

# Water Utility-Community Guide for Communications



# Guide Elements:

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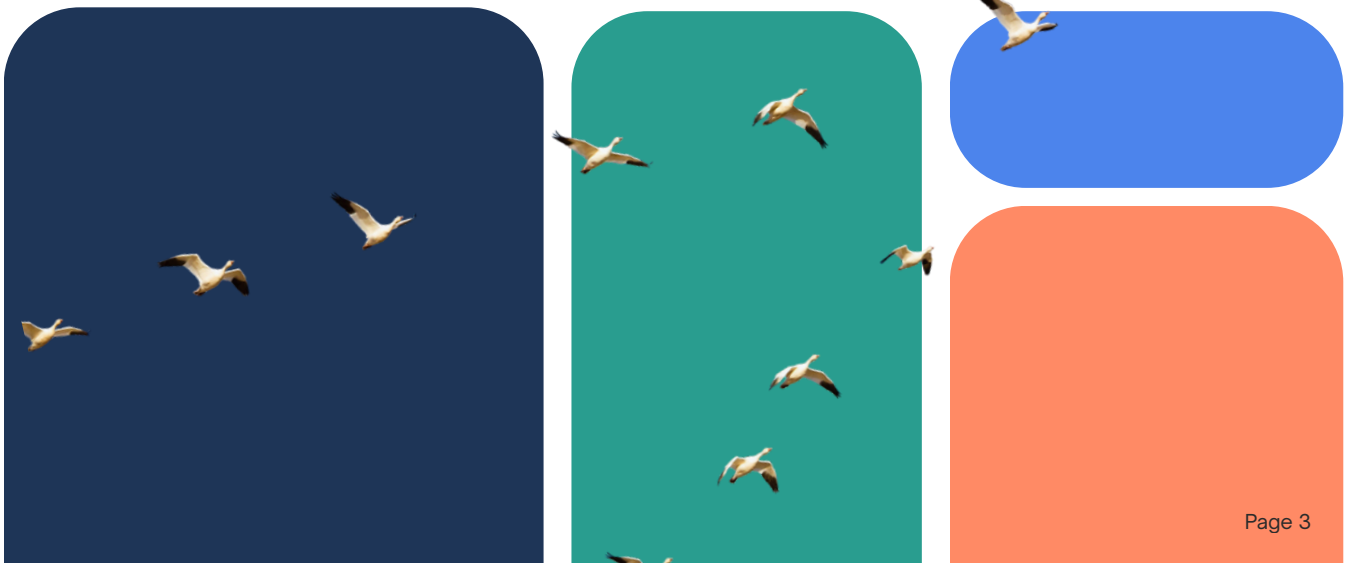
# The Importance of Trust

Updating and properly maintaining drinking water and wastewater infrastructure is a complex, expensive, and increasingly urgent [challenge](#). Most water infrastructure decisions are made at the [local level](#), meaning utilities and the communities they serve must [work together](#) to make the best, most equitable choices. At the center of that collaboration is trust.

[Trust](#) is not just a “nice to have.” It is essential. When trust exists between utilities and communities, it opens the door to true co-management of water systems, where residents feel informed, respected, and invested in the outcomes. This will lead to cleaner, more affordable water, faster project implementation, and stronger public support.

## **When trust breaks down, the consequences are serious:**

- People may stop drinking tap water and turn to bottled alternatives, increasing household costs and plastic pollution.
- Necessary infrastructure upgrades may be delayed or opposed.
- Misinformation can fill the void, eroding public understanding and cooperation.
- The voices and needs of vulnerable groups may be overlooked.



For utilities, this means that communication and community engagement are not just “soft skills.” They are essential “power tools” for getting the job done. They help build public support, avoid conflict, prevent crises, and ensure smoother implementation of projects. For community members, trust and communication are equally vital. They ensure your concerns are heard, your health and safety are prioritized, and that you’re a partner, not just a payer, in decisions that affect your everyday life.

