exposure to this toxic metal at low levels. Lead exposure can build up or bioaccumulate in the body over time.

Based on this guidance that there is no safe level of lead in drinking water, Freshwater Future recommends that all homes in communities that are not in compliance with the Lead and Copper Rule use filters and water flushing techniques.

It is important for everyone residing in cities with elevated lead levels to understand the importance of using filters and have a knowledge of their proper maintenance and use. For more details on filters and flushing best practices visit <https://freshwaterfuture.org/community-resources>.

## Benton Harbor Water Council Update: High Lead in Benton Harbor Water Continues

**R**ev. Edward Pinkney had friends in Flint, and when he became concerned about water quality in his hometown of Benton Harbor, he contacted his friends for advice and they suggested calling Freshwater Future. Our staff helped Rev. to conduct testing that confirmed lead in many homes, triggering the formation of the Benton Harbor Water Council.

Over the past two-years, the Benton Harbor Water Council has trained community volunteers about proper filter installation, use and maintenance and helped to distribute hundreds of filters to residents.

Because the City of Benton Harbor is out of compliance with the lead and copper rule, they are required to test every six-months. For the most recent round of testing, the city was having trouble securing willing residents for

sampling so the Benton Harbor Community Water Council stepped in and collected over 60 water samples for the City to check compliance with the state and U.S. EPA lead and copper standards for drinking water.

Results have not been released yet, however, the Benton Harbor Water Council will continue to educate residents about the need for filters and will ensure that the public voice and resident interests are protected and heard by the City, Health Department and State Agencies. The City of Benton Harbor replaced a small number of lead lines, but many more will need to be replaced to reduce lead exposure for residents.

*Rev. Edward Pinkney*







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## Pellston Students Find Toxin in Drinking Water Using Freshwater Future Test Program

Issues with access to safe drinking water isn't isolated to cities with aging pipes and infrastructure. For example, a family of toxic chemicals called PFAS, shortened for poly- and perfluoroalkyl chemicals, are being found in rural communities and private wells. These rural homeowners, who had invested in residential well systems, now may have to pay for municipal water service. PFAS, a toxic man-made chemical that repels oil and water used in fire retardants and found in cookware, flame- and water-resistant clothing, food wrappers, and stain prevention products, is being discovered at an alarming rate in water bodies, groundwater, and drinking water across the country.

In the rural Michigan community of Pellston, Freshwater Future worked with a group of student citizen scientists, who tested and detected elevated PFAS levels in area groundwater samples, which



*Pellston student scientists involved in testing and education.*

was quickly confirmed by state tests. With this information, local residents and community groups are now obtaining assistance from the state in securing safe drinking water and filters for individual residents.

The Pellston students received numerous awards for their activities from the State of Michigan and the Health Department. Without Freshwater Future's testing program, this contamination may not have been discovered for years or even decades.

COVID-19 impacted our testing program due to restrictions on use of the testing facility. We are working to re-establish the service and hope to be able to resume offering kits in 2021. Please visit our website to sign-up for notifications once the service of providing affordable PFAS test kits for ground water, surface water and drinking water is available again.

## Chicago Residents Getting Help with Turning on Water

How many residents in your town do not have running water (water service)? It seems like a question that most city or town officials would know the answer to, yet surprisingly most do not know the number. Investigative reporters from WBEZ Chicago and American Public Media documented the water disparities in disadvantaged communities by disclosing that while the City had stated to numerous reporters and community leaders there were no residents in the City of Chicago without running water, almost 20% of residents surveyed have admitted their water services had been shutoff.

As a result, residents quickly formed the Chicago Water Council (CWC) to help residents who have had their water turned-off and establish partnerships with community leaders to provide relief to those without running water. The CWC with Freshwater Future initiated



a campaign to pinpoint homes in the most vulnerable neighborhoods.

Over the last decade, Chicago's water rates have increased dramatically due to infrastructure upgrades and many residents are simply unable to afford higher water bills. In July, Chicago officially announced the launch of their Utility Billing Relief Program to reduce the cost of water services (drinking water, sewage, and water tax) by 50%.

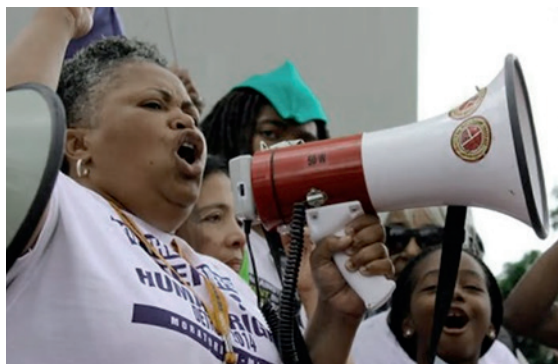
The program was instituted to help Chicagoans who are unable to pay their massive water bills enroll with the chance to have all past due bills and penalties be forgiven, contingent on demonstrating a good payment history over a 12-month period. Chicago officials' actions to offer debt relief on water bills and keep the shutoff moratorium are important for addressing water equity issues. More cities need to discontinue water shutoffs and restore service for system integrity and public health.



