



STATE OF MICHIGAN

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
LANSING

GRETCHEN WHITMER
GOVERNOR

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State to begin paying Benton Harbor residents and sites distributing bottled water

*Paid positions part of Community Ambassadors Program;
over 100,000 cases of water distributed to date*

LANSING, Mich. – To ensure the continued success of bottled water distribution locations in Benton Harbor and to recognize the city residents who have been stepping up to donate their time and talent, the State of Michigan has partnered with local agencies and will begin paying city residents who work at state-supported bottled water distribution sites, retroactive to Oct. 1, 2021.

Paid staff will be known as community ambassadors and will be paid \$15 per hour and be approved by the community organization they will be volunteering with. Ambassadors must live in the city limits proper and be approved by the community organization where they intend to work.

Distribution sites will be responsible for recruiting, managing and paying the ambassadors who serve at their site. Organizers of each distribution location will review the credentials of the potential ambassadors before hiring them.

“Benton Harbor residents have stepped up to help one another as the state provides free bottled water to the city to reduce the risk of exposure to lead in their drinking water,” said Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Director Elizabeth Hertel. “Ensuring that residents are compensated for their time is a priority for the state and will help ensure a sustainable, long-term solution and is the right thing to do.”

“The residents of Benton Harbor are taking action to help their neighbors access safe drinking water by working with the state to distribute free bottled water day in and day out,” said Benton Harbor Mayor Marcus Muhammad. “These ambassadors for their community deserve to be compensated for their tireless efforts, and I am proud that we are valuing their service. Together, bottled water will continue to be provided indefinitely and we look forward to start moving dirt to replace 100% of lead service lines in an accelerated timeframe of 18 months.”

The Rev. Brian Clayborn, pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Benton Harbor, said he supports Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s plan to provide bottled water and said the ambassador program is a great idea. About a dozen members of his church have been staffing water distribution events there.

“The community has truly come together to help one another,” Clayborn said. “I had one lady call Tuesday who is a cancer survivor, and she stated that she couldn’t lift any water, but said that if there was anything she could do, she was willing. So, she came out Tuesday and worked for about three hours passing out forms for people to sign.”

Among the volunteers are Diane Young, who worked at Ebenezer on Tuesday and has assisted at other distribution locations with members of the community group Sisters from Another Mother.

“What really has been most rewarding has been seeing the community collaborate,” said Young, a lifelong city resident who is a Business Resource Network success coach for Michigan Works! “It’s working together for the greater good of the community. It’s great to see the diversity. Every age, color, gender. We’re just all coming together to take care of the city residents.”

Individuals who want to serve as community ambassadors should connect with an established distribution site. Individuals or groups who want to serve as unpaid volunteers can sign up [on the United Way’s online platform](#).

Free bottled water is being provided by the state as residents are being encouraged to [use bottled water for cooking, drinking, brushing teeth, rinsing foods and mixing powdered infant formula](#).

This action is part of an accelerated, across-the-board effort to reduce the risk of exposure to lead in drinking water while the city replaces all lead service lines.

To date, MDHHS and volunteers had provided more than 100,000 cases of free bottled water at community distribution sites and deliveries to residents who are homebound or lack access to transportation.

The upcoming schedule for bottled water pickup is:

Friday, Oct. 29

- Southwest Community Action Agency, 331 Miller Street, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. (Self-service)

Saturday, Oct. 30

- Boys & Girls Club of Benton Harbor, 600 Nate Wells Sr. Drive, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.
- Harbor of Hope Seventh-Day Adventist Church, 769 Pipestone Street, 4 – 6 p.m.

Sunday, Oct. 31

- Abundant Life Church of God, 693 Columbus Avenue, 3 – 5 p.m.
- Brotherhood of All Nations, 1286 Monroe Street, 4 – 6 p.m.

Monday, Nov. 1

- Southwest Community Action Agency, 331 Miller Street, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. (Self-service)
- Abundant Life Church of God, 693 Columbus Avenue, noon – 2 p.m.

Tuesday, Nov. 2

- Southwest Community Action Agency, 331 Miller Street, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. (Self-service)
- Abundant Life Church of God, 693 Columbus Avenue, noon – 2 p.m.
- Ebenezer Baptist Church, 214 E. Britain Avenue, 4 – 6 p.m.

The ongoing response in Benton Harbor includes the city, Berrien County Health Department, local community organizations, MDHHS and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy.

Additional dates and locations for bottled water pick up will be added to make sure community needs are met. Information will be posted on Michigan.gov/MiLeadSafe.

MDHHS is engaging in a long-term effort to eliminate lead action level exceedances, educate communities on the effects of lead in drinking water, and remove lead service lines. This collaborative effort includes the City of Benton Harbor, the Berrien County Health Department, local community organizations, MDHHS and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy.

These efforts also include recently approved funds to remove lead from homes in the city. Families living in Benton Harbor can apply for this service by filling out and mailing in [an application that is available online](#). Residents also can call 866-691-5323 to obtain information.

For questions about lead, MDHHS can be reached at 866-691-5323 Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. – 5 p.m.

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