Some communities have struggled for decades to access safe, affordable water. Public attention to water justice grew sharply after the Flint, Michigan water crisis, and recent water emergencies have only deepened public skepticism, especially as trust in government continues to [decline](#). The erosion of local journalism and the rise of social media have also created fertile ground for misinformation and disinformation. Today, distrust runs especially deep in Black, Latine, and low-income communities, which is reflected in record-high [bottled water usage](#). That’s why this guide exists. It’s not just about better messaging: it’s about real partnership between water systems and the people they serve.

[Proactive](#), clear, and culturally relevant communication [builds](#) trust. While utilities are required to distribute annual Consumer Confidence Reports, that alone isn’t [enough](#). Residents [need](#) to hear from their utility more often, more clearly, and through the platforms and messengers they understand; community members need tools and encouragement to participate, ask questions, and hold systems accountable. This guide outlines the dos and don’ts of water utility-community engagement. Whether you’re a utility leader or a resident advocate, this guide offers practical steps for building relationships, navigating tension, and creating water systems that are transparent, equitable, and bridge the gap between water governance and those being served.





# Dos and Don'ts in water utility communications

Utilities provide one of the most essential public services — delivery of drinking water, and removal and treatment of wastewater for it to re-enter the environment safely. To serve their communities well, they must not only share information clearly but also listen and respond to the people they serve.

The “public” in public utilities and public health refers to the very communities whose trust and input are vital. Accessible communication helps residents understand how their water systems work, where their services come from, and ensures a range of voices are heard. True two-way communication builds stronger partnerships, encourages collaboration, and leads to greater support for utility projects and long-term infrastructure investments.



# Dos for Water Utilities:

- \* **Identify and build long-term relationships with key community institutions, groups and media organizations.**

This includes neighborhood associations, churches, schools, advocacy groups, media partners, and trusted community leaders. Send good news stories, like infrastructure investments or community partnerships, to build trust and a rapport with reporters.

- \* **Create and advertise opportunities for community input and make public forums accessible in location, time, format, and tone.**

Examples include community advisory boards, quarterly Q&A sessions, and infrastructure listening tours. Avoid government buildings at 10 a.m. Try schools, libraries, or community centers during evening hours, with food and child care if possible.

- \* **Put complex issues into simple, clear terms and provide information in multiple formats and languages.**

Don't just say "PFAS exceeds MCLs." Explain what that means for families. Use short videos, infographics, flyers, and social media posts in the primary languages of your community.

- \* **Be honest about challenges and capacity limits, and own mistakes and share lessons learned.**

Saying, "We don't have enough staff to replace all lines this year, but here's our plan" builds more trust than silence or vague updates. Publicly acknowledging what went wrong and how you'll prevent it next time helps rebuild credibility.

- \* **Communicate proactively and regularly — don't wait for a crisis.**

Use multiple channels (mailers, texts, social media, community meetings) to provide consistent, accessible updates.

- \* **Be transparent about water quality, risks and costs, especially when public health is involved and when rates increase.**

Notify residents about decisions that affect them in a timely and tailored way. Offer context about how water infrastructure is funded and managed, as well as the need to fix it and other associated costs. Share what's happening, what it means for residents, and what actions are being taken clearly and without sugarcoating. Emphasize the benefits for residents while considering different impacts on different communities and the barriers they face.

- \* **Meet people where they already are, and engage vulnerable and historically excluded groups.**

Join neighborhood meetings, community fairs, or local events. Don't just host City Hall forums and expect attendance. For example: adjust to comprehension levels and use visual aids, host roundtables at senior centers, partner with food banks to reach low-income residents, or offer Spanish-language events in Hispanic neighborhoods.

- \* **Respond to feedback and show how it's being used.**

Acknowledge community ideas in plans or reports: "Based on feedback from X group, we've added Y to our lead line replacement strategy."



# Don'ts for Water Utilities:



## **Don't rely solely on transactional, one-way communication.**

Water bills, outage alerts, and CCRs aren't enough. Residents want to feel heard and engaged.



## **Don't wait until there's a problem to communicate.**

This frames the utility as only reactive, not proactive and erodes trust over time.



## **Don't use jargon or unexplained acronyms.**

Use language that resonates with the public and is easy to understand. Say "lead pipes" instead of "LSLs" or "pipe" instead of "main" or "service line."



