

To the Mayor and Members of the City Council**August 29, 2023**

Page 1 of 3

**SUBJECT: WATER UTILITY SHUT-OFF PRACTICES**

In response to City Councilmember questions, this Informal Report outlines the Water Utility's process and practices for service shutoffs because of non-payment.

Delinquency Timeline

According to city ordinance, Fort Worth bills are due within 21 days from the date of the bill and are late on day 22 after the bill is generated. On day 24, a 10 percent late fee is assessed on unpaid bills. On day 30, the customer receives the next bill that shows the past due amount plus the new amount due for the current bill. On day 37, residential customers with a minimum amount past due of \$25.00 are notified by an automated phone call that their account is delinquent and reminded to pay or make payment arrangements. An urgent notice is mailed on day 39 to all customers who have not satisfied the required payment. Service termination (disconnection) does not occur until 52 days after the bill is generated. When water is shut off, a red door tag is left at the home. It contains the instructions for having service restored. See Attachment A for a visual of the timeline.

Shutoff Process

Account shutoffs are performed on a billing cycle basis with all delinquent accounts in a billing cycle completed in one day. All meter shutoffs for non-payment are completed by 2:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday and, since January, by noon on Friday. Upon customer payment of all charges and notifying us with a request to restore service, work orders are created and issued to field personnel. Work orders to restore services are completed after meter shutoffs for non-payment are processed.

On Monday through Thursday, all "same day" work orders to restore service are accepted until 6 p.m. and worked the same day until all requests are filled, which can take until 10 p.m. "Same Day" restore work orders received after hours (after 6 p.m.) are worked as long as there is communication between a customer service supervisor and meter services supervisors.

The utility revised its Friday shutoff practices in January to complete all Friday shutoffs by noon and extended the hour to accept restore of service requests until 7:00 p.m. This allows customers more time to make a payment and notify us so as not to be without service all weekend. It also allows customers who are getting home from work extra time to do the same.

At the same time, a regular weekend route was added on Saturdays in order for Meter Services to accommodate customer calls/requests received after 7:00 pm Friday nights through 12:00 pm on Saturdays.

From January 28 through June 20, the Meter Services group completed 21,510 delinquent work orders but received only 44 weekend work orders related to delinquency.

After-hours and weekend emergency calls are answered by Field Operations Dispatch, which notifies the on-call Meter Services staff. Because resources are not available to verify payments on the weekend, water service is restored in all cases, and customer service staff follows up on Monday to verify payment and eligibility for service restoration. If payment is not verified, or if the customer is otherwise ineligible for service restoration, the water service is shut off again.

**To the Mayor and Members of the City Council****August 29, 2023**

Page 2 of 3

SUBJECT: WATER UTILITY SHUT-OFF PRACTICES

Fort Worth Water is not aware of any customer who has contacted us that has gone without water for the weekend since we implemented this practice.

Shutoffs during Extreme Weather

The utility has an internal practice of suspending water shut-offs for delinquency any time there is extremely hot or cold weather. The conditions under which these apply are:

- an “excessive heat advisory” from the National Weather Service;
- the air temperature is forecast to be 105 degrees or hotter;
- a temperature/humidity index of 110 degrees or hotter; or
- for cold weather, the previous day’s high temperature does not exceed 28 degrees and the temperature is predicted to remain at or below that level for the next 24 hours.

This summer, shutoffs were suspended from June 20 to present due to very high temperatures and excessive heat advisories.

Medical Needs

The utility attempts to maintain a record of customers with medical conditions or equipment that require water. To achieve this, the utility has a form that requires information from both the customer and a licensed physician, along with the physician’s signature. The purpose is to facilitate the maintenance and restoration of service. It does not guarantee uninterrupted service in the event of non-payment. If service is interrupted for planned or emergency repairs, the utility provides bottled water to these customers.

Delinquency Management

Fort Worth Water staff take many steps proactively to keep customers from being without water service due to delayed payment. We offer customers payment plans and extensions with no interest if the customer contacts us prior to being delinquent.

Staff routinely refer customers to Community Action Partners (CAP) in the Neighborhood Service Department and other agencies for financial assistance. The utility restores service with pledges from CAP and other established agencies, meaning we do not wait to have the money in hand in order to maintain or restore services for delinquent accounts. The federally-funded Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) has been especially helpful in providing financial assistance by paying water and wastewater charges directly to the utility for income-eligible customers. From the beginning of the program in June 2022 to present, the utility has received \$1,664,287 in LIHWAP funding from CAP and Texas Utility Help for 4,594 customers. However, funding for this program ceases at the end of the year. Water and wastewater organizations are asking Congress for ongoing funding, such as exists for energy bill assistance.

When appropriate, referrals are made to the SmartRepair and SmartFlush programs, which can aid in reducing water consumption, thus lowering bills.

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Page 3 of 3

**SUBJECT: WATER UTILITY SHUT-OFF PRACTICES**

The MyH2O customer portal enables customers to view their water use in hourly increments to help them understand the impacts of various activities, such as filling up a pool. The portal also enables customers to set up alerts for usage above certain amounts and/or establish water use budgets.

In addition, the utility does not lock residential accounts with balances less than \$75.00. All commercial properties are called by a customer service representative when the account is delinquent. Schools are not locked. Churches and apartments with four or more units have specific criteria for notifications and service interruptions, including personal contact with the customer.

Recommendations

The utility evaluated the staffing impacts of only performing shutoffs Monday through Thursday of each week. This would further minimize the potential for customers to go all weekend without water service. Customers would have all of Friday to make payments and notify customer service they need service restored.

To accomplish this while maintaining service levels for all other activities, such as new meter sets for development, meter repairs/replacements, AMI system maintenance, along with leak and theft of service investigations, the evaluation shows it would take four additional positions and four additional vehicles. These additional resources would be necessary due to inefficiencies associated with completing work within a compressed time frame and distributed across a wider geographic area on a daily basis.

The utility recommends moving forward with this measure in the FY2024 budget through the use of temporary positions to validate the level of resources needed, including the need for a Saturday crew. Based on these results, a request for new positions may be included in the FY2025 budget.

Should you have any questions about the Utility's shut-off practices or recommendations, please contact Chris Harder, Water Director, at 817-392-5020.

**David Cooke
City Manager**

Attachment A Delinquency Timeline

Day 1

Bill Date

Bill available on the portal/mailed for payment

Day 21

Due Date Current charges due within 21 days

Auto Pay Bank draft processed

Day 24

Late Fee Applied

10% fee on current charges outstanding 3 days after due date

Approx.
Day 30

Next Bill Available/Mailed

Indicating past due balance & itemizing late fee

Day 36

Delinquent

Becomes delinquent 36 days from bill date

Approx.
Day 37
1 day after delinquent

Outbound Dialer Call

Automated dialer call placed to qualifying delinquent accounts with minimum due of \$25.00 (residential) & \$500 (commercial)

Approx.
Day 39
3 days after delinquent

Urgent Notice

Letter generated and mailed to all customers; available on the portal

Approx.
Day 52
16 days after delinquent

Water Shut Off

Work order created to shut off water and location notified with door tag (delinquency must be at least \$75.00 to trigger cut-off) \$20 fee is assessed to next bill

**For information on payment options and bill assistance:
FortWorthTexas.gov/water**