

***“I couldn’t help but think . . . if you are. . . [supporting the right to water globally] outside your borders, can’t you do it at the same time in tandem so nobody falls through the cracks? . . . It just hit me, because I literally cannot understand the most powerful country in the world having these kind of stories about the lack of clean, potable water and sanitation, it really blows my mind quite frankly... if you ignore your most vulnerable –I am sorry to say, I say it quite bluntly, you are not a civilized society. You must protect the most vulnerable! And in doing so, you respect their human rights, recognize them as human persons, and give them back their dignity.”*** – Commissioner Margarette May Macaulay, Rapporteur to the United States in response to the US Government testimony

On Monday April 4, 2016, members of the US Human Rights Network coordinated [National Human Rights to Water and Sanitation Coalition](#) shared powerful and heartbreaking stories of the lack of clean and safe water and sanitation in their lives and those of their families and communities. They talked about water contamination and the harmful health impacts in their communities; astronomical water rate increases and the lack of affordable water; criminalization of people who cannot afford water and sanitation services; and the lack of adequate sanitation in communities across the United States. Yet in response, the US government ignored the testimony of the people sitting directly across from them to congratulate itself on water assistance around the world, while falling silent on the water crisis facing people in the U.S. (watch the full video of the hearing [here](#)).

Throughout the entire testimony from the U.S. government, not a single government representative responded to the stories, crises, and conditions presented before them by their own residents. They sat across from U.S. civil society and reiterated multiple times that they are not legally obligated to ensure the human rights to water and sanitation; nor is it the federal government’s responsibility to ensure water and sanitation – all of the problems are at the hands of local and state officials and agencies. This utter lack of response to the painful truth of what we came to share was astonishing and painful.

***“It is insulting to hear how the U.S. is providing water to the rest of the world when we are sitting right here in front of you. We need to hear about what the U.S. government will do for its own residents,”*** said Robert Robinson, longtime member of the US Human Rights Network on behalf of the National Human Rights to Water and Sanitation Coalition. ***“Our delegation has presented stories from across this country to show how the U.S. has failed to uphold this most fundamental human rights obligation for its most vulnerable residents, and the government’s presentation today unfortunately reflects its continued indifference to our plight.”***

***“As a testifier, I was thoroughly ashamed that members of my own government felt so little about low income people, suggesting that we were less than "dirt" and not***

**worthy of access to what my constituent tax-dollars provide for others. Clearly, we are not respected nor valued as they each repeated, ad nauseam, the same refrain about not having the obligation to provide access to clean water and sanitation to residents here in this country. How awful. How sad. How hurtful that this is the verification of what many of us have long suspected.”** said Maureen D. Taylor, State Chairperson of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization.

While the U.S. government focused on legal technicalities, (which they got wrong<sup>1</sup>), they cannot deny the hard truth that low-income, Indigenous Peoples, homeless, undocumented, and communities of color lack equal access to safe, affordable, and adequate water and sanitation in this country, and the impact is especially severe on women and children. Every person has a right to human dignity. Our government must be held accountable for ensuring that every person in the U.S. has access to safe, affordable, and adequate water and sanitation without discrimination.

Despite the disappointing response from our government representatives, we left having built deeper connections with each other, strengthening our Coalition, and knowing our power. We left with a renewed commitment to the work ahead to educate our own government about the way forward towards justice for our frontline communities. We know we are on the right side of history.

We are tremendously thankful to everyone who spoke at the hearing, who contributed to research and our hearing request, and to everyone who continues to spread the word on social media.

To echo the words of Kelly Miller of the National Coalition for the Homeless Speakers Bureau at the hearing - We are human. We are of value. All we are asking is for the U.S. government to look us in the eyes and recognize that fundamental truth.

When we fight, we win. And we hope you join us.

[US Human Rights Network](#)

[National Human Rights to Water and Sanitation Coalition](#)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### ***United States Government***

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<sup>1</sup> The US may not be a party to the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) but it does have an obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to life under the American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Additionally, the US has signed the ICESCR and therefore must not take steps that contravene the spirit of that treaty. The lack of access to safe, affordable water and adequate sanitation threatens the right to life enshrined in the ICCPR, as well as its broader formulation, the right to a dignified life, in multiple ways. Further, in September 2015 the U.S. made [commitments](#) on the right to water under the Universal Periodic Review process of the UN Human Rights Council.

