



Recovering
Stronger



Transforming Water Management Post COVID-19 Initiative Overview

Times of upheaval can lead to moments of radical change. COVID-19 has upended life across America, disrupting business as usual in every sector and shifting the way we relate to, and work with, one another. In many ways, and across many sectors, the pandemic exposes and reinforces structural challenges and social inequities. In the water sector, this plays out through access to water, the cost of water services, governance structures, and even how we fund and deliver those water services. We have a unique opportunity in how we respond and recover from COVID-19. We can take this moment of disruption to rework a system so it ensures both the financial stability of water agencies and the equitable distribution of services. If we do this, we can emerge stronger than before—a resilient water sector more prepared for the challenges that lie ahead.

Now is the time for innovative and committed leaders to take this moment of deep disruption and turn it into a source of lasting transformation in how we view, value, and manage our nation's water systems.

Five Interlocking Solutions

Five interlocking solutions are needed to make the water sector resilient, sustainable, and equitable in the wake of COVID-19. They address structural problems that have led to sub-optimal outcomes for decades. Addressed in concert—and grounded in rebuilding trust across a range of water stakeholders—we can realize water's promise in fostering public health, equity, and resilience for all.

Solution #1: Price Water to Reflect its True Value and the Cost of Service.

Despite its essential nature, the United States has undervalued and underinvested in water, and the result is a cascade of compounding problems. We need a sustainable business model and a pricing structure that reflects the true cost of service. We need a funding structure that closes the infrastructure gap and makes systems more resilient to emergencies like COVID-19.

Solution #2: Provide Affordable, Universal Access to Water.

We must build affordability into the financial business models of water agencies, giving them the tools and support needed to maintain service even when individuals struggle financially. We need to set local water agencies up for success on affordability—which requires co-investment and financial innovation. Solutions considered should span from local and regional rate structures all the way up to federal entitlement programs.

Solution #3: Catalyze Utility Partnerships and Consolidation.

More than 80 percent of the nation's 52,000 community water systems serve fewer than 3,330 people, and 55 percent serve fewer than 500. It is unrealistic to spread sustainable solutions to so many water agencies with different resource and capacity levels. It is time to accelerate community-

driven, outcomes-based approaches to partnerships and consolidation that deliver improved water service to communities.

Solution #4: Deploy Smart Water Operations at Scale.

The pandemic reveals why water agencies that made investments in big data, artificial intelligence, remote sensing technology, modern billing and customer service systems, and other digital solutions are better positioned and more resilient than their peers. As municipalities face mounting pressure to “do more with less,” we must scale these solutions to become standard operating practices at every water agency. Intelligent water systems more readily adapt to changing contexts and help public agencies operate efficiently and effectively, even under great strain.

Solution #5: Use Water as a Pathway to Address the Climate Crisis.

Scientists say we have less than a decade to act on climate, and any efforts to help the water sector recover stronger must contribute to progress on the climate crisis. The water sector has ample opportunities to contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation efforts while pursuing sector goals like resilience and sustainability. From renewable energy generation to carbon sinks, water can help reduce the nation’s carbon footprint.

Key Project Components

For the next two years, the US Water Alliance is dedicating itself to forging the pathway needed to recover stronger from this public health and economic crisis. Together, with partners across the country, we will reknit a local, state, and federal partnership for water through the following activities:

- **Support Five Pilots to Drive Local Innovation at Water Agencies.** Water is fundamentally a local issue, and much progress can be forged by local water agencies. Many US Water Alliance members are ready to use this moment to transform their agencies and communities. We will develop five pilots with water agencies to make progress on the areas outlined above. For example, the pilot, *Preventing Shutoffs for Low-Income Households*, will support ten utility-community partnerships on preventing water shutoffs for low-income households while balancing financial resilience.

- **Spur State Policy Innovations.** States are a seedbed for water innovation and can play a central role in helping the water sector recover stronger. The Alliance will collaborate with regional partners to host listening sessions that explore emerging state policy approaches. The insights will be synthesized into a state policy agenda for recovering stronger, with the goal of spreading promising policies across states.

- **Elevate Water in the Federal Policy Dialogue.** To date, the water sector has been left out of federal recovery funding. This is a missed opportunity. We will develop a federal policy agenda for recovering stronger in the water sector. We will collaborate with diverse partners, host educational briefings, and elevate the voices of aligned coalitions.

- **Spread and Share Insights to Shape the National Narrative.** The Alliance will spread lessons and insights from this project across our growing national network through high-impact events, virtual trainings, peer dialogues, and presentations. We will also shape the national narrative through dynamic earned, paid, and social media activities, publications, and other strategic communications modalities.

Together with partners and allied organizations, **we must act with urgency and purpose** to drive long-overdue changes that will allow the water sector—and the nation—to recover stronger.

To learn more, visit us at:

www.uswateralliance.org
[@USWaterAlliance](https://twitter.com/USWaterAlliance)