## **Don't make major decisions without community input.**

Even well-intended plans can backfire if they're made behind closed doors and rolled out with little context.



## **Don't allow misinformation to go unchallenged.**

If a viral post misrepresents the facts, respond clearly and directly on your official channels.



## **Don't delay or withhold information that could affect public health or vulnerable groups.**

Transparency, even when the news is bad, is a non-negotiable part of public service.



# Dos for Community Members:

## \* Engage with your utility's communications.

Open letters, read inserts in bills, follow them on social media, and attend local forums when possible.

## \* Ask questions when something seems unclear.

Utilities have experts on hand, and many now have dedicated communications staff to assist residents.

## \* Report water issues promptly and document them.

Note the date, time, and issue. This helps utilities respond and identify broader patterns.

## \* Take advantage of public health tools.

If water testing kits, filter programs, or bill assistance are available, use them and help neighbors do the same.

## \* Learn from and listen to others in your community.

Share stories and insights, especially from elders, long-time residents, or multilingual households.

## \* Participate respectfully and constructively.

Passion is powerful, but a respectful tone increases the chance your concerns will be heard and acted upon.





# Don'ts for Community Members:



**Don't rely solely on social media or third parties for your water info.**

Get information directly from your utility's website, newsletter, or hotline to confirm facts.



**Don't jump to conclusions without seeking clarification.**

Ask: "Can you help me understand why this is happening?" before assuming the worst.



**Don't spread misinformation, even unintentionally.**

If something seems off or alarming, verify it before sharing.



**Don't disengage entirely.**

Even when trust is broken, participating in public forums, surveys, or town halls is one way to influence outcomes and demand accountability.



# Examples of water crises with communication challenges

These case studies from around the country feature the experiences of utilities and communities navigating communications around different issues. They illustrate how the presence or absence of trust is central to water governance and the relationship between utilities and communities, driving decision-making processes.

## Case studies →



Toledo, OH



Tucson, AZ



South Bend, IN



Sandusky, OH



Central Arkansas





# Environmental crisis in Toledo, OH

## Water problem:

In 2014, a toxic algal bloom contaminated Toledo, Ohio's drinking water and the National Guard had to be brought in to deliver bottled water for approximately 72 hours. The crisis affected half a million people, disrupted tourism, prompted business closures, and cost the city an estimated [\\$65 million](#). The crisis fractured residents' relationship with their water utility and city officials.



**Communication challenges:** Residents were caught off guard by abrupt “do not drink” orders. Communications lacked clarity and failed to reach everyone effectively, especially marginalized communities. On the second day of the crisis, there was panic and bottled water became hard to find on store shelves. John C. Jones, community liaison for ProMedica health system, [explained](#) the challenge of messaging to the public during the crisis: “you’re trying to manage the panic, but you’re also trying to make people be non-apathetic.”

**Water solution:** After the crisis, the City invested in upgrading its [waste water treatment plants](#) and worked with the state and other organizations to address the root cause of the problem by [mitigating nutrient pollution](#) from agriculture and urban sources in the Lake Erie watershed. In 2019, the state started a voluntary program to address agricultural runoff, but some people believe it has not been enough to solve the problem since there are still algae blooms every year.

Therefore, people are asking for an expansion of the program. In the meantime, the City of Toledo has invested in technology to improve filtration, treatment and detection of algae blooms, but this has raised the cost of water significantly.



## Trust/communications outcome:

The initial communication failures during the water crisis caused long-lasting skepticism about the safety of the water and the truthfulness of utility reports. Many residents began to question whether the city prioritized their wellbeing or was simply managing a public relations crisis. The creation of community science initiatives, where residents test and report on water quality (often in partnership with universities or nonprofits), has helped rebuild trust. When the utility publicly acknowledged these community data sources and worked collaboratively to address concerns, it fostered a new model of transparency and accountability. Still, even after 10 years, people and families [still wonder](#) if their tap water is safe to drink or not.







# PFAS Contamination in Tucson, AZ



## Water problem:

In 2018, Tucson, Arizona, confronted a significant environmental challenge when groundwater contamination with per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS)—often referred to as “forever chemicals”—was identified. The presence of these substances was primarily linked to historical use of firefighting foams at [Davis-Monthan Air Force Base](#) and the Tucson International Airport. This led to the precautionary shutdown of nearly 30 wells, impacting a portion of the city’s water supply and raising health concerns, particularly among communities located near the contamination sources.



