



INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS HEARING TO HIGHLIGHT LACK OF WATER AND SANITATION IN POOR COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE U.S.

COMMUNITY ADVOCATES TO DEMAND URGENT ACTION BY THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION TO ADDRESS THE WATER AND SANITATION CRISIS

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WASHINGTON, DC - On October 23 the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) will hear testimony by grassroots groups from around the country about the widespread lack of access to safe water and sanitation that impacts poor and disadvantaged communities throughout the U.S., in particular black, brown, and Indigenous Peoples. This is the first time the IACHR and any international tribunal will consider the lack of water rights in the U.S.

"Today's hearing is an important step in exposing the shocking violations of the basic human right to safe water and sanitation that happens in this country daily and holding the U.S. government accountable" said Rebecca Landy, Human Rights Outreach and Advocacy Manager at the US Human Rights Network.

"It is unconscionable that in the world's richest economy, people are in fear of losing their homes and children because they cannot afford to pay for clean water or sanitation systems, or are getting sick because their water has been contaminated," Landy added. "We are calling on the Obama Administration to take immediate steps to address this crisis that disproportionately affects poor communities and communities of color."

The hearing comes five years after the United Nations declared water and sanitation a basic human right.

In poor communities around the U.S., escalating water rates have made water unaffordable for many people on limited incomes. Water utilities have responded with massive shutoffs for unpaid bills, with devastating impact on families and households.

✓ In Detroit, where 41 percent of residents are living in poverty and 99

percent of the poor are African American, [more than 33,000 households](#) lost water service for non-payment of bills in 2014. Maureen Taylor, Chair of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization comments: "People who in desperation turned their water back on without authorization have been issued criminal warrants. Children have been removed from their parents' custody solely on the grounds of having no water service. As families scramble to pay their bills, they've had to choose between water service or paying for rent, medications or even food."

- ✓ In Baltimore, where water rates have risen by 54 percent in the last three years, the public water utility CKCK has turned off service to some 4500 household in the last six months due for non-paymnet. According to Jessica Lewis, Co-Founder of Baltimore's Right to Housing Alliance, "In addition to the recent shut-offs, renters are being evicted when they're unable to pay the water charges included in their rent and people are losing their homes through tax lien sales for unpaid water bills. This forces poor residents to make an impossible choice about whether they can pay for water or for housing, and either way they can lose both. It's a real crisis for these families."

In rural areas stretching from California to the West and Southwest, contamination from mining, industry and agriculture has deprived communities of safe drinking water, creating a public health crisis for poor Latino, black and indigenous communities. In the Deep South, much of the rural population lacks even basic sanitation services.

- ✓ In Alabama, public health officials estimate that 40 percent of households in the Black Belt region have either inadequate or no septic system. Catherine Flowers, Director of the Alabama Center for Rural Enterprise comments: "Poor rural people living amongst raw sewage in the United States of America is the starkest example of inequality in the richest nation on earth." These poor people are also being criminalized for lack of proper sanitation and are being exposed to diseases related to poor sewage, like hookworm.
- ✓ In California, where agricultural chemicals like nitrate fertilizers have polluted drinking water wells throughout farm communities, many of the farmworkers who harvest the nation's fruit and vegetables suffer chronic illnesses and are forced to buy expensive bottled water on poverty wages. According to Horacio Amezquita, from the San Jerardo Farmworkers Housing Cooperative: "We have fought for years for public officials to address this public health crisis, but our communities still live with the unacceptable injustice of being denied access to a vital resource, even as the produce they harvest helps keep the rest of the nation healthy."
- ✓ Nationally, Native Americans are nearly 10 times more likely than

white households to be without water and sanitation service. In New Mexico, members of the Red Water Pond Road community within the Navajo Nation, who live alongside three uranium mines, face a frightening risk to their water supply. Community member Edith Hood said: "The government and mining companies have forced my community to make an impossible choice: either stay in our current location and have clean drinking water, but be exposed to nearby radiation or relocated to our traditional use area to escape the radiation, but give up our access to drinking water."

The coalition testifying at the IACHR is also calling on the Obama Administration to immediately extend emergency assistance to restore water service to households disconnected for inability to pay; to remediate groundwater supplies contaminated by extractive and agricultural industries; and to provide wastewater treatment in poor rural communities. UN experts have also called for a national water policy.

"Every person deserves access to safe water and sanitation," said Wenonah Hauter, executive director of Food & Water Watch. "It is appalling that our government leaders have violated this basic human right in communities across the country. We demand that the Obama Administration immediately end these violations of human dignity and provide federal relief to ensure safe and affordable water and sewer service for all."

Hearing Time & Location: The hearing takes place on Friday, October 23rd, from 4:15-5:00pm at the Organization of American States, 1859 F Street NW, Padilha Vidal Room (TL Level), Washington, DC

Live Stream: www.oas.org/en/iachr/default.asp

A copy of the request for the hearing can be found at:

<http://bit.ly/IACHRUSRighttoWater>. It was presented by a coalition of some 20 grassroots and national organizations and individuals who advocate for water rights. Find their contact information [here](#).

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ABOUT THE US HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK

The US Human Rights Network (USHRN) is a national network of organizations and individuals working to strengthen a human rights movement and culture within the United States led by the people most directly impacted by human rights violations. It is a network of over 300 organizational members that is working to popularize human rights in communities across the United States in order to secure dignity and justice for all. www.ushrnetwork.org