



UNITED STATES MISSION
TO THE UNITED NATIONS AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS
IN GENEVA

July 16, 2015

Ms. Leilani Farha
Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context
Geneva, Switzerland

Mr. Philip Alston
Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights
Geneva, Switzerland

Mr. Léo Heller
Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation
Geneva, Switzerland

OHCHR REGISTRY

20 JUL. 2015

Recipients :.....*S.P.O.*.....

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Enclosure

Dear Ms. Farha, Mr. Alston, Mr. Heller:

Thank you for your letter to U.S. Ambassador Pamela K. Hamamoto dated May 15, 2015. The United States fully supports the mandates of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context; the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights; and the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation. In your letter, you expressed concerns regarding water disconnections in the City of Baltimore. We appreciate the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. The information we are able to supply regarding your inquiry has been provided to us by the City of Baltimore.

In regards to the specific water situation in the City of Baltimore, the Baltimore Department of Public Works does have an annual water turnoff program that takes place between April 1 and October 31 each year. This program includes the listing of accounts that are delinquent, and the disconnection of some of these accounts. Not every accountholder listed as delinquent is at risk of water disconnection; only those who have made no payments in six months face possible disconnection. Also, accountholders who are already on a payment plan and in good standing; are part of an active Law Department agreement in good standing; have their account under review; are in bankruptcy proceedings; are in the tax lien certificate sale; or have documented serious medical conditions are not at risk of water disconnection regardless of their payments history or account status. This program is meant to respond fairly to the issue of significantly overdue payments that places a serious burden on the Baltimore Department of Public Works.

Commercial accounts are also a part of the listing and disconnection process as described above, and 2015 is the first year the Department of Public Works turnoff program has fully included commercial accounts. So far, two commercial accounts have had their water disconnected and another four are posted for shutoff.

Please note that an account's delinquency, and eligibility for disconnection, does not necessarily mean that the account holder is incapable of paying the bill. The City of Baltimore offers a number of programs to assist those who are truly unable to pay. For example, one program for senior citizens allows those 65 and older who own their home, and have a household income of \$25,000 or less, to receive a discount on their bills. The discount was increased to 43 percent on July 1, 2015. Another example, the Low Income Water Assistance Program, provides eligible households an annual credit of 179 U.S. dollars. There are also Hardship Exemptions of Storm Water Fees and Bay Restoration Fees for homeowners who receive public assistance and are income eligible. Individuals with delinquent accounts are informed of these programs when they receive delinquency and turnoff notices.

In the 2014 fiscal year, Baltimore had 2,374 customers who received the Senior Discount and another 1,993 customers who received funding through the Low Income Assistance Program. In the 2015 fiscal year, 2,654 customers received the Senior Discount and 2,433 received funding through the Low Income Assistance Program. Since the beginning of this turnoff season, Baltimore has enrolled at least 477 customers in the Senior Discount Program, and 382 accountholders have taken advantage of the Low Income Assistance Program. Another 388 accountholders were eligible for Hardship Exemptions. Baltimore has worked with private nonprofits and the State and Municipal governments to determine if adjustments to assistance programs are needed, and what adjustments should be made.

Additionally, your letter noted that, since 2000, water and sewer rates have tripled in Baltimore; this is accurate. However, increased prices reflect Baltimore's efforts to meet important water standards contained in legislation. Meeting the requirements of the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act is central to providing adequate standards of living, safe drinking water, and sanitation to the citizens of Baltimore.

People within the United States have created a society where there is a widespread expectation that everyone should have access to safe drinking water and sanitation, and public authorities take significant measures, like those taken by the City of Baltimore, to provide this access. There are various U.S. laws, some noted above, that protect citizens from contaminated water and from discrimination in the provision of services. U.S. law does not recognize justiciable rights to drinking water, but the United States is deeply committed to addressing global challenges related to water, and to promoting access to water domestically without discrimination. We appreciate the work you have done to promote access to safe drinking water and sanitation, to adequate housing, and to promote an end to extreme poverty around the world.

Sincerely,



Keith M. Harper
Ambassador
U.S. Representative to the United Nations
Human Rights Council