

[White House under pressure to issue national water shut-off ban as state protections expire - The Washington Post](#)

No explicit Center mention but we helped the reporter with political background and shutoffs data. Bigger part of the #NoShutOffs coalition's coverage.

White House faces new pleas to avert ‘tidal wave’ of water shut-offs as state bans continue to lapse

Billions of dollars in coronavirus stimulus aid have yet to reach families facing back-due utility bills, worrying experts and lawmakers in Michigan and across the country

By [Tony Romm](#), [Jeff Stein](#) and [Alyssa Fowers](#)

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Michigan residents who are behind on their water bills could see their taps start to run dry in five days, once a state shut-off ban instituted at the height of the coronavirus pandemic expires. But Monica Lewis-Patrick said she isn't waiting around for that to happen.

The 55-year-old Detroit-based activist leaped into action last week, purchased about 68,000 water bottles and set in motion a plan to truck them to families across the state out of a fear that other government aid may not reach them in time.

“There is no policy, no safety, after March 31, from seeing massive numbers of people at risk,” said Lewis-Patrick, president of We the People of Detroit, a community advocacy organization.

But the wave of potential water shut-offs in Michigan reflects a broader, national crisis in the making: Utility protections enacted in the early months of the pandemic are slated to expire in some states — including Hawaii, New York, Pennsylvania and Vermont — over the next few weeks. The looming lapses have registered new urgent alarm among congressional lawmakers and community activists nationwide, who say the Biden administration should have acted faster, and sooner, to distribute federal aid to households at risk.

None of the roughly \$1 billion in new stimulus funds allocated for water assistance has reached Americans in need, nearly three months after Congress authorized the first tranche of money. In the meantime, the Biden administration has resisted calls on Capitol Hill to institute a national moratorium on water and electricity shut-offs, a policy that might have covered people until federal assistance arrives.

The danger is particularly acute in Michigan, which finds itself in the grips of one of the worst coronavirus resurgences in the country — an [approximately 77 percent increase in cases and 50 percent increase in hospitalizations](#) since mid-February. State lawmakers so far have not extended the utility protections, rankling those who remember all too well the water hazards that have plagued cities like Flint.

Fearing a cascade of disconnections on the horizon, U.S. Reps. Debbie Dingell and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan said they requested a meeting with the Department of Health and Human Services about the fact that water assistance hasn't been released. The two Democrats have also raised the matter with White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain and are working to set up a meeting on the matter.

“I hope the White House works with us to make sure the water is not turned off in any state in America. We need to make sure nobody loses water,” Dingell said in an interview.

