



# BUILDING BLOCKS OF TRUST CASE STUDY

City of Durham, North Carolina  
and Community Empowerment Fund

Advancing Affordability and Empowering Community Members



# BUILDING BLOCKS OF TRUST IN ACTION



Prioritize  
Transparency and  
Accountability



Restore Community  
Confidence



Cultivate Long-Term  
Community  
Relationships

## INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

In Durham, North Carolina, residents often faced water shutoffs due to mounting water fines and fees. While the City offered customer assistance programs and maintained a hardship fund meant to prevent shutoffs, customers did not take advantage of these benefits and hardship funds went unspent. This lack of participation in bill assistance did not mean everyone in Durham could afford their water bills, however.

Research showed that over a 3-year period more than 73,000 accounts were assessed late fees and that nearly 37,000 disconnections were made. The research also showed that shutoffs were more likely to occur in areas with higher representation of people of color and that most fees and shutoffs were assessed on households in central and eastern Durham, which are lower income areas of the city.

The City acknowledged that its water shutoffs and fees were inequitable and determined that meaningful change to its bill assistance was necessary. This spurred the City's partnership with the Community Empowerment Fund (CEF), a trusted voice in the Durham community that provides residents experiencing financial hardship with resources and guidance towards financial wellbeing. Together, Durham and CEF embarked on a collaborative journey grounded in active listening, trust, and shared purpose to create the LIFT-UP program and transform water affordability within the community.

As a community-centered program, LIFT-UP provides holistic support to avoid water shutoffs. LIFT-UP participants receive one-on-one hands-on support to navigate the water bill assistance program, which includes:

- A pause on shutoff proceedings while the customer is enrolled,
- A tailored repayment plan to bring their account back into good standing, and
- Up to \$240 in financial assistance towards their outstanding water bill if they allow the city to make certain leak repairs and efficiency upgrades.

Participants also receive help in setting up a bank account, if they do not already have one, and access to rap around financial coaching services.



# HOW DID THE PARTNERSHIP BUILD TRUST?

The City and CEF used a multipronged approach to build trust with the community and launch LIFT-UP.



**First**, the City grounded the project in transparency and accountability. The City acknowledged that its past implementation of water shutoffs was inequitable and committed to doing things differently by working with CEF.

**Second**, to build on the City's quantitative research about its fees and shutoffs, CEF and the City hired Durham residents to conduct qualitative interviews with water customers to better understand their lived experiences with shutoffs. These interviews revealed the traumatic and negative impacts customers faced when they lost access to water in their homes. Interviewees expressed how feelings of shame, stress, and anxiety from having their water shutoff prevented them from seeking help.



The interviews built trust because this process allowed residents an opportunity to share their experiences in a non-judgmental environment with residents that reflected the affected community. Opening these lines of communication helped humanize not only the customers but Durham's water utility. And the interviews were a step in demonstrating that the City wanted to shape the new program around these underlying people-centered challenges.

**Third**, the City followed through on its commitment to changing the status quo. With CEF's input, Durham overhauled their fine and fee structure, revamped how customers were notified of late payments and next steps, and created LIFT-UP. The City also updated its code to require that property owners fix leaks to help protect renters from high water bills that were the result of leaks they could not fix on their own. This accountability and follow through helped restore the community's confidence that they City is a resource for them.



**Finally**, CEF and the City intentionally expanded their partnership to an ongoing relationship. CEF supports LIFT-UP implementation and continues to support the City as a trusted third party in the community.

# WHY WAS TRUST ESSENTIAL TO SUCCESS?

The City could not have achieved its goal of improving its customer assistance programs without building trust with CEF and its customers. By taking a community-centered approach, Durham water managers gained insights into why the prior program was not working that the qualitative data could never uncover. These insights lead to customer assistance truly designed to meet customers where they were and eliminate barriers to participation.

The City and CEF would not have been able to create the LIFT-UP program without their partnership or without restoring the community's confidence in the city's commitment to equitable access to water.



## LESSONS LEARNED

CEF and Durham's partnership offers valuable lessons to other communities looking to prevent water shutoffs. One learning is the importance of a water utility partnering with a trusted community-based organization when residents may have low confidence in the utility. This trusted voice can help restore trust and overcome past missteps—so long as the partnership is genuine. Taking accountability for past missteps is another key learning. Durham and CEF's work shows that to move forward can take some reckoning with the past. Finally, Durham and CEF's LIFT-UP program teaches that building trust-based customer assistance programs is about more than facilitating on-time bill payment. It takes a holistic approach and a long-term commitment to ongoing relationships with community partners.