The coronavirus pandemic has affected everyone in the United States, including the country’s more than 50,000 public water utilities and their customers. While most utilities have had to slash budgets, defer infrastructure investment, and increase spending on things like employee overtime, personal protective equipment, and other hygiene protocols, they understand the challenges that many of their customers are also facing paying their water bills, especially when they’ve lost a job due to the pandemic.

Many utilities are creating or expanding programs that have already been in place to offer customers financial help. I want to share the experiences of the Toho Water Authority and what it’s doing to assist the public. This originally appeared as an article in AWWA Connections and is reprinted here with permission.

It was a story that Toho Water Authority, based near Florida’s Walt Disney World, began to hear over and over again this spring. A theme-park employee, used to earning a good living, was suddenly laid off due to the COVID-19 outbreak and couldn’t afford one of the family’s most basic needs: water.

Fortunately, Toho could refer many of those customers to the Toho Assistance Program, or TAP.

“Many of our customers lost their jobs and had no means to pay for water. They wanted to know, ‘How can we get help?’” said Mary Hewitt, Toho’s director of customer services. “This program has definitely been having an impact.”

A utility member of the American Water Works Association (AWWA), Toho is located in central Florida’s Osceola County, and is the largest provider of water, wastewater, and reclaimed water in the county, serving more than 100,000 customer connections. The county is the gateway to Walt Disney World and several nearby theme parks, and its economy relies heavily on the tourism and service industries.

When those businesses closed in mid-March to help slow the spread of COVID-19, thousands of residents were laid off. By summer, Osceola County’s unemployment rate topped 30 percent, the highest in Florida. Some of the parks were scheduled to re-open in July, although the number of coronavirus cases reported in the state remains high.

That staggering statistic had a profound effect on Toho’s customers. Typically, the TAP program receives 20 applications a month from customers facing economic hardship. Due to the massive number of layoffs, the program is processing nearly 10 times that amount.

“We’re working closely with quite a few people to help them get back on their feet,” said Todd Swingle, Toho’s executive director. “Everything is so unique in this response; there’s not a one-size-fits-all solution, but TAP represents one of those important tools.”

The TAP program began in 2017 with a goal of helping customers with temporary financial challenges make their bills more manageable. The TAP funds are provided by Toho and managed by the Osceola Council on Aging, a nonprofit that has offered social service programs to the community for nearly 50 years. The program prioritizes income-eligible customers whose service is in the process of being disconnected, as well as households with elderly or disabled individuals or families with children under the age of 18.

Typically, Toho contributes $50,000 each year to TAP, but its board approved an increase of $100,000 to help the growing need during the pandemic.

Mike Sweeney, Toho’s deputy executive director, said some utilities are considering a flat-rate reduction to help customers during this nationwide economic downturn, but that doesn’t focus the help on where it’s needed most.

“Targeting customers on the basis of need and income seems to have the greatest impact,” Sweeney said, “and even if rate increases are relaxed this year, infrastructure needs remain, making water more and more expensive for people who are the most vulnerable.”

Noted Sweeney, “We have to adapt and find ways people can get the water they need and use it efficiently.”

Like other utilities, Toho suspended water shutoffs through the beginning of August and is offering payment plans for customers who are struggling to pay. Toho has a tiered rate structure that offers a lifeline category supporting basic usage needs, and the utility is piloting a matching contribution program in which customers can donate to assistance programs on their bills.

All of these tools will be important as Toho eases back into normal operations, balancing fiscal responsibility with the need to ensure that all customers have access to a natural resource they can’t live without.

“The TAP program is one way for us to show our community and customers that we care,” said Swingle, who serves on AWWA’s Diversity and Member Inclusion Committee. “We can’t solve all the problems that exist from the coronavirus, but we are certainly able to demonstrate to our customers that we care about the challenges that exist for them.”