## Communication challenges:

Initially, communication with the public regarding the PFAS contamination was limited, leading to confusion and concern among residents. This early public communication about PFAS was complicated by the technical complexity of the issue and the evolving science regarding health impacts. This contributed to community concern and, in some cases, frustration about the availability and clarity of information. Some marginalized communities, already disproportionately affected, felt particularly left out of the communication loop. Tucson Water recognized the need for improved communication, particularly to ensure that all communities — including historically underserved neighborhoods — had access to timely, understandable updates.



## Water solution:

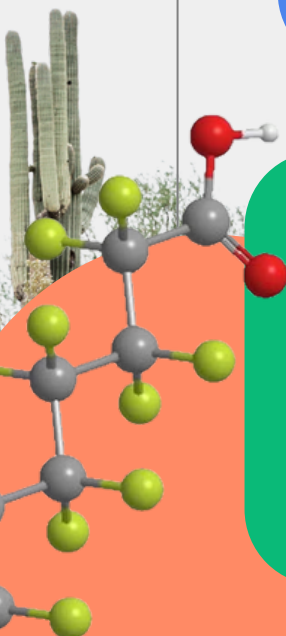
Tucson Water responded swiftly and collaboratively to address the contamination. Between 2020 and 2024, the utility accelerated key treatment and mitigation projects. Investments in advanced water treatment technologies, including ion exchange and granular activated carbon systems, helped restore and protect the city’s drinking water supply.

These efforts were supported by significant funding, including [\\$30 million](#) from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and additional resources from the [Arizona Department of Environmental Quality](#). Tucson Water also worked closely with federal, state, and local partners to monitor water quality and safeguard public health. Importantly, Tucson Water established a PFAS [Community Advisory Group](#) to ensure that residents, especially those from the most impacted areas, could participate in meetings, review data, and provide input on solutions—strengthening trust through transparency and collaboration.



## Trust/communications outcome:

Initial shortcomings in communication led to a breakdown in public trust. While the complexity of PFAS initially posed challenges for public communication, Tucson Water’s sustained efforts to share clear, timely information and to engage residents directly helped rebuild public trust. The utility’s commitment to collaborative problem-solving, community advisory participation, and holding polluters accountable reinforced confidence that Tucson Water is dedicated to protecting the health and well-being of all Tucsonans.







# Aging and lead pipes in South Bend, IN

## Water problem:

In the early 2010s, South Bend, Indiana, faced significant challenges with aging water infrastructure, particularly concerning lead pipes. The city lacked comprehensive records of lead pipes locations, raising concerns about potential lead exposure in drinking water. This uncertainty posed health risks and eroded public confidence in the municipal water supply.



## Communication challenges:

The absence of accurate data on lead pipes made it difficult for the city to inform residents about potential risks. This lack of transparency led to skepticism and mistrust among community members, especially in historically underserved neighborhoods. Residents were uncertain about the safety of their drinking water and felt excluded from decision-making processes related to water infrastructure improvements.



## Water solution:

To address these issues, South Bend Utilities partnered with BlueConduit, a data science company specializing in predictive modeling for lead pipe identification. This [collaboration](#) aimed to efficiently locate and prioritize lead pipes replacements. Recognizing the importance of community involvement, the city established advisory boards comprising local residents, health experts, and community leaders. These boards provided input on project planning, ensuring that the voices of those most affected were heard and considered.



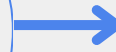
## Trust/communications outcome:

By integrating advanced technology with active community participation, South Bend fostered a transparent and inclusive approach to water infrastructure management. Regular public meetings, accessible data dashboards, and responsive communication channels helped rebuild trust between the utility and residents. The collaborative effort not only accelerated lead pipe replacements but also empowered the community, setting a precedent for citizen-engaged public health initiatives.