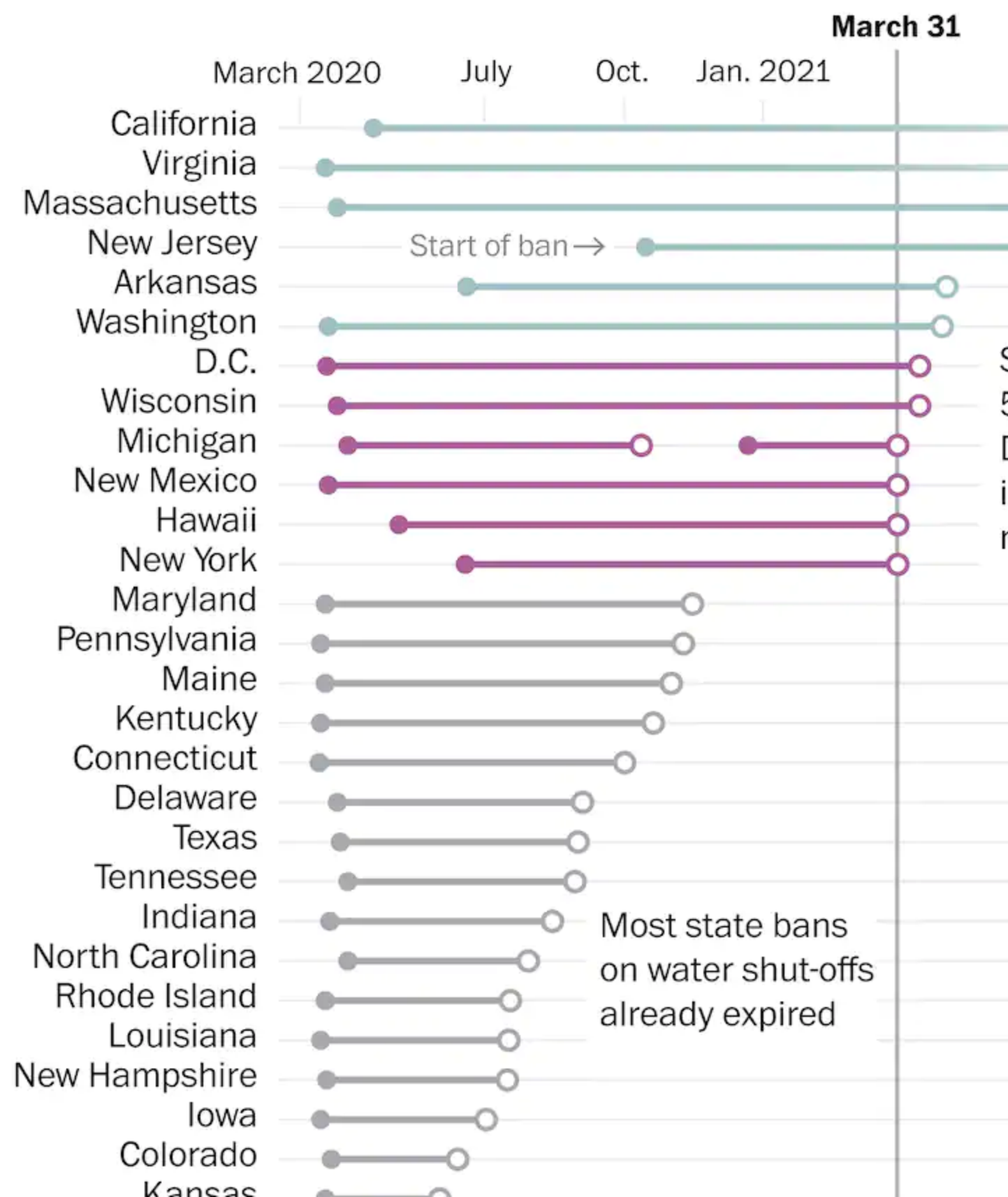
Tlaib added: “Dingell and I are requesting a meeting as soon as possible so we can understand the barrier and challenge in getting this out. It's been three months. ... On March 31, my families are going to be cut off from water — so we want them to move quickly.”

The White House did not respond to a request for comment. HHS, meanwhile, said in a statement it is working as quickly as it can to stand up an entirely new program under a tight time frame.

“In the United States, many are used to water running freely from taps and faucets, but this water is not free, and water costs are on the rise,” Lanikue Howard, director of the agency's Office of Community Services, wrote in a blog post earlier this week. “For many low-income households in America, water affordability has reached a level of crisis.”

Water shut-offs loom as protections expire

State bans on water shut-offs during the pandemic



Bonnifer Ballard, the executive director of the American Water Works Association's Michigan Section, said her organization's data suggests that the number of people falling behind on their bills is "not nearly as high as we expected it to be." She said there is unlikely to be a raft of shut-offs on April 1, as water providers first send delinquency notices and try to strike payment arrangements with those in debt.

But Ballard agreed with lawmakers and advocates that the federal government should provide stimulus aid more promptly, aiming to help not only Americans in need but utilities that similarly find themselves strained for cash. "We want the best of both worlds," she said. "We want everyone to have access to water, but we also want to pay the bills."

The urgent calls for new federal protections illustrate the lingering economic consequences of a public health crisis that has lapsed into its second year. Even as the stock market is improving, the number of people applying for unemployment benefits [has decreased](#) and new [vaccines](#) are reaching those in need, the country's recovery hasn't been equal — and some of the families and communities hit hardest by the coronavirus are at risk of falling even further behind.

Their financial struggles are borne out by the most recent [U.S. census data](#), which found that roughly one-third of Americans surveyed are still facing difficulty in paying their usual household expenses. The dour numbers contributed to Democrats' efforts to authorize \$1.9 trillion in new coronavirus relief spending as one of their first acts of governance after the 2020 election, allowing President Biden to sign the [American Rescue Plan](#) into law earlier this month.

But lawmakers did not include as part of the package a new [federal moratorium](#) to prevent potentially millions of families nationwide from experiencing power, water and [Internet shut-offs](#) specifically. That's left many at the mercy of their state and local governments, which have instituted patchy, [inconsistent protections](#) against utility disconnections since the pandemic began last March.

