

# Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) Drinking Water Outreach and Engagement Strategy

The Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience Drinking Water program, known as SAFER or SAFER Drinking Water, was created to ensure Californians who lack safe and affordable drinking water receive it as quickly as possible. The SAFER Outreach and Engagement Strategy is intended to increase early community engagement with SAFER; keep local drinking water projects on track; identify potential risks, issues, or delays; build local capacity and create a path towards equitable and resilient water governance.

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## BACKGROUND

The State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) and the nine Regional Water Quality Control Boards, collectively known as the Water Boards, are dedicated to a single vision: abundant clean water for human use and environmental protection to sustain California's future. The Water Boards monitor and protect water quality, allocate the right to use California's water, regulate pollutants and enforce compliance to protect California's water resources. The Water Boards also regulate drinking water and advance the Human Right to Water,<sup>i</sup> which establishes that every Californian has the right to clean, safe, affordable, and accessible water.

Currently, more than one million Californians do not have access to safe drinking water. The Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience Drinking Water program, known as SAFER or SAFER Drinking Water, was established in 2019 after the passage of Senate Bill 200.<sup>ii</sup> SAFER is a set of tools, funding sources, regulatory authorities, and engagement strategies designed to ensure Californians who lack safe and affordable drinking water receive it as quickly as possible. The purpose of SAFER is to bring environmental justice to California by addressing the disproportionate environmental burdens experienced by some communities and advancing justice for people of all incomes, races, and cultures.

### Engagement Challenges

Community involvement is an important part of SAFER, but the following barriers have created challenges to meaningful engagement that advances safe and affordable drinking water:

- **Historical Barriers:** Many communities have endured negative experiences with government agencies (such as inequitable practices, racism, systemic exclusion from decision-making processes, and lack of action) that have led to distrust, fatigue and apathy for new solutions.
- **Cultural and Language Barriers:** Many communities with unsafe drinking water are linguistically isolated and/or communities of color. Often, traditional approaches to water education do not present information in a culturally relevant manner, in the languages spoken by the community or using the community's preferred methods of communication.
- **Technical Barriers:** Many rural communities do not have access to internet, smartphones or computers. This can limit a community's ability to get information or attend virtual meetings.
- **Socioeconomic Barriers:** The effects of COVID-19 have disproportionately impacted low-income communities and communities of color and worsened preexisting socioeconomic barriers such inability to pay water bills.
- **Community Access:** Lack of existing community-based organizations in certain areas has made it difficult for the Water Boards to work with local groups to support SAFER outreach. Many communities also lack physical venues that are equipped for public meetings.
- **Poor Communication:** Drinking water solutions can take many years to complete, and project managers do not regularly communicate with communities throughout the process. This can lead to lack of confidence in solutions and frustration with the speed of progress.
- **Funding for Outreach:** Small, grassroots community groups may not apply for existing funding because processes can take several months, and the funding recipient must cover costs and rely on reimbursements.

For SAFER to be successful, the Water Boards need to partner with local experts who have a deep understanding of community needs. Collaborative partnerships are essential for building trust and achieving sustainable drinking water solutions.

## How SAFER Works

To understand the SAFER Outreach and Engagement Strategy, it's helpful to first understand how SAFER works to achieve safe water for all. Within the State Water Board, the Division of Drinking Water, Division of Financial Assistance, and Office of Public Participation work together to implement SAFER as follows:

- **The Division of Drinking Water** is responsible for enforcing federal and state drinking water statutes and regulating over 7,400 public water systems. The Division of Drinking Water works directly with water systems to review their water quality monitoring data, directs struggling systems to technical and financial assistance and issues enforcement orders to systems that consistently fail to meet safe drinking water standards. The Division of Drinking Water develops an annual drinking water Needs Assessment that informs SAFER activities.
- **The Division of Financial Assistance** awards state and federal grants and loans for drinking water projects, including funding from the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund. SAFER can fund both short-term and long-term solutions. Short-term solutions include point-of-use or point-of-entry treatment systems, drilling wells, and providing bottled or hauled water directly to communities. Long-term solutions include system upgrades, consolidations that link smaller systems to larger ones and training local technical and managerial staff.
- **The Office of Public Participation** oversees community engagement and supports public participation in Water Boards decisions. The Office of Public Participation facilitates local drinking water meetings, develops outreach materials, translates materials into languages spoken by communities and coordinates interpreters at public meetings. The Office of Public Participation also engages with tribal water systems who could benefit from SAFER funding.

