



ELEVATE



Teena Christmas: Plumbing Leaks and Water Debt

When Teena Christmas received a water bill for \$257 in April 2020, she knew something wasn't right. Her previous bill had been \$48, and her bills had ranged from \$40 to \$60 throughout the previous year. After taking measures to ensure there were no leaks in her home, Ms. Christmas hoped the issue had been resolved. Instead, she continued to receive increasingly high bills, peaking at \$1,400 in October 2020.

Unexpected leaks in a home's plumbing are hard to identify and can lead to growing bills and a spiral of debt for a homeowner. As they accumulate, these bills can add up to around \$15,000 before the problem is addressed. Without resources and assistance, homeowners are left on their own to figure out how to address these leaks and the costs that come with them.

Ms. Christmas lives in an older home on Chicago's South Side. She takes pride in paying her bills in full and on time. When her water bills skyrocketed in 2020, she reached out to multiple sources, including the water department and her alderman's

office to try to pinpoint the problem and seek assistance. She was unable to receive clear answers.

"I never understood that it could be possibly a leak up under the ground," Ms. Christmas explained. "I ran out of choices of who I can call next. I was worried because it was getting ready to turn cold."

For five months, Ms. Christmas turned off her water when she was not using it to mitigate the climbing bills. Doing so required sticking her arm in a water meter box up to her shoulder to reach the water valve. She would fill up a rain barrel for her use and then shut her water valve back off. During that time, she had a plumber inspect her home, and he informed her the leak was coming from a pipe under her lawn.

Eventually, the City of Chicago connected Ms. Christmas to Elevate to repair the leaks at her building. In December 2020, Elevate secured a plumber and worked with Ms. Christmas to have the leaky pipes replaced.

"When I heard I might have some help coming from

Next page ►



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Elevate, I was in tears. It was almost unbelievable,” said Ms. Christmas. “I had called so many people. I called plumbers, alderman, city people. I had ran out of choices of who I can call next. I was worried because it was getting ready to turn cold.”

The City also helped her enroll in its Utility Billing Relief program, which will protect Ms. Christmas from paying enormous bills for water she didn’t use. As long as she pays her future bills for 12 months, the program will waive her past outstanding bills.

“I’m so excited! I’ll be paying that bill before they send it out,” Ms. Christmas said. Her first bill following the pipe replacement was for \$17, which was reflective of the small amount of water she was using to fill her rain barrel.

Stories like Ms. Christmas’ emphasize the need for the water education and resources that Elevate implements and promotes. Elevate seeks to create a just and equitable world in which everyone has clean and affordable heat, power, and water in their homes and communities — no matter who they are or where they live.

Property Overview

- Two-story home in Englewood, Chicago

Upgrades Completed

- Replaced plumbing to address leaks
- Replaced lead service line

Winter Bill Cost

- Before Upgrades: \$1,400
- After Upgrades: \$17

Project Cost

- \$11,200

“ *I can’t say enough about Elevate. Everybody was so professional, so concerned, so kind. I can’t say enough, so patient. When the City picked Elevate to run this project, they did a fantastic job.*”

Teena Christmas

Want to learn more?

Elevate works with municipalities and water utilities to research water affordability challenges and explore strategies for tackling the challenges in those communities. Visit ElevateNP.org/Water-Affordability to learn more about our latest research.