# Toxic algae blooms and lead pipes in Sandusky, OH



**Problem:** Sandusky, Ohio has faced significant water quality challenges due to nutrient runoff from septic systems, lawns, golf courses, wastewater treatment plants, and agricultural fields. This runoff led to an overabundance of phosphorus in Lake Erie's Sandusky Bay, fueling seasonal harmful algal blooms (HABs) that can produce toxins harmful to aquatic life and humans. Additionally, the city grappled with aging infrastructure, including lead service lines, posing health risks to residents.



## Communication challenges:

Initially, there was limited public awareness about the extent of water quality issues and the presence of lead pipes. The technical nature of these problems made it challenging for residents to understand the risks and the steps being taken. Ensuring clear, transparent, and accessible communication became essential to engage the community and build trust in the remediation efforts.



## Water solution:

To combat the HABs, the [Sandusky Bay Initiative](#) was launched by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources in 2019. In 2023, it received a \$5.4 million boost from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to restore over 1,000 acres of wetlands and natural habitats. These restorations aim to filter out pollutants, reduce phosphorus levels, and improve the bay's ecological health.

In 2024, construction began on a new barrier wetland as part of the governor's H2Ohio initiative. Concurrently, Sandusky [accelerated its lead service line replacement program](#), supported by financing from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and technical assistance from the EPA's Get the Lead Out initiative. The city actively involved residents by establishing advisory boards and hosting community meetings, ensuring that those affected had a voice in the decision-making process and fostering transparency throughout the projects.



## Trust/communications outcome:

Through proactive community engagement and transparent communication, Sandusky has made strides in rebuilding public trust. Regular updates, educational campaigns, and opportunities for resident involvement have empowered the community, leading to increased public support for the initiatives. These efforts have not only addressed immediate water quality concerns but have also set a precedent for collaborative problem-solving in the city's future environmental endeavors.





# Infrastructure Investment and Community Engagement in Central Arkansas

**Problem:** In 2022, Central Arkansas Water (CAW) identified the need for substantial upgrades to its aging infrastructure to ensure reliable water service for its growing customer base. The utility proposed a 10-year plan to invest approximately \$685 million in capital improvements, which would double the average household water bill by 2032.



## Communication challenges:

The proposed rate increases sparked significant public concern. The Little Rock Board of Directors debated a resolution to oppose the rate hike, reflecting the unease among city officials and residents. A local citizen group, Citizens for an Affordable Little Rock, also mobilized to challenge the increase, fearing the financial burden on households which would have been compounded by a city-proposed tax increase the group was also opposing.



## Water Solutions:

To address these concerns, CAW embarked on a comprehensive community engagement strategy. Utility leaders attended existing neighborhood meetings, chamber events, and other community gatherings to present the rationale behind the rate increases and the necessity of infrastructure investments. Notably, after direct discussions with CAW officials, the initially opposing citizen group said they gained a better understanding of the challenges and never went forward with their opposition. They also appreciated CAW's time and effort sitting down with its low-income members to discuss ways to address water affordability and apply for bill assistance programs. This approach emphasized transparency and responsiveness to community input.



## Trust/Communications Outcome:

By proactively engaging with the community and providing clear explanations for the rate increases, CAW managed to rebuild trust with its stakeholders. The utility's commitment to meeting residents where they were and involving them in the conversation about water infrastructure needs fostered a collaborative environment. This case underscores the importance of transparent communications and community involvement in implementing significant public utility projects. This is ongoing work, as CAW in 2025 put an increased focus on its social media engagement, proactive engagement with its Hispanic and Spanish-speaking communities, and its community outreach and school programs.





# Moving forward, together

**Trust and understanding is fundamental** to effective partnership between water utilities and the communities they serve. Such collaboration facilitates the necessary work to make accessible, clean water for all a reality.

We hope this guide takes your community one step closer to this vision.



Fill out this form to  
express interest in  
water career, job,  
and skill training





# Get involved, take action



Learn about [The Junction Coalition's](#) community work with utilities and policymakers for environmental justice, including opportunities for careers in water.

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Check out the [Water Hub's](#) resources on how to communicate around water issues and our services for storytelling.

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Learn about [Rogue Water Lab's](#) work to empower the water sector to better engage communities and policymakers and elevate the conversations around water.

