



Closing the Water Access Gap in the US Project Description March 2018

Water is the defining issue of our time—it has been steadily rising as a top-of-mind concern for community, business, and political leaders across the globe. In fact, the World Economic Forum identifies water insecurity as one of the greatest risks we face in this decade. Water shapes economic growth, the environment, and the very social fabric of our communities. Ensuring that all people have access to safe, reliable, and affordable water and wastewater systems is the cornerstone of a sustainable and prosperous nation.

Too often, when we think of vulnerable communities that struggle with lack of access to drinking water and wastewater in their homes, we think of places like sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and other developing regions of the world. The overall high quality of water systems in America—one of our most monumental achievements as a nation—obscures the fact that lack of access to safe and reliable drinking water and wastewater is a daily reality for some. Many Americans would be surprised to learn that 1.6 million people in the United States still lack access to complete plumbing facilities. Poor quality water access predominantly affects vulnerable groups like communities of color, tribal communities, immigrants, and extremely low-income people in rural areas. African Americans are more than twice as likely as whites to live without modern plumbing—for example, in Lowndes County, Alabama, only 20 percent of the majority African-American community is connected to a municipal sewer system. On the Navajo Nation, 40 percent of people lack access to running water. Impoverished rural communities in Appalachia face water-borne diseases at rates rarely seen in the developed world.

The issue of uneven water access is an invisible problem in America. The lack of comprehensive data on water access and conditions in water-poor communities hinders our ability to forge policy solutions, accelerate the implementation of projects that can deliver access, and to build public and political will for investment. While high-level government data on access to plumbing facilities is available, this data only traces the basic outline of the problem. It does not provide details on which communities are affected by lack of access to water and wastewater services, how these challenges manifest in different regions, and what solutions can solve the problem. We need richer, more granular information in order to develop effective responses to achieve universal access to high quality and reliable water and wastewater service in America.

All people need access to the basics—water, food, shelter—in order to participate fully in society. When these basic conditions are met, our communities and our economy thrive. Across the country, important work is being done to make our country’s water systems more equitable. Many of these improvements have focused on urban areas, where utilities are addressing disparities in water cost and quality, extending service, and leveraging water investments to create economic opportunity. At the same time, there are many organizations making progress on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) access in the developing world, but much more needs to be done here in the United States to address severely underserved and water-poor communities in the US. Truly equitable water management in this country requires that rural, remote, and low-income communities that lack services and infrastructure are not left behind.

It is possible to extend access to safe, clean running water and adequate sanitation to every American. It may not take the traditional form of large-scale, centralized infrastructure to which many people are accustomed,

and it will require creativity, ingenuity, and collaboration by a wide range of stakeholders. With the right information, smart and strategic collaboration, and investment by a broad range of stakeholders, we can make significant strides toward universal access to running water and indoor plumbing.

Project Goals

- 1. Build national understanding of the water access problem.** The Alliance and DigDeep will use quantitative and qualitative data to build a clear understanding of the communities that lack adequate access to water and plumbing facilities: their geography, current water access conditions, and obstacles to improved access.
- 2. Identify community-centered solutions that are working.** We will identify promising, scalable community-centered models for providing universal access to running water and indoor plumbing.
- 3. Develop recommendations for policy and funding steps.** We will produce a report that articulates the factors that would need to be in place to extend access to all Americans. This report will define policy recommendations and funding priorities for a range of stakeholders committed to extending water and plumbing access to everyone in the US.

Scope of Work: June 2018 to June 2019

Conduct baseline research. The project will begin with a literature review of the existing data on drinking water and sanitation access in the United States, with the goal of synthesizing existing national data. We will use government data, starting with the American Community Survey, as well as any available independent reports and datasets. We may use mapping software to overlay American Community Survey and other datasets with data on indicators of socioeconomic vulnerability, such as poverty and race. This process will build on the extensive research conducted by the US Water Alliance to inform their national briefing paper *An Equitable Water Future*, and on DigDeep's existing primary research on potential project sites. This baseline research will help us identify hotspots in the United States where the problem of water access is particularly acute. This baseline research synthesis will also identify data gaps and needs that point the way to future research needs.

