

# Cleveland, OH Water Champions Program



## Project at-a-Glance

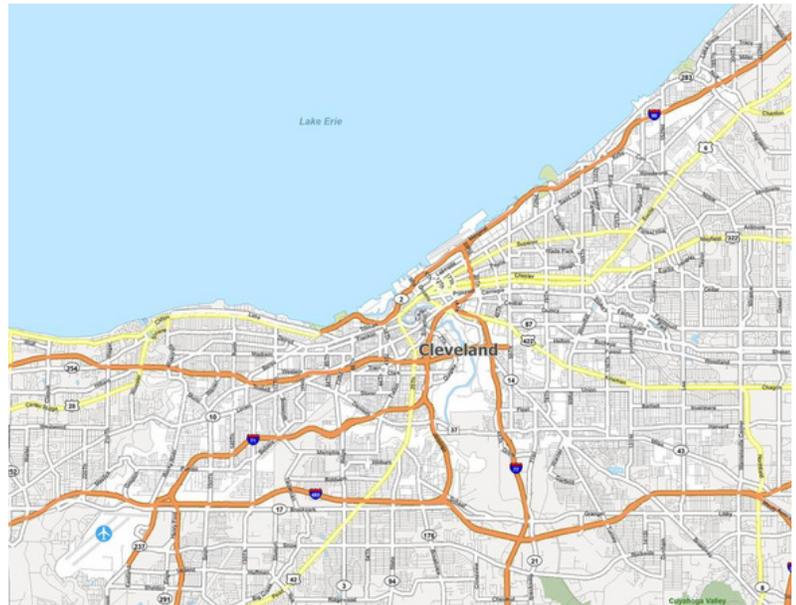
### Community Overview

- Utility/Community: Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District and Cleveland Water's service areas
- Location: Cleveland, OH
- Population served: + 1 million
- Service area: 380 square miles

### Project Partners



**CHN  
Housing Partners**  
*The Power of a Permanent Address.™*



### Project Benefits

- Builds trust and fosters communication between the residents and utilities.
- Helps a variety of people by offering multiple programs that can help a wide range of residents with being able to afford their water bill.
- Helps local residents learn about and apply for programs that reduce rates by up to 40 percent and help avoid water and sewer shutoffs.

### Project Challenges



Equity and affordability



Urban flooding



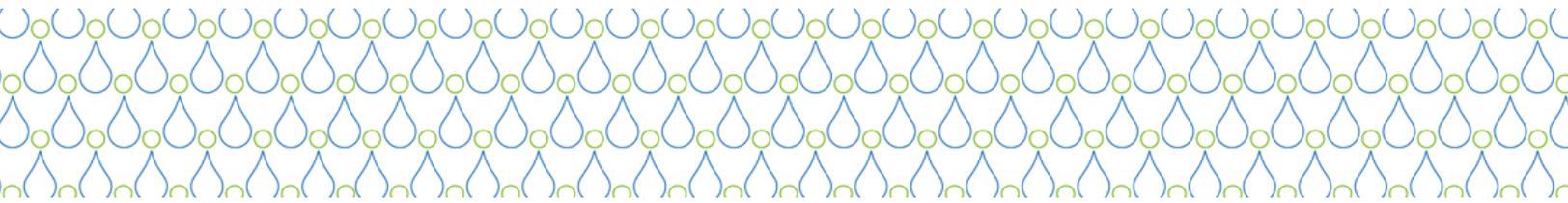
Climate change



Aging and damaged infrastructure

## Strategies for Success

WaterNow supported CHN Housing Partners (CHN) and the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (NEORSRD) with implementing the Water Champions program, a two-year pilot program that utilizes grassroots outreach to serve at-risk communities, administered by CHN, NEORSRD, and Cleveland Water. The program connects the water and sewer utility with low-income communities. Local community members – or Water Champions – listen to community members’ most critical concerns and challenges around utility programs and share information about utility bills, water quality, and cost-savings programs.



## Project Spotlight

Cleveland has one of the highest poverty rates among large U.S. cities. Approximately 30 percent of Cleveland residents live in poverty, three times the national average. Many face difficult choices as they juggle the costs of their basic needs, such as food, water, and shelter. Missing water and sewer payments can put residents at risk of incurring debt and risking service shutoffs.

