Action requested: contact your members of Congress ASAP to let them know how they can assist in water service needs during the pandemic

As you may have seen in the news, Congress is reacting to the coronavirus pandemic with a series of bills. While progress appears to be stalled on one right now, they will likely begin moving legislation again soon. For the water sector, one of the upcoming bills will deal with providing assistance to low-income customers who are having trouble paying their water and other utility bills. Then another economic stimulus bill will deal with assistance for water utilities. Congressional staff tell us they want to go through existing programs to do this since it takes so long to stand up new programs. Therefore, assistance will likely come via the state revolving loan fund programs (SRFs), WIFIA, perhaps Community Development Block Grants and water-specific grant programs. However, they need to hear from us!

One interesting twist is that in order to get money to low-income folks via existing programs, some members of Congress are proposing to send funding to be administered via the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. This is a specific amount of money ($1.5 billion in the last version of legislation we saw) to be expended during this coronavirus pandemic. Be aware that there are also mandates for a suspension of water cutoffs in the House leadership proposal, but only for the duration of the federal emergency declaration and 120 days afterward.

A group of water organizations have come together with a joint letter to congressional leadership to reinforce the need for assistance to the water sector. It is attached. AWWA is asking its members to call or e-mail their members of Congress with these messages:

- We support the following measures in coronavirus legislation as it relates to water service:

  1. Assistance to low-income customers in paying their water bills through the LIHEAP program, as proposed in Section 199992 of draft House leadership legislation.
  2. Financial assistance to support utility operations as these water systems see revenues drop during this economic downturn.
  3. Strong funding for all utility providers, regardless of ownership, through established water infrastructure investment programs such as the state revolving loan fund programs, Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act program, USDA’s Rural Development programs, water reclamation programs and grants such as those for removing lead service lines.

You may also forward the attached letter and say it has your support.

Thank you in advance for your attention to these urgent matters.

Tommy Holmes
Legislative Director
American Water Works Association