

URBAN WATER INSTITUTE NEWSLETTER

Provide timely, compelling, and diverse discussion of water policy, economics and resource management.



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In Focus: Customer Service

The Urban Water Institute is pleased to feature the activities of our member agencies and highlight the professional work of our board members.

In this issue, the focus is on customer service in two agencies: Helix Water District and Elsinore Valley Water District. Their innovative programs are especially relevant during the COVID experience.

Helix Helps Customer Assistance Program

Addressing Unpaid Water Bills With Helix Water District Customer Assistance Program

By Kathleen Coates Hedberg, PE, MPH Vice President, Board of Directors, Helix Water District



Since the implementation in March 2020 of a moratorium on shutoffs for nonpayment of water bills, unpaid water bills in California have exceeded \$1 billion.

In January 2021, the State Water Resources Control Board estimated that 1.6 million households in California, or nearly one in eight homes, had accrued water debt. Water utilities recognize the need for customer assistance, however California law prohibits utilities from using water rates to help struggling customers stay afloat. ... *(see page two for more)*

Rate Assistance For Residents Of Elsinore Valley

EVMWD Rate Assistance Program: RARE Helping Customers During Times Of Need

By Darcy Burke, Vice President, Board of Directors Elsinore Valley Municipal Water District

When the last drought hit California, water costs began to rise and the impact on Elsinore Valley Municipal Water District (EVMWD) customers was significant. EVMWD, which serves more than 155,000 people in Southwest Riverside County, found that disadvantaged populations were most affected by the rising costs. To ensure that disadvantaged communities had continued access to essential water services, the district began to explore options to assist low-income customers with their bills.



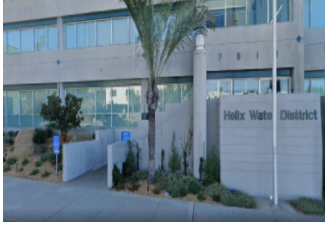
In accordance with laws, EVMWD can only charge the actual costs to provide water and sewer service. The district thus needed to secure non-public funds to create a rate assistance program.

Previously, EVMWD negotiated with cell service providers to locate towers on EVMWD properties, and those funds were used for rate offset, replacement projects, and other programs. With some innovation, EVMWD opted to use those lease revenues as a reliable source of funds to create the RARE (Rate Assistance for Residents of Elsinore Valley) program.

EVMWD's board eagerly approved the agreement, allowing up to \$350,000 annually to fund the program for qualified customers.

Since the program's inception six years ago, EVMWD now funds \$515,000 towards the program serving more than 1,200 households. ... *(see page two for more)*

Helix Helps Customer Assistance Program *(continued)*



(from page one) ... My colleagues on the Board of Directors of Helix Water District, which serves 277,000 people in San Diego's east county suburbs, recognized the potential financial impacts of the pandemic early on and took steps to help the district's customers. We stopped shutoffs and late fees before the mandate, began making payment arrangements with customers, froze rates and asked staff to cut costs. Determined to do more, we dedicated \$500,000 from recent surplus land sales to fund the district's first-ever customer assistance program.

On April 5, 2021, we launched the *Helix Helps Customer Assistance Program*. The program offers a one-time credit of up to \$300 to help the district's single-family residential customers who are behind on their water bill and can demonstrate loss of income due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The assistance amount was based on the district's average outstanding residential balance when the program was created, which was just over \$300.

The district partnered with Home Start, a local nonprofit, to administer the program. Home Start was already administering rental assistance programs for three neighboring cities and they focus on meeting customers where they are: providing resources in English, Spanish and Arabic and working with customers online, over the phone, and in-person to assist them with the application process.

Once Home Start approves applicants, Helix customer service staff adjusts water bills and, if needed, enters customers into a payment arrangement. We review applications on a first-come, first-served basis.

The program is an example of what a creative and responsive local leadership can accomplish. Recognizing Proposition 218 limitations, the board looked for other, non water revenue sources to fund the program. We also knew our community, which allowed us to quickly establish a partnership and launch the program.

Within its first few weeks, the *Helix Helps Customer Assistance Program* has provided dozens of customers with financial relief. We have the funds to help at least 1,400 households in need and will continue outreach to all customers including targeted outreach to customers carrying a balance on their water bill.



Rate Assistance For Residents Of Elsinore Valley *(continued)*



(from page one) ... "We believe the best way to spend this non-rate-based money is to assist our low-income customers with a break on their bill," said Phil Williams, president of the EVMWD board of directors, "We hope that it will bring some relief to those who struggle financially while also encouraging them to remain water efficient."

To streamline the program with requirements of neighboring utilities, the RARE program requires that applicants meet the existing guidelines of the Southern California Edison or Southern California Gas CARE programs. Customers must also use less than 13 billing units (ccf) a month of water, to ensure water use efficiency. Customers must apply annually to take advantage of the

program.

To date, approximately 4 percent of EVMWD customers participate in the program, demonstrating the sizeable need within the service area. With the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need is greater than ever. While many customers can still pay most of their bills, they are struggling with ensuring a full payment each month.

An EVMWD customer, Raul, shared "I am recently unemployed and having difficulties making ends meet. I am grateful for EVMWD assistance programs, and even more grateful for the staff who have taken the time to assist me with finding a program than can help me with my water bill."

More information about this program is available at www.evmwd.com/RARE.