In response to these challenges, Cleveland’s water and sewer agencies have developed several bill assistance programs to support low-income residents. These programs include discount programs that reduce rates by up to 40 percent for ratepayers who qualify based on income, age, and/or disability; plumbing repair assistance for low-income residents; and one-time sewer bill assistance for major life events or crises. This type of support can help avoid shutoffs and reduce the financial strain on low-income residents. Data shows that participants in Cleveland’s discount and assistance programs have been overwhelmingly successful in maintaining their water and sewer service. However, getting people signed up for these programs can be a challenge – the city estimates that only half of eligible residents are participating in these programs.

The Water Champion’s program aims to close this gap. The program grew out of Cleveland’s participation in the U.S. Water Alliance’s Water Equity Taskforce, a network of seven cities that worked together to develop more equitable water policies and practices and to better understand the challenges, opportunities, and solutions to advance equitable water management.



*A postcard invites community members to attend a focus group discussion.*

As part of the Water Equity Taskforce, Cleveland created a local Learning Team composed of utility managers, community representatives, and local foundations working to ensure that all residents have access to thriving local economies, community vitality, and healthy ecosystems through equitable water management. The Cleveland Learning Team developed the report, *An Equitable Water Future: Cleveland*, detailing recommended activities focused on “public engagement, affordability, climate resilience, and workforce development,” including the Water Champions program, a grassroots program to connect at-risk populations to water and sewer bill assistance.

To implement the Water Champions program, the City of Cleveland Division of Water and the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (NEORS) partnered with the Division of Water’s nonprofit partner CHN Housing Partners (CHN). The

program is based on a long-standing relationship between the utility and CHN, which already administers the water and sewer utilities’ affordability programs. The Water Champions – CHN employees – work in the most affected communities, to share information, support residents in applying for affordability programs, and hearing directly from residents about the affordability challenges they face and any questions they have. CHN has built a trusting relationship with the community over its 35-year history, which is integral to the Water Champions program, enabling residents to speak with familiar faces and helping the water sewer agencies reach residents they might struggle to engage otherwise.

The Water Champions program aims to both increase the number of residents who take advantage of affordability programs and to help the utilities better understand the needs and concerns of the neighborhoods within their service areas. By partnering with a trusted local nonprofit organization – CHN Housing – the program is better able to meet residents where they are at, building trust and participation in their affordability programs.



## Project Impacts

The overall goals of the Water Champions program are to strengthen ties between utilities and local communities; gather information that can be helpful to utilities as they implement and update their affordability programs; and increase the rate at which participants are able to access affordability programs.

While the program is still underway (beginning mid-way through 2020), in less than a year:

- The Water Champions program had hosted over 100 listening sessions with local residents.
- Over 362 community members had met with a Water Champion to discuss affordability programs, or to get help applying for them.
- Approximately 1,000 residents had been exposed to the Water Champions program through public outreach.

This outreach aims to help the water and sewer agencies reach their goal of increasing participation in affordability programs to 80 percent, enrolling residents in these programs before their bills create a crisis.



## Lessons Learned

Through research of similar programs, the Water Champions learned these important lessons about implementing their program:

- Partnering with a trusted local partner, such as a non-profit organization or community group, is critical, ensuring that residents feel comfortable sharing their questions, priorities, and concerns.
- It is vital for community liaisons to meet people where they are – both physically, in terms of where outreach occurs (e.g., in local neighborhoods and community gathering places), and more intangibly, in terms of how community liaisons listen to and approach community residents. Hiring community liaisons within the community facilities builds relationships with residents through shared knowledge and experiences.
- Providing training for community liaisons, including training focused on racial equity, trauma, and leadership, and the skill of listening and learning about the cultural context of each community, supports program success.
- Frequent barriers to participation include: a low awareness of affordability programs, the time and technology needed to assemble and submit required documentation as part of the application process, and the lack of a central affordability service location.



*Water Champion Kirsten Nitsch at a community event.*

The program identified new strategies to grow participation, including an approach that would let participants "opt-out" rather than "opt-in," and the use of an expanded array of outreach mediums, such as TV, radio, and local newspaper advertisements, in addition to digital and mailed materials. In the year ahead, the Water Champions will expand to conduct outreach in two additional neighborhoods, continue to build new community partnerships, and host more neighborhood focus groups, to hear directly from residents about their water-related experiences and goals.