SAFER uses many tools to prioritize technical, financial, and engagement assistance in the most equitable way possible. Unlike other funding programs where funding recipients must reach out to apply, SAFER uses its tools to proactively reach out to water systems in need.

## How Data Informs SAFER

Each year, SAFER conducts a drinking water Needs Assessment that identifies California water systems and domestic wells that are failing or at risk of failing to provide safe drinking water. The Needs Assessment informs the implementation of the SAFER Program and how communities are prioritized for engagement and funding.

## How SAFER Prioritizes Funding

Each year, SAFER develops a Fund Expenditure Plan that describes how safe and affordable drinking water funding will be spent. The Needs Assessment informs how the Fund Expenditure Plan prioritizes projects for funding. Small, disadvantaged communities are prioritized above all other communities. The following criteria is used to prioritize funding in fiscal year 2021-2022:

1. Address emergency or urgent funding needs, where other emergency funds are not available, and a critical water shortage or outage could occur without support from the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund.
2. Address community water systems and school water systems out of compliance with primary drinking water standards.
3. Accelerate consolidations for systems out of compliance, at-risk systems, as well as state small water systems and domestic wells, and promote opportunities for regional-scale consolidations.

4. Expedite planning through use of technical assistance for systems out of compliance, at-risk systems, as well as state smalls and domestic wells.
5. Provide interim solutions, initiate planning efforts for long-term solutions, and fund capital projects for state smalls and domestic wells with source water above a primary maximum contaminant level or at risk of running dry due to drought.
6. Ensure assistance is distributed in a manner consistent with the goals and direction provided in the State Water Board's Racial Equity Resolution and associated action plan.

### **How Drinking Water Solutions Work**

- **Short-term Support:** When a sustainable solution is not possible in the near term, short-term solutions such as point-of-use or point-of-entry filtration can be installed, communities can be supplied with bottled or hauled water, or the state can fund emergency repairs until a long-term solution is feasible.
- **Technical Assistance:** Communities with drinking water challenges may need help finding solutions and accessing funding. Technical Assistance Providers support communities with project planning, assessment, financing and more.
- **Consolidation:** Consolidation is the process of joining two or more water systems together. This process can happen voluntarily, or the State Water Board can require a larger system to absorb a failing smaller system. When the State Water Board requires consolidation, SAFER sends a letter to the water system and its customers and hosts a public meeting to discuss the plans for mandatory consolidation.
- **Regionalization:** Regionalization is consolidation on a larger scale, where several water systems work together to form a combined system, or several systems are absorbed into a large system. Regionalization takes place through several public meetings and requires the collaboration of water systems, domestic well owners, community members, community-based organizations, local elected leaders and regional water management efforts.
- **Administrator:** When a water system has consistently failed to provide safe drinking water, the State Water Board can appoint an administrator to temporarily take control of the system. Before appointing an administrator, SAFER sends a notice to the water system and its customers and holds public meetings to discuss the process and listen to public comments. The appointed administrator develops and implements a Community Accountability and Engagement Plan and holds public meetings.

These solutions are complex and can take many years to complete. Their success hinges on partnerships between SAFER staff, water systems and their customers, local and state agencies, and local partners.

### **How SAFER Engages Water Systems**

SAFER staff regularly review water quality monitoring reports for local water systems. When drinking water problems occur, SAFER staff coordinate with the water system to determine what happened, identify potential solutions, and works with the water system to get back on track to providing safe water. SAFER staff meet regularly to discuss what is being done for systems that are currently failing or at-risk of failing to provide safe drinking water to determine what types of community outreach and engagement are needed.

