

Senator asks governor to waive fees for water

Written by By Beth Blakeman Associate Editor
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For all the necessities and front-line and essential worker issues being highlighted as the COVID-19 pandemic moves across the globe, the country, and the state, McKinley County has special challenges that call for unique adaptations.

For people on the reservations, water is a prime consideration. For that reason, N. M. Sen. George Muñoz, D - McKinley, Cibola, San Juan wrote Gallup Mayor Jackie McKinney and the Gallup City Council March 25 requesting a halt to charging people who use the city's water loading stations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to legal obstacles, he was advised to contact the governor's office.

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Muñoz took his concern to Diego Arencon and Daniel Schlegel in Santa Fe.

He told the *Gallup Sun* that when people on the reservation don't have running water, they haul their water from a filling station with trucks and trailers and then pump it into their homes. It costs them \$0.25 for 19 gallons of water. However, in addition to the inconvenience of having to haul and pump the water, there is the expense and sometimes the need to make additional trips to get change to purchase it, in cases where customers do not have a water account. Muñoz says handling cash and change at the coin-operated station increases transmission risks. All of that moving around in the community adds to issues of contact and possible increased dangers of community spread.

Muñoz said temporarily suspending fees at the water loading station will assist in proper hygiene, ease economic hardships and ensure people have access to clean water for drinking, cleaning and food preparation.

As of April 1, the governor's office is in discussions with the City of Gallup, water providers, and utilities across the state. However, there is no estimated time of accomplishment.

In addition to the request of the governor's office, Muñoz wrote to President Trump. Along with the request to waive fees for the water loading station, he asked for federal relief funding for people living in Gallup and on the Navajo Nation who are in need of the basic essentials for survival through this pandemic, in particular coal and wood for heating and propane for cooking.

Muñoz says another issue concerns how people cash their checks, so they can make purchases. He says it is important to keep businesses such as pawn shops open in town, because they charge the lowest rates for cashing checks for customers.

By Beth Blakeman
Associate Editor