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## A Call to Action: Rebuilding Trust in Virginia's Drinking Water Systems

Richmonders (and virtually every statewide elected official) just experienced first-hand how vital drinking water is for our health, livelihoods, and economy. As we embark on the necessary after-action analysis, we must commit to building a trusted and reliable water system that serves everyone equitably.

Our mission at Virginia Health Catalyst is rooted in the belief that everyone in the commonwealth should have equitable access to comprehensive health care that includes oral health. Water is intrinsically linked to our health and our

healthcare. Yet trust in drinking water was fraught even before this crisis, with 1 in 4 Virginians saying they did not trust the drinking water from their tap. That number is as high as 1 in 3 for Black and Hispanic Virginians.

Much of this mistrust is generational, cultural, and very rational. I need only mention Flint to highlight evidence of neighborhoods and communities ill-served by officials who prioritized cost-cutting and neglected to consider equity in policies above effective healthy solutions for all.

The irony is that, on the whole, Virginia's tap water is terrific. It undergoes rigorous testing and monitoring to meet stringent safety and quality standards set by state and federal agencies (much more rigorous testing than bottled water). Virginia's public water systems are managed by dedicated professionals who ensure that tap water is safe, reliable, and fluoridated to support public health. Moreover, the state has a robust Office of Drinking Water that oversees compliance and provides resources to address emerging challenges, such as aging infrastructure and climate-related disruptions.

When issues do arise, boil water notices are not signs of failure but of a robust testing system working - safeguarding public health by detecting and responding to potential risks.

Unfortunately, even temporary infrastructure failures will likely erode trust further, leading families to choose bottled water or other less healthy beverages to ensure their families have something to drink. Relying on bottled water is costly. It's 2,000 times more expensive than tap water, less regulated, and less rigorously tested than tap water, and typically not fluoridated. Thirty-five billion tons of plastic bottles are thrown away yearly. The subsequent health and economic consequences are most concentrated in low-income communities and communities of color. This includes a raised risk of tooth decay, obesity, and (indirectly) diabetes. Children in families that avoid tap water are more likely to experience food insecurity.

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Let us leverage this crisis to improve the infrastructure while working alongside communities to embrace the water coming from their tap as their beverage of choice.

The pending analysis will no doubt reveal years of disinvestment, disrepair, and delayed priorities by management and officials. I won't litigate it here. As the after-action analysis is conducted and shared, tap water will be top of mind for the public and decision-makers. This is a massive opportunity to improve the infrastructure while working with communities to understand what they need to make tap water their beverage of choice and exemplify what an equitable, trusted water system looks like.

Mayor Avula has deep roots in the community and has demonstrated a lifetime commitment to listening and responding to community needs. And because the water system failed at the start of the legislative session, virtually every official controlling the purse strings of the commonwealth saw first-hand the effect it had on themselves, business, and government.

To ensure that what comes next is a trusted and reliable water system that serves everyone equitably, we must:

**Listen and respond to community needs and concerns.** Trust relies on consistency, transparency, and communication. We must understand what community members need to trust the water from their tap and include all of us in the decisions to shore up the system.

**Recognize and address the financial burden on individuals and localities.** Water is expensive, government investment is vital and has not kept pace with need, and the current rates, while unaffordable for some, don't enable appropriate ongoing operations. These incongruencies must be reconciled through reimagined rate setting and a new paradigm.

**Invest significantly in infrastructure and technology.** This endeavor will be expensive, but we are seeing the results of what happens when improvements are delayed.

**Mandate state-supported audits and remediation monitoring.** Auditing water systems to determine deficiencies and needs is not enough. Regulations must require that issues be addressed, and local, state, and federal resources must be available to ensure they are addressed quickly and equitably.

**Communicate.** Always.

Let's seize the opportunity to create a system that works for everyone.

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Sarah Holland is the CEO of Virginia Health Catalyst, a public health nonprofit that ensures Virginians have equitable access to comprehensive health care, including oral health. Catalyst convenes the statewide Water Equity Taskforce. She is a proud resident of RVA.