**H2O Article ROUGH DRAFT, 5/27/22**

**Flooding our Community with Kindness**

**Help to Others Water Assistance Program Keeps Utilities Flowing for Residents**

When we turn on the tap, we expect clean water to flow freely. But for many Hampton Roads residents, this is not their reality. Sudden unemployment or an unexpected disability can leave them with the tough decision of choosing which bills to pay each month.

There are times when the water bill does not make the list.

Since 1999, one regional nonprofit organization has kept the water running for local individuals and families in need—**Help to Others (H2O)**. Administered by the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission and HRSD, in partnership with The Salvation Army, the program provides one-time financial assistance of up to $500 so those in crisis can pay their local water and wastewater bills.

“There are not a lot of programs specifically designed for these types of emergency assistance situations, and that’s what’s special about the Help to Others program,” said H2O Program Manager Katie Cullipher. “As a community-based program we work just on the generosity of community donors, and all of our donations go directly to help families in need here in the Hampton Roads region.”

To be eligible, recipients of H2O funds must live in the service area of a participating Hampton Roads utility. Applicants must also be able to show that a personal or family crisis, such as death in the family, catastrophic illness or drastic decrease in family income, is preventing them from paying a water bill.

Seth Atkinson knows firsthand how much H20 is needed in the region. As the social services program manager for The Salvation Army’s Hampton Roads Area Command, he manages the initial assessment of those applying for the relief funds in his area.

“Almost all of the people we serve don’t make nearly enough to get by, and the smallest crisis makes them fall behind; a health emergency or a car that breaks down,” said Atkinson. “There’s not enough money to pay the day-to-day expenses, and then this massive bill arrives. That can be devastating.”

**Help at a critical time**

It was a medical crisis that put Mary and her husband behind in their bills.

Last December, they came down with COVID-19 Pneumonia. After seeing her husband struggle with breathing and fatigue, she called an ambulance. Soon after, Mary was admitted. For two weeks they remained in the hospital, on separate floors. Combined with the days they were sick before hospitalization and the post-quarantine time and recovery at home, they had each missed one month of work.

Over the years, The Salvation Army has been a blessing to Mary. As a young girl, she grew up attending youth activities and programs at her neighborhood command, and she is still involved with the organization today. When Major Dorman from the area command called on Mary as she was convalescing, he mentioned the H2O program.

“We were aware of assistance programs like this, but my husband and I wanted other people to have them,” said Mary. “But when you’re out of sync for that long, it was a blessing.”

Residents can apply for the H2O assistance program in the city or county where they live. Workers at The Salvation Army commands complete the initial assessment over the phone. When candidates are qualified, the command submits a report to HRSD requesting that the applicant’s water service stay connected. Then HRSD transfers the H2O funds to cover the bill.

“The H2O funds are managed by a trusted agency, based on the client’s need. It is a very safe way to give,” Atkinson said. “You are assured the money flows to the right place.”

Residents can [donate to H2O](https://shareh20.org/donate/) through a secure online portal; by check; or by adding a one-time or monthly donation to their HRSD/HRUBS payments. H2O is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, making all program donations tax deductible. In addition, 100% of contributions apply directly to the water or wastewater bill of someone in need in the local area.

For those involved in the program, H2O is not just about managing the program and administering the funds, however.

“It’s about what your support means to others: hot showers, clean clothes and fresh water from the tap,” Atkinson said. “It’s knowing that we are all making a difference.”

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