1. Issue an executive order announcing a federal prioritization of achieving universal, equal access to safe, affordable, and adequate water and sanitation, and direct a federal **investigation to address barriers** to universal, equal access to safe, affordable, and adequate water and sanitation for vulnerable communities in the U.S.;
2. Take immediate Executive Branch action to provide **emergency assistance** to households that lack safe, affordable water and adequate sanitation;
3. Ensure **universal, equal access to safe, affordable drinking water and adequate sanitation for everyone**, without discrimination;
4. Undertake targeted measures to address inequities in access to water and sanitation for low-income, indigenous, homeless, undocumented, and communities of color;
5. Suspend activities that deepen this crisis, including water shutoffs against low-income households that cannot afford water bills, closure of public restrooms and water fountains near homeless encampments, criminalization of low-income households who cannot afford water or sanitation, criminalization of homeless people for their own lack of access to adequate sanitation, removal of children from parental custody for inability to pay for water or sanitation, foreclosure of homes for inability to pay water bills, and permitting of activities that pollute drinking water supplies, among others;
6. Protect drinking water supplies, particularly those that low-income, indigenous, homeless, and communities of color depend upon;
7. Recognize the different challenges faced by rural, urban, and indigenous communities in achieving universal, equal access to safe, affordable, and adequate water and sanitation;
8. Collect and publish objective data on access to water and sanitation in the U.S., including demographic indicators;
9. Consult with civil society and affected communities;
10. Develop and promote a **national action plan on water and sanitation** as well as comprehensive federal guidelines for achieving universal, equal access to safe, affordable, adequate water and sanitation for federal and state agencies; and
11. Fulfill the commitments made by the United States government during the UN Universal Periodic Review to realize the human rights to affordable and safe water and adequate sanitation for all, as a matter of urgency.

### **SIGNATORIES**

1. Alabama Center for Rural Enterprise (ACRE)
2. Alice Jennings, Edwards & Jennings, PC; Pro Bono Legal Committee for Lyda et. al. v City of Detroit, Detroit Water and Sewage Department
3. Center for Earth Ethics at Union Theological Seminary

4. Color of Water Project/Boston, Suren Moodliar
5. Community Justice Project, Inc. (CJP)
6. Community Lawyering Clinic, Drexel University, Kline School of Law
7. Detroit Equity Action Lab (DEAL)
8. Detroiters- Resisting Emergency Management (D-REM)
9. The Environmental Justice Coalition for Water (EJCW), Colin Bailey
10. The Equal Justice Initiative
11. Equity Matters
12. Food & Water Watch
13. The Franklin Law Group, P.C.
14. Friends of the African Union
15. Friends of the African Union Chamber of Commerce
16. Georgia Women's Action for New Directions (GA WAND)
17. Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
18. Kelly Miller, Volunteer with National Coalition for the Homeless
19. Kairos: The Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary
20. Michigan Coalition for Human Rights
21. Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO)
22. Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment
23. National Economic Social and Cultural Rights Initiative (NESRI)
24. National Welfare Rights Union (NWRU)
25. New Mexico Environmental Law Center (NMELC)
26. Organize! Ohio

27. People's Water Board Coalition
28. Philip D. Althouse, Attorney, Member International Committee, National Lawyers Guild
29. Program on Human Rights and the Global Economy (PHRGE) at Northeastern University School of Law
30. Red Water Pond Road Community Association
31. Renee Hatcher, Clinical Teaching Fellow, University of Baltimore School of Law Community Development Clinic
32. Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights
33. San Jerardo Cooperative, Inc.
34. Santa Clara University, International Human Rights Clinic (SCU IHRC)
35. St. Frances Cabrini Clinic of Most Holy Trinity Church - Free Healthcare Clinic
36. Dr. Brian R. Shmaefsky, On-Call Scientist, American Association for the Advancement of Science
37. Sisters of Mercy West Midwest Justice Team
38. Social Justice Mission Team, Detroit Metropolitan Association, Michigan Conference United Church of Christ
39. Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC)
40. United Clevelanders Against Poverty
41. Water Alliance
42. We the People of Detroit
43. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, U.S.
44. Alliance for Democracy, Defending Water for Life Campaign