

## San Antonio Water System (SAWS): SAWS Uplift – Helping Neighbors in Need

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The San Antonio Water System (SAWS) serves 2 million people in Bexar County, Texas, as well as parts of surrounding counties. The population includes more than 511,300 water customers and 457,600 wastewater customers. Approximately 16% of the population of Bexar County, and 19% of San Antonio, have incomes below the poverty threshold. SAWS has established a robust and highly utilized Customer Assistance Program (CAP) to help low-income customers afford their water service bills. The CAP, referred to as SAWS Uplift – Helping Neighbors in Need, currently consists of 14 touch points which cover a broad range of assistance areas. The program’s name reflects the intentional terminology shift from “customers” to “neighbors” as a sign of SAWS’s connection and commitment to the communities they serve.



The SAWS Uplift program provides assistance to eligible households in a variety of areas including plumbing services, emergency assistance, reduced meter fees, and discounted monthly bills. One of the innovative programs, Plumbers to People, provides free plumbing services for residential customers to repair plumbing fixtures to decrease their water usage. Another initiative, the Uplift Assistance Program, was recently changed from a monthly discount on water bills to a discounted rate structure with no monthly charges for the first 2,000 gallons of water. The full list of programs and initiatives are shown in the table on the next page.

The SAWS Uplift program uses a streamlined, single application process. SAWS staff review the application to determine the programs for which each applicant qualifies. This shifts the burden of navigating multiple programs, eligibility criteria, and applications away from the residents. Additionally, some applicant information is pre-populated, and SAWS uses a third-party to automatically verify income information. SAWS continues to identify ways to streamline the application process and reduce barriers to accessing assistance. For example, it is exploring ways to automatically enroll households that qualify for other assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The majority of the 14 programs receive funding through a city-approved fee included as a line item on SAWS’s water bills. However, Project Agua, which provides emergency payment assistance, is entirely funded through donations. SAWS is proud that the largest portion of donations come from SAWS’s employees themselves.

The SAWS team attributes much of their program’s success to transitioning CAP implementation into the Community Outreach Department. Working through an external affairs approach, SAWS first determined the total number of potentially eligible customers and identified their needs. This allowed the team to tailor engagement opportunities, better connect with the community, and ultimately increase the number of participants in the program. SAWS actively conducts outreach in communities, rather than primarily relying on more passive outreach techniques like flyers or advertisements. This approach has been an important component for SAWS in reaching their neighbors, sustaining the program over time, and making it a success. Additional information on the SAWS Uplift Program can be found here: <https://uplift.saws.org/helping-neighbors-in-need/>.

## SAWS Uplift Programs and Initiatives

Program/Initiative Name	Description
Uplift Assistance Program	Discounted rate structure with no monthly charges for the first 2,000 gallons of water.
WaterSmart	Provides access to an online tool to help save water (e.g., monthly water reports, water use history, customized water saving tips).
Courtesy Hold	Prevents water service from being shut off while the Uplift application is being processed.
Reduced Meter Service Fee	Lowers the fee for sending a technician to a household to disconnect water service because of a non-payment.
SAWS Payment Arrangements	Payment plan for past due account balance.
Reduced Deposit	Reduces the security deposit amount for new qualifying customers.
Agency Referrals	Helps make connections with local agencies to provide various types of assistance (e.g., CPS Energy electric and gas utility, Food Bank, etc.).
Leak Adjustments	Removes charges for “lost” water when a leak is repaired and fixed by a licensed plumber.
Senior Citizen Billing	Waives late payments penalties for customers aged 60+.
Domestic Violence Deposit Waiver	Allows victims to open a new service account without paying a security deposit.
Project Agua	Provides emergency payment assistance up to two times per year.
Plumbers to People	Helps residential customers repair leaking plumbing fixtures in their household.
Laterals to People	Helps residential customers repair sewer lateral from outside household to the property line.
Disability Billing/Disabled Veterans initiative	Provides payment extension to residential customers who receive disability income.