With water, in particular, the gaps are stark: More than 200 million Americans will be living in states without a full water shut-off moratorium in place by April 1, according to an estimate from Food and Water Watch. In the meantime, electricity and water experts say Americans have racked up significant utility debts, adding to the government's challenge in preventing the disconnections once state moratoriums — or similar policies put in place by cities and other local governments — are lifted. Exact national figures are impossible to obtain because state and federal regulators collect little information about utility arrearages.

Federal lawmakers have established programs to help those struggling to keep the lights on and the water running. One pot of funds, now totaling nearly \$50 billion, is set aside

for rental and utility relief combined. Another totaling nearly \$1 billion is specifically supposed to aid Americans at risk of losing water. Congress approved some of the aid in December and the rest as part of the newly adopted American Rescue Plan. That package also included a new round of \$1,400 stimulus checks, offering a financial boost for millions of families to catch up on their bills.

But the two new utility programs have faced early bureaucratic delays, as government officials struggle to launch various relief efforts in record time while ensuring the dollars are spent appropriately. The rental and utility relief is already thinly spread, given that renters are tens of billions of dollars behind in their housing payments, and most of the money has not yet gone out the door. HHS, meanwhile, has not issued guidance yet on how it is going to manage its roughly \$1 billion water program — meaning the relief still may be months away.

In the absence of the aid, lawmakers and consumer groups said it is even more urgent for the Biden administration to put in place a utility shut-off moratorium. Some of the party's top lawmakers say it should be [modeled after the policy](#) the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention implemented last year to protect renters from eviction. The CDC at the time justified the protections as essential for stopping the spread of the coronavirus.

“With millions of vaccine doses going into arms each day, we are so close to getting to the other side of this crisis and getting our economy fully reopened,” Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) said in a statement. “But we aren’t there yet, so the CDC should exercise its responsibility for public health both by extending its moratorium on evictions and by protecting families from the cutoff of water, power, and broadband that would make their homes uninhabitable.”

Lawmakers and advocates also have taken their concerns directly to the Biden administration in recent months — only to face an icy reception. This January, for example, a coalition of 636 groups led by Food and Water Watch wrote the White House a draft executive order that aimed to prohibit utility shut-offs. But their entreaty received no response, said Mary Grant, the campaign director for the Public Water for All initiative at Food and Water Watch.

“Now is the moment the Biden administration can take action on it because the variants are spreading and the relief isn’t out there yet,” she said.

Without it, experts warn the consequences could be stark. New [research from Cornell University](#), which Food and Water Watch helped produce, estimates that a national moratorium might have saved 9,000 lives nationally and prevented half a million people from being infected with the coronavirus. Researchers studying infection rates between mid-April and the end of December 2020 found a link between water shut-off

protections and lower coronavirus infection rates, reflecting the importance of hand-washing and other hygiene to controlling the pandemic.

“Enacting a nationwide moratorium on utility shut-offs is an important and urgent measure to help slow the spread of COVID-19,” the report found.

In the meantime, though, some states’ protections are starting to expire.

At least 815,000 regulated water, gas, and electric accounts in Pennsylvania are at risk of being shut off, with residents in the state collectively owing more than \$850 million in back payments, according to data provided by Elizabeth Marx, executive director of the Pennsylvania Utility Law Project. That represents an approximately 44 percent increase between February 2020 and February 2021.

“The countdown is upon us, and relief is not coming fast enough,” Marx said. “I fear a tidal wave of terminations next week, before federal utility relief programs are operational and accessible at the local level. This will become a major crisis unless terminations are further halted until federal relief is available, whether that’s at the state or federal level.”

In Michigan, meanwhile, the need may be vast. More than 317,000 households had fallen behind on their bills by this fall and may be at risk of a water shut-off unless the legislature acts to extend its order set to expire March 31.

The [data reflects](#) the most recent information available from the state, said Cyndi Roper, a senior policy advocate in Michigan for the Natural Resources Defense Council. She also pointed to other warnings that suggest state residents are falling far behind in their bills. Earlier in the pandemic, for example, Michigan set aside \$25 million in federal stimulus funds to help residents catch up on their water bills. Months later, the roughly 144 water companies that ultimately participated in the program had requested almost twice as much as the state made available, according to Roper.

Even if Michigan’s shut-off protections expire, some cities including Detroit have their own moratoriums in place. Policymakers in other cities, including Flint, are eyeing an emergency meeting to prevent a flood of new water shut-offs. But some city council leaders have still called on the White House to act.

“This is an impoverished community and we have the highest water bills in the nation. We have a huge, terrible problem here,” said Maurice Davis, a Flint councilman.