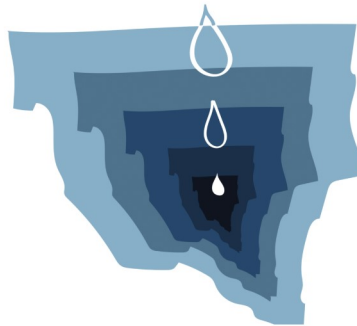




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Sofie Lie

The Pandemic Has Made It Even Harder For Some Chicago Residents to Access Clean Water

PUBLISHED ON SEPTEMBER 3, 2020
BY NEYA THANIKACHALAM

Since the pandemic began, **I Grow Chicago**, a West Englewood-based nonprofit, has made more than 4,000 essential deliveries to neighborhood residents. Many of these deliveries, director of development Zelda Mayer explained, are of something residents of other neighborhoods often take for granted: clean drinking water.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened disparities between Chicago residents, as many people unable to afford their utilities are forced to make hard choices in order to meet basic needs. “When we look at job access, income inequality, housing inequality, and we look at that big picture, housing and income are two of the biggest factors in water access,” Mayer said. “Because water, as it is right now, is an amenity you have to pay for. ... No one should be able to go without water.”

Complex causes

Sera Young, a professor of anthropology at Northwestern University, has studied water insecurity—insufficient access to safe, clean water—on both the local and global scale. She says there are two root causes of water insecurity in Chicago: when people can't physically access running water, because they can't pay their water bills or because of other infrastructural issues, and poor water quality for those who can access water.

However, Young explained that addressing these issues isn't that simple. For instance, there still aren't standardized, efficient ways to measure different water contaminants in much of the city, she said, while even the highly standardized realm of utility payments often lacks the data necessary to understand exactly who is being affected. These shortcomings make it hard to create large-scale solutions to increase the affordability of water.

"I think that's step one, to know how big the problem is," Young said. "And step two is to figure out who are the people who are really suffering from this. Is it the elderly? We don't know. Is it just people in one part of the city? I don't think we know that either.... wouldn't want to try to say what the solution is to a problem [when] we don't fully understand what the problem is."

It may be difficult to understand the extent of the issues that limit Chicago residents' access to water. Despite this, it's clear that the cost of utilities is a significant barrier to a safe water supply, said Jude Gonzales, the supportive services director at the [Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing](#) (LCBH), an organization that provides legal and supportive services to improve housing stability.

"Things can get very desperate very quickly for folks," Gonzales said. "What we're saying is that of course, people should seek out resources."

The need for representation

The burden of utility payments is especially severe in communities of color, Gonzales said, a problem only exacerbated by the pandemic.

In Chicago, as throughout the nation, there have been a disproportionate number of illnesses and deaths due to COVID-19 among people of color, and [especially within Black communities](#). The CDC reported that Black people are almost five times more likely to be hospitalized after being infected with COVID-19 and about twice as likely to die from COVID-19 than white people.

Higher rates of crowded housing and intergenerational households, increased stress and anxiety (which can weaken the immune system), inconsistent access to health care—a trend exemplified by the planned closure of Mercy Hospital in Bronzeville in 2021—and higher rates of chronic health conditions all combine to heighten the impact of the illness in communities of color.

Gonzales said that the majority of people who contact the LCBH are from the South and West Sides of Chicago, primarily from Black communities. He added that many of them work in essential services, making them more vulnerable to COVID-19.

"We are seeing the same communities that were hit hard prior to COVID are getting hit harder now because of COVID," he said.

The public health crisis has led to an economic crisis, leaving many financially strapped. Many have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic—the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the nation's unemployment rate in July was 10.2 percent, or 16.3 million people. While there are unemployment benefits that people can access, it's uncertain how long they will be extended, Gonzales said.

That's why it's important that residents immediately reach out for legal help if there are any concerning issues surrounding their housing stability or their access to utilities, Gonzales said. LCBH has a model that pairs lawyers and social workers to more effectively address the

problems that Chicago residents face surrounding their housing stability and related services.

“We’ve been able to do a number of things that hopefully don’t just react to the crisis but actually respond to it for the immediate and then hopefully the long term,” Gonzales said.

Available Aid: Utility Billing Relief Program and Illinois Housing Development Authority

In early July, the City of Chicago and the Community and Economic Development Association, or CEDA, launched the **Utility Billing Relief** (UBR) program in an effort to make water and sewage bills more affordable for Chicago residents. Residents who are income-eligible for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program can qualify for the UBR program.

CEDA president and CEO Harold Rice said that the program is meant to relieve residents of some of the costs associated with their households, especially with the high unemployment rate. Although the program is meant to help all low-income Chicagoans, Rice added that he wanted to ensure the communities of color were given sufficient aid during the pandemic.

“People of color, specifically from the Black and brown communities have been really hit hard during the pandemic, and we’re making sure that those individuals are not left out like they normally are, in certain situations, or overlooked,” Rice said.

However, the UBR program does have a limitation: it’s only applicable to homeowners. Chicago renters—who made up 55.3 percent of the population in 2017, according to the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University—must use other options to access aid.

Right now, the LCBH is helping renters who can’t afford their utilities by tapping into the state and the city’s homelessness prevention funds, Gonzales said.

The federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) has also been a major source of aid nationwide. Chicago residents had the option to apply to receive \$5,000 through an online portal run by the Illinois Housing Development Authority. However, the applications were only available until August 28, and grants are only given to 30,000 residents.

Gonzales said he hopes that there is greater funding on an ongoing basis so that people who don’t get Emergency Rental Assistance still have the chance to receive aid.

“It’s great that a grant of \$5,000 is going to help 30,000 Illinoisians,” Gonzales said. “But there are going to be way more than 30,000 people who need this money.”

Housing instability and homelessness has been a significant factor preventing West Englewood residents from accessing water, I Grow Chicago’s Mayer said.

Despite this, Mayer said the factors that heighten water insecurity are extensive and not limited to housing instability. This only highlights how “no issue can really be viewed in isolation,” she said. Underlying problems, such as income inequality, poor water quality, and utility affordability, need to be addressed in order for people throughout the city to access a safe water supply.

“It really does boil down to looking at who has access to resources and opportunities and who is profiting,” Mayer said. “Water is not our main issue. It’s one of many issues that we’re seeing our community face.”

Resources

For more information about the Utility Billing Relief Program, see chicago.gov/city/en/depts/fin.html.

For more information about the Lawyers’ Committee for Better Housing, see lcbh.org.

For more information about Emergency Rental Assistance and Emergency Mortgage Assistance, see idba.org.

For more information about Legal Aid Chicago, see legalaidchicago.org.

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Neya Thanikachalam is a student at Northwestern University. This is her first piece for the Weekly.



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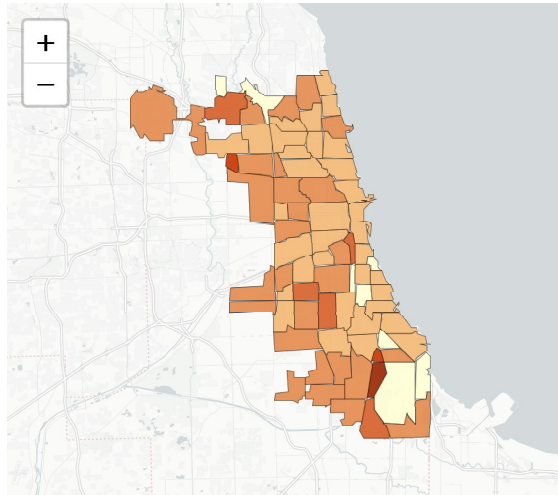
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