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Advocates in DeKalb County Secure First of Its Kind Water Affordability Legislation in the Deep South

Yesterday, elected officials in Georgia passed sweeping legislation to address water affordability issues and implement stronger protections against shutoffs in DeKalb County. These efforts are the result of years of advocacy by the Legal Defense Fund (LDF) and local organizations, including DeKalb Water Watch, the South River Watershed Alliance, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and New Disabled South. The legislation will help to ensure Black residents, families with children, seniors, and residents with disabilities have access to clean, affordable water.

To increase access to water and sewage services for low-income residents of the County, the legislation passed today caps water bills at 3 percent of residents' monthly income, creates a discount program to make water bills more affordable, strengthens shutoff protections to ensure that people don't lose access to essential services, and establishes an independent advocacy office to assist residents in disputing incorrect bills. The legislation also implements an increase in water rates, phased in over ten years, which is meant to enhance the County's budget for addressing neglected water infrastructure.

"We are thrilled that residents of DeKalb County will soon have relief from exorbitant water bills and better access to clean water – a life-sustaining resource," said **David Wheaton, Policy Counsel at LDF**. "Today's comprehensive legislation is a historic first in the Deep South and a major step forward in the fight to equalize access to clean water. However, our work is not done. We will continue to hold the County Commissioners accountable to their legal and moral obligations under the new legislation—especially as it relates to addressing neglected water infrastructure and ensuring low-income residents do not bear the burden of the rate increase."

"This legislation we worked so hard to get is dedicated to the resident in Stone Mountain who, as a Section 8 voucher holder was arbitrarily issued a payment plan of \$500 per month for water," said **Kat Maddox, Community Advocate at DeKalb Water Watch**. "It is for the resident who has delayed her retirement for years due to a mountain of disputed water debt. This legislation is for all the friends I made along the way—community members of DeKalb County who will no longer have to struggle to afford and access clean water because of the Board's decision today. This is a significant first step in rebuilding trust between residents and decision-makers, and our coalition intends to ensure that trust is well-founded."

“I started DeKalb Water Watch in 2016, when I was pregnant with my 8-year-old son. The years of advocating for fellow single mothers unable to bathe their children, other families losing their homes to water debt, as well as my dear friend who lost her cancer battle during an unresolved dispute, have fueled my passion to keep fighting,” said **Star McKenzie, Founder of DeKalb Water Watch**. “My hope is that these affordability protections are the beginning of a sustained collaboration between the county and DeKalb Water Watch, and ensuring all residents have access to affordable water.”

For years, DeKalb County residents have suffered from unfair water billing practices and failing water infrastructure that both put their housing and health. 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. LDF has consistently urged County officials to implement water affordability and shutoff protections for residents

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

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