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LDF and Local Advocates Urge DeKalb County Officials to Implement Stronger Policies Protecting Access to Affordable Water

Today, representatives from the [Legal Defense Fund](#) (LDF), [DeKalb Water Watch](#), [South River Watershed Alliance](#), and [New Disabled South](#) joined residents of DeKalb County, Georgia to urge County officials to implement water affordability and shutoff protections for residents ahead of a proposed rate hike to already-inflated and inaccurate water bills.

For years, DeKalb County residents have suffered from unfair water billing practices and failing water infrastructure. These issues disproportionately impact Black residents, families with children, and residents with disabilities, and are a result of policy choices made by the County. Recent planning maps of the county show that a majority of Black neighborhoods were designated as “non-priority” areas, meaning the areas were deprioritized for repairs to damaged water and sewer infrastructure.

Despite this disinvestment, residents throughout the county are forced to increasingly shoulder the financial burden for the county’s sewage management even though they do not equally benefit from these services. Other cities like Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Chicago have passed laws to protect against using property liens to collect unpaid water bills and have ensured that low-income residents, seniors, and people with disabilities have access to affordable water. The coalition present at today’s press conference urged DeKalb County to implement similar policies.

“Water is a human right and a life-sustaining necessity. We strongly oppose service disconnections and tax liens as a collection method for unpaid water,” **said David Wheaton, Policy Counsel at LDF.** “Our research is clear – the County’s practices have an outsized impact on Black residents, families with children, and residents with disabilities. The county should not move forward with increasing already-exorbitant water rates, instead we urge officials to increase water shutoff protections for low-income residents, seniors, and people with disabilities, adopt a more transparent process to dispute incorrect bills, adopt an income-based affordability program, and refrain from placing tax liens on people’s homes due to unpaid water bills.”

"It is as unfair as it is telling that the same residents currently being disconnected for exorbitant water bills, live in the areas designated as 'non-priority' for sewer repairs in the county's 2010 consent decree with the EPA," **said Dr. Jacqueline Echols, Board President of the South River Watershed Alliance.** "85 cents out of every dollar of our water bills goes towards sewer costs. Water and sewer go together. And while it is immoral to unduly burden people being systematically excluded; it is likewise financially indefensible when the amount of infrastructure repairs needed – and their associated costs – far exceed the revenue the county could collect from them."

"I never imagined the community I grew up in and am now raising my family in would be a place where my neighbors worry whether they can bathe their children or wash their clothes – a place where you might be forced from your home because of a \$20,000 water bill," **said Star McKenzie, founder of DeKalb Water Watch.** "We have been in the fight for affordable water for nearly a decade, and despite the clear solutions that could be deployed, the problem persists. All residents in DeKalb County deserve equal access to clean, affordable water, and we will not rest until they do."

"When I received my first \$1,000 water bill I thought if I did what the County said – paid the normal amount and waited – everything would resolve. Not only was it not resolved, the bill climbed to \$80,000 at one point, for a half of a duplex that I lived in for less than a year," **said Cymeve Garrett, a resident of DeKalb County, Georgia.** "When I moved to DeKalb to improve my family's circumstances, I never could have imagined that of all the situations I've survived in my life, a water bill would be the one that could devastate me. This has been a nightmare for me and my family."

"Water shutoffs in DeKalb County disproportionately harm disabled residents, many of whom depend on uninterrupted water access for basic daily living and health-related needs, **said Dom Kelly, Co-Founder, President, and CEO of New Disabled South.** "For disabled folks who rely on medical devices and/or in-home, the impact of these shutoffs is immediate and life-threatening. Accessible and reliable utilities are not just a public service – they are a lifeline. DeKalb County must prioritize protecting its disabled residents."

To watch a recording of today's press conference in DeKalb County, click [here](#).

For more information on the affordable water crisis facing Black communities, [view our Water/Color research brief](#).

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The Legal Defense Fund. *Founded in 1940, the Legal Defense Fund (LDF) is the nation's first civil rights law organization. LDF's Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multidisciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the Legal Defense Fund or LDF. Please note that LDF has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights.*

DeKalb Water Watch. *For years, DeKalb County residents have been plagued by outrageously high water bills. DeKalb Water Watch, founded by Star McKenzie, is a coalition of residents and allied organizations committed to ending unjust water billing practices in DeKalb County. The coalition's mission is to advocate for fair and accurate water billing to ensure all residents have access to affordable water services.*

South River Watershed Alliance. *South River Watershed Alliance (SRWA) is committed to ecological restoration of the South River for the benefit of nature and people. Cleaner water requires increased awareness, collective advocacy, stronger protection, and management of our river as a valuable natural resource.*