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IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Human Rights Groups Commend Mayor Walsh and Boston Water and Sewer for Low Income Rate Payer Protections Announcement

BOSTON/CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Wednesday January 14, 2015 — Human rights organization the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) and Boston's Color of Water Project today applauded Mayor Martin Walsh's State of the City announcement that Boston Water and Sewer Commission will increase water service discounts for all senior and disabled homeowners to 30 percent.

The city's decision adds important new protections for low-income elderly and persons with disabilities to Boston's "right to service" program.

The move puts Boston in a leadership position nationwide, as public services face significant fiscal and environmental challenges that often result in steep rate increases. Human rights advocates have advocated for increased protections with Boston Water and Sewer Commission and the Mayor since 2006.

"When we listened to Mayor Walsh last night announce the protections for the elderly and persons with disabilities, we were pleased that this step has been taken," said Suren Moodliar, coauthor of the [Color of Water report](#). "Boston Water and Sewer Commission professional staff has been responsive to consumer concerns that water service rates were unaffordable.

"Last year BWSC instituted a moratorium on winter water shutoffs, and this announcement expands these protections to those BWSC established in their "right of service" program. We have a way yet to go, but it is a good day."

The Color of Water Project published a report in July 2014 on the discriminatory impact of water shutoffs in Boston. Cambridge-based UUSC has continued advocacy on behalf of the right to affordable water for the most vulnerable, both in Boston and across the U.S.

Color of Water's report indicates that for every one percent increase of people of color in the population of a ward, there is a 3 percent increase in threatened water shutoffs. Several thousand households receive notices threatening to shut off their water each year.

"We understand that BWSC has decreased the number of shutoffs over the years of community activism and this is a good trend to see. Yet we are still concerned about the discriminatory impact of the shutoffs and rising overall prices," said Greg Williams, Jamaica Plain resident, founder of Rail of Justice, a Boston Quaker ministry, and advisor to the Color of Water Project.

"We commend Mayor Walsh and the Commissioners and professional staff of Boston Water and Sewer Commission for their decision to implement a 30 percent rate discount for the elderly and people living with disabilities," said UUSC President and Chief Executive Officer Reverend William F. Schulz.

"This step is very important for consumers struggling to make ends meet with rising water rates. Mayor Walsh committed to the people of Boston that he would represent all of our residents, especially in their times of need, and he and the Commission have taken an important first step toward fulfilling that commitment," said Schulz.

"As a faith based human rights organization, we are grateful, and look forward to more announcements like this in the future as we work together to ensure that children and families have access to safe, affordable water services."

Boston Water and Sewer Commission agreed to continue to meet with advocates to understand their concerns. The U.S. Conference of Mayors raised the alarm about affordability in their 2013 report. <http://www.usmayors.org/pressreleases/uploads/2013/0508-release-waterlocalcosts.pdf>.

"Boston is one of the cities in the U.S. coming closest to countries overseas in terms providing a suite of protections for vulnerable populations," said Dr. Patricia Jones, UUSC Senior Program Lead for the human right to water.

"The trend with important U.S. allies in Europe and around the world is to ban water shutoffs outright as a disproportionate punitive measure that puts at serious risk significant numbers of people, and is actually found to be an ineffective collection procedure," Jones said.

"France and Great Britain have banned water shutoffs to name a few, and courts have banned shutoffs as a violation of human rights. Another critical factor that only happens in the U.S. is that water shutoff can trigger even more serious consequences," she said.

"Children can be taken from their homes and put in foster care, and homes can be condemned or foreclosed for unpaid water bills. Affordability must become a central part of policymaking for water services going forward."

On the horizon, Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, who sells water to BWSC, announced significant rate increases every year for the next five years, some as high as 17 percent, which will mean BWSC must deal with the consequences for low income consumers.

Color of Water Project is a Massachusetts Global Action campaign to raise public awareness, provide reliable in-depth research and data to decision makers, and advocate for protections for vulnerable populations to ensure their access to basic municipal services. The Color of Water Project produced a report in July 2014 on the discriminatory impact of water shutoffs available at: http://massglobalaction.org/projects/colorofwater/primary_report_shutoffs_pre-pub.pdf

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is a human rights and social justice organization of 40,000 supporters, celebrating 75 years of advocating for human rights domestically and overseas. UUSC's human right to water campaign supports efforts like the Color of Water and direct advocacy to policymakers to reform the domestic water and sanitation sector.

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