### **How SAFER Prioritizes Engagement**

SAFER staff prioritize regions and communities in need of outreach, engagement and technical assistance when the following occurs:

- State Water Board mandates a consolidation
- State Water Board appoints an administrator
- A regionalization process begins, and the area meets several of the following criteria:
  - High number of domestic wells dependent on contaminated aquifers
  - Multiple small water systems
  - One or more systems are currently failing or at risk of failing to provide safe water
  - Serves disadvantaged communities
  - Serves predominantly Black, Indigenous, or communities of color
- A water system meets most the following criteria:
  - Exceeds maximum contaminant levels for primary contaminants
  - Has been out of compliance for over three years
  - High vulnerability score from CalEnviroScreen
  - Less than 1,000 service connections
  - Serves disadvantaged communities
  - Serves predominantly Black, Indigenous, or communities of color

## OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

To advance justice and address challenges to meaningful engagement, SAFER will partner with and fund community experts to conduct local outreach and engagement activities that achieve the following outcomes:

- Increase early community engagement with SAFER and ensure community buy-in
- Keep local drinking water projects on track
- Identify potential issues, risks or delays
- Build local community capacity
- Create a path toward equitable and resilient water governance

### Who's Involved

The strategy involves three types of Outreach and Engagement Partners:

- **Funding Partners** enter into funding agreements with the State Water Board and fund Community Partners for outreach and engagement activities. Funding Partners are liaisons between the State Water Board and Community Partners that help address barriers to funding for outreach.
- **Community Partners** receive funding from Funding Partners for outreach and engagement activities in communities with drinking water challenges. Community Partners foster inclusive cultures and are experts in grassroots organizing, community education, outreach and engagement, and community capacity building.
- **Technical Assistance Providers** have funding agreements with the State Water Board to provide administrative, technical, operational, legal, managerial, and/or community engagement support to failing water systems. Technical Assistance Providers oversee the subcontracting and management of various types of assistance for communities and assist water systems who may not have the technical capacity to address drinking water challenges on their own.

More information is in the Details on Outreach and Engagement Partners section below.

## How it works

- 1. Prioritize Water Systems:** In 2022, SAFER staff will prioritize water systems in need of community engagement and technical assistance at one time. These priority systems will receive targeted engagement assistance from Community Partners. In future years, systems in need of assistance will be identified on an ongoing basis.
- 2. Select Funding Partners and Community Partners:** SAFER staff will select Funding Partners through a request for qualifications process. Funding Partners will work with the SAFER staff to identify, prepare and assign Community Partners to priority water systems.
- 3. Planning:** For each priority community, SAFER staff and assigned Community Partner and Technical Assistance Provider will hold a kick-off meeting to discuss the community's drinking water challenges and begin planning an engagement approach. After the kick-off meeting, the Community Partner will develop a community profile and engagement plan.
- 4. Implementation:** Community Partners will implement engagement plans in collaboration with SAFER staff. Technical Assistance Providers will help communities plan, fund, and implement drinking water solutions. Funding Partners will fund Community Partners for engagement work and coordinate with the SAFER staff. Community Partners, Technical Assistance Providers and Funding Partners will submit progress reports and participate in quarterly and annual meetings with SAFER staff.
- 5. Closeout:** Funding Partners, Community Partners, and Technical Assistance Providers will present successes and lessons learned at the end of each project. SAFER staff will share project highlights with the public.

## 2022-2023 Anticipated Timeline

- |                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>Early 2022</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prioritize Water Systems</li><li>• Solicit Funding Partners (request for qualifications- ongoing)</li><li>• Public Workshop for prospective Funding Partners</li><li>• Solicit Technical Assistance Providers (request for qualifications- ongoing)</li><li>• Public Workshop for prospective Technical Assistance Providers</li></ul> |
| <b>Mid 2022</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Select Funding Partners</li></ul>  |
| <b>Late 2022</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Finalize scopes of work and funding agreements with Funding Partners</li><li>• Develop Community Partner agreement templates</li></ul>   |
| <b>Early 2023</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify, prepare and assign Community Partners to priority communities</li></ul>  |
| <b>2023 and on</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Outreach and Engagement Partners plan and implement activities.</li></ul>  |

## DETAILS ON OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT PARTNERS

All SAFER Outreach and Engagement Partners (1) commit to upholding values of equity, inclusion, cultural awareness, humility, and anti-racism; (2) have experience working with communities with unsafe water; multilingual communities; Black, Indigenous, and communities of color; or under-resourced communities; and (3) are expected to follow through on all contract responsibilities such as monitoring and reporting progress and coordinating with SAFER staff.