## If Water is a Human Right, What Should it Cost?

**M**ost people have no knowledge that many people simply can't afford increasingly high water rates, many times, far exceeding average water bills nationwide. The United Nations recommends water bills should account for three percent of a family's income. Yet for many Great Lakes cities, bills can be significantly higher due to declining city populations, decaying infrastructure, decreasing tax revenue, and fixed incomes. Studies have shown that municipal water utilities in six of the largest Great Lakes cities have issued close to 400,000 shutoff notices in the past decade. Experts believe that for the entire Great Lakes region, the number is closer to 1 million people without running water in a populace of 40 million.

One of the leading world advocates for water affordability can be found nearby in Detroit, Michigan—Monica Lewis-Patrick, President and CEO of We the People of Detroit. We the People of Detroit is not



*Monica Lewis-Patrick of We The People of Detroit.*

mount. At the community level, We the People of Detroit did not let up on water distribution. They quickly learned all about personal protective equipment (PPE) and trained others on proper PPE use for water distribution.

At the policy level, We The People of Detroit, Freshwater Future, and the Great Lakes Environmental Law Center urged the Michigan Director of Health and Human Services and Governor Whitmer for a Declaratory Judgment to turn on all

water in Michigan. In March, Governor Gretchen Whitmer ordered water service restored, now extended through December 31, 2020.

Over the last several months, We the People of Detroit and researchers have collected data identifying a direct correlation between areas of Detroit with some of the highest rates of COVID-19 cases per capita and those that experience the most water shutoffs. Monica states

**“...we must develop a permanent solution that ends water shutoffs and improves water affordability for all residents.”** *Monica Lewis-Patrick*

only a powerful and effective community advocate for water affordability, but also manages an emergency water hotline, supervising water stations, and delivering water to Detroit households in need.

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Detroit was one of the epicenters with a disproportionately high rate of coronavirus cases in low socioeconomic areas. With an estimated 9,000 households not having access to running water, the need to get water to people was para-

“This data shows how essential water access is for public health. We applaud the state's continued commitment to ending water shutoffs impacting our most vulnerable residents during this pandemic. Moving forward, we must develop a permanent solution that ends water shutoffs and improves water affordability for all residents; we urge our local and state leaders to demand transparency from utilities on their service rates and practices.”

## Handbook Helps Michigan Residents Lead on Removing Lead from Drinking Water

**I**t was the tenacity and persistence of Flint residents that revealed the high-lead levels in the drinking water and illegal reporting of lead testing. Currently, 32 communities in Michigan are out of compliance with the State's Lead and Copper Rule designed to assess the effectiveness of corrosion control, which should prevent lead leaching from pipes.

A new handbook developed by our partners at the Great Lakes Environmental Law Center, will help communities navigate how to protect their residents from exposure to lead in drinking water. This fall, Freshwater Future staff will help several Michigan communities use the handbook to get access to data, ask questions of their water supplier, and educate their residents.





*Freshwater Voices* is a joint production of Freshwater Future, a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization and Freshwater Future Canada, a registered Canadian charity.

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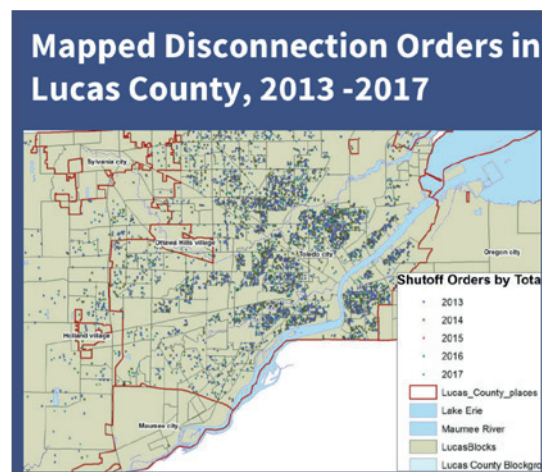
## All About Water Virtual Event

More than 150 people joined us for a 6-session virtual series to learn about water affordability, equity and justice, and solutions. A special page on our website

contains recordings and resources from the sessions. Together, we can continue to learn and support solutions that ensure everyone has access to safe, affordable water.



Dr. Peggy Berry — *Water: A Life Source for Our Health and the Environment*



Dr. Sujata Shetty — *Equity and Water Affordability: Toledo Poverty Study*

## Congratulations to Freshwater Future's Recent Grant Recipients

### 2020 Spring Project Grants

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### Special Opportunity Grants

Benton Harbor Water Council, Benton Harbor, Michigan  
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Concerned Citizens of Butler and Beyond, Wolcott, New York  
Genesee County Hispanic/Latino Collaborative, Flint, MI



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## Collaboration with Bowling Green State University Students Produces Important Water and Public Health PSAs

*Thank you* to the Students of the Collaborative Digital Arts Development class taught by Professor Bonnie Mitchell at Bowling Green State University for producing animated public service announcements for Freshwater Future to highlight important water and public health issues! View their creative works available on our website.



What's in Your Water?



COVID-19 Mask Usage & Best Practices





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## PFAS Testing on Pause

Due to COVID-19, Freshwater Future is no longer able to utilize the University of Michigan Biological Station lab for our PFAS analyses. Fortunately, with the Flint Community Lab coming online soon, we have an opportunity to develop the capacity to perform PFAS analysis in this lab, hopefully by the new year. Watch our weekly email newsletter for updates.



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