



## **Questions and Answers for Stakeholders and Constituents on S. 2596 The Voluntary Water Partnerships for Distressed Communities Act of 2019**

The bipartisan Voluntary Water Partnerships for Distressed Communities Act of 2019 (S. 2596), would help Illinoisans and people across the country have access to quality drinking water by creating a pathway for drinking water systems that are chronically out of compliance with the standards of the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA). Right now, approximately 130 million people in the U.S. get their drinking water from systems that are in violation of SDWA and small systems – those that serve less than 3,300 people – are responsible for more than 80% of all violations. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has noted that many small systems are “likely to serve low-income, vulnerable populations.”

Below is a short Q/A for stakeholders and constituents interested in this policy. Additional questions should be sent to [Radha\\_Adhar@duckworth.senate.gov](mailto:Radha_Adhar@duckworth.senate.gov).

### **Q: Does this bill force utilities to privatize?**

A: No. Nationwide, more Americans are served by public drinking water systems and this bill does not take a position on who can and cannot qualify for a partnership. Furthermore, this bill is intended to address dangerous public health situations where a drinking water utility is already failing to comply with SDWA and there is little prospect of that utility having the resources to remedy the situation. In these dire cases, authorizing partnerships – which includes partnerships between public utilities and public-private partnerships – can enable water utilities to pool their resources together to finance improvements that bring water quality into compliance with the law.

### **Q: Does this bill waive EPA’s enforcement of the Safe Drinking Water Act?**

A: No. This bill is for utilities that are not meeting SDWA’s requirements and puts policies in place that will ultimately lead to the utility being in compliance faster than under current law.

Under current law, utilities out of compliance with SDWA enter into consent decrees with EPA that take decades to resolve and often are not. They are also levied with fees they cannot afford, which makes compliance even more challenging. At no point does this bill prohibit an enforcement action when there is an imminent public health threat. However, there is a short grace period of three years to ensure that “helper” systems are not immediately exposed to violations that they had no role in creating by working with the struggling utility.

**Q: Will my taxpayer money go to private water companies so they can increase their bottom line?**

A: No. Any incentives in this bill go directly to the struggling utility that is out of compliance and they are limited. The bill provides technical assistance incentives to the struggling utility and establishes new incentives for distressed community water systems to form partnerships. These incentives include providing small system technical assistance grants to nonprofit organizations to assess partnership options for noncompliant community water systems and engage in peer-to-peer assistance. The bill also directs EPA to allow states to provide additional assistance like low-interest rate loans, principal forgiveness, or negative interest rate loans to the noncompliant community water system for such partnership activities.

**Q: Who supports this bill?**

A: This bill has broad support including from the American Public Works Association, American Society of Civil Engineers, American Water Works Association, Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies, the Bipartisan Policy Center's BPC Action, Moonshot Missions, National League of Cities, the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, Xylem Inc.