## Funding Partners

Funding Partners coordinate with and fund Community Partners outreach and engagement activities. Funding partners receive their funding from three-year master funding agreements with the State Water Board. These master funding agreements are part of the State Water Board's Technical Assistance funding, so Funding Partners are required to meet the eligibility guidelines for Technical Assistance Providers described in Appendix C of the Safe and

Affordable Drinking Water Fund Policy. Funding Partners are considered a specific type of Technical Assistance Provider.

**Essential Skills:**

- Experience managing and tracking a large number of subcontracts.
- Able to liaise between local grassroots organizations and government agencies.
- Able to work with Community Partners to track and report on metrics and progress.

**Sample Responsibilities:**

- Enter into a Funding Agreement with the State Water Board.
- Monitor budget and submit quarterly reports to SAFER staff.
- Manage subcontracts for Community Partners.
- Liaise between SAFER staff and Community Partners.
- Monitor and coordinate Community Partner progress and deliverables.
- Maintain regular communication, relationships, and support for Community Partners.
- Alert Water Boards staff of concerns or drinking water issues.

**Community Partners**

SAFER staff select Community Partners to implement outreach and engagement activities where there are drinking water challenges. Community Partners can be any type of group or organization and do not have to be a 501c3 nonprofit. This means informal neighborhood groups and grassroots organizations can become Community Partners. Community Partners may work with one specific community or several communities within a region. Community Partners with experience in a specific community will be prioritized for that community. Community Partners enter into contracts with Funding Partners to receive payment for outreach and engagement work.

**Essential Skills:**

- Willing to learn and receive training about engaging communities on water issues.
- Able to develop and implement effective and equitable engagement strategies.
- Able to develop multilingual and culturally relevant outreach and engagement materials.
- Able to plan and facilitate multi-stakeholder meetings focused on sensitive topics.

**Sample Responsibilities:**

- Participate in kick-off meetings and meet with SAFER staff quarterly to discuss progress.
- Develop and implement multilingual and culturally relevant community engagement plans.
- Coordinate professional language interpretation and translation services.
- Provide written updates to SAFER staff on a quarterly basis or more frequently if needed.
- Compile and share deliverables (meeting materials, stakeholder lists, etc.) quarterly.

**Technical Assistance Providers**

The Division of Financial Assistance selects Technical Assistance Providers to help failing water systems with administrative, technical, operational, legal, or managerial services. Individuals or organizations can apply to join a pool of qualified Technical Assistance Providers that are eligible to enter into a funding agreement with the State Water Board. Technical Assistance providers may also be assigned Community Partner responsibilities, if appropriate.

**Essential Skills:**

- Knowledge and experience in successfully providing any combination of administrative, technical, operational, legal, or managerial services to drinking water systems in California.
- Experience in successfully bringing a water system into compliance; completing a consolidation; reducing or eliminating factors that put systems at risk of not providing safe water; or enhancing the technical, managerial, or administrative capacity of a water system.
- Able to provide technical assistance to multiple water systems at the same time.
- Able to develop and implement effective and equitable engagement strategies.
- Demonstrated success in outreach and engagement with community members.

**Sample Responsibilities:**

- Manage administrative, technical, operational, or legal services for water systems.
- Secure or administer bridge loans and solicit and award subcontracts.
- Subcontract or manage multilingual and culturally relevant outreach and engagement tasks.
- Plan and facilitate multi-stakeholder meetings focused on sensitive topics such as extension of service, consolidation, or regional projects.

**HOW TO CONTACT US**

If you would like more information about the SAFER Outreach and Engagement Strategy or are interested in becoming a SAFER Engagement and Outreach Partner email [SAFER@waterboards.ca.gov](mailto:SAFER@waterboards.ca.gov) or call 916-445-5615.

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<sup>i</sup> [Assembly Bill 685](#)

<sup>ii</sup> [Senate Bill 200 established the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund, an annual fund of \\$130 million through 2030, to tackle the California's drinking water problems.](#)