Create advisory group. The Alliance and DigDeep will draw on their wide-ranging networks to assemble a group of key stakeholders representing equity-focused organizations, water sector leaders, the private sector, and philanthropy. The advisory group will provide expert guidance to help us shape the research, develop the recommendations, and disseminate the conclusions. The advisory group will be convened at key touchpoints during the project, starting with a kick off meeting at the US Water Alliance's One Water Summit 2018 which will be held July 10-12 in Minneapolis.

Conduct primary research in US hotspots. We will use learnings from our baseline research and guidance from our advisory group to select five US hotspots where water and sanitation access is a significant problem. We will conduct in-depth qualitative research to understand the local context and water infrastructure needs. The research process will also help us identify existing promising models, and build relationships with potential partner organizations for future phases of work that would focus on implementation. Through site visits, we will conduct extensive interviews with residents, experts, and community leaders. We will also review and synthesize any data or information—should it exist—on water access from existing reports on the selected regions. Potential sites include California's Central Valley, Appalachia, Colonias along the US/Mexico Border, tribal lands in the Southwest or the Dakotas, and the deep South.

Write report. This project will produce a report that describes the scope of the existing challenge of water access in America, utilizing the research in the five hotspot communities. It will include detailed descriptions of conditions at each hotspot and describe the promising models and success factors that can be utilized, modelled, or scaled to make universal access a reality. This report will lay out clear steps that a range of stakeholders can take to contribute to equitable water access, and provide a basis for commitments and actions. It is our hope that this report will serve as a catalyst for concrete improvements in access to water and sanitation for our nation's most vulnerable communities.

Educate and elevate. The report will be released on World Water Day 2019, sounding a call to action for water and equity leaders. We will hold briefings on our findings for policymakers, elected officials, philanthropic organizations, and other stakeholder groups. The release will be accompanied by a strategic communications strategy aimed at educating all stakeholders on current water access conditions and what is needed to close the water access gap. Communications may include a multimedia component to reach a broader audience.

Organizational Information

US Water Alliance

The US Water Alliance advances policies and programs to secure a sustainable water future for all. Our membership includes water providers, public officials, business leaders, agricultural interests, environmental organizations, community leaders, policy organizations, and more. A nationally recognized nonprofit organization, the US Water Alliance brings together diverse interests to identify and advance common-ground, achievable solutions to our nation's most pressing water challenges. As one of the nation's leading voices on equitable water management, the US Water Alliance is well-positioned to implement this project. The Alliance has released two comprehensive reports on the interconnections between water and socioeconomic equity in the country: *An Equitable Water Future: A National Briefing Paper*, released in June 2017, and *An Equitable Water Future: Opportunities for the Great Lakes*, released in March 2018. Both reports involved an extensive research process involving literature reviews, over 150 discussions with stakeholders, and multi-stakeholder review processes. The promising practices highlighted in both reports are influencing policy development around the country, and the reports serve as blueprints for change at the city, state, and federal levels. For more information: www.uswateralliance.org.

DigDeep

DigDeep is the leading organization improving community-based water and sanitation (WASH) outcomes in the United States. DigDeep was founded in Los Angeles in 2011 by a group of human rights professionals working in water, health and international development. Today, the organization runs several nationally-recognized programs that leverage low-tech, community-led interventions to improve water equity for communities in New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, and South Dakota. They are best-known for their Navajo Water Project, an initiative bringing safe, hot-and-cold running water to hundreds of remote Navajo families for the first time ever. DigDeep maintains an extensive network of academic, government and water industry partners and routinely develops cross-sectoral coalitions to address WASH-related challenges. The organization has extensive on-the-ground experience in communities experiencing extreme water stress, as well as experience conducting multi-site research projects. For more information: <https://digdeep.org/>.