

What is a Blue Community?

A “Blue Community” adopts a water commons framework by taking the three actions outlined in this guide. Adopting a water commons framework is an important step towards governing water as a commons and public trust.

A water commons framework treats water as a common good that is shared by everyone and the responsibility of all. Because water is essential for human life, it must be governed by principles that allow for reasonable use, equal distribution and responsible treatment in order to preserve water for nature and future generations.

The Blue Communities Project encourages municipalities and Indigenous communities¹ to adopt a water commons framework by:

1. Recognizing water and sanitation as human rights.
2. Banning or phasing out the sale of bottled water in municipal facilities and at municipal events.
3. Promoting publicly financed, owned, and operated water and wastewater services.

This guide provides information and resources to help you achieve these goals.

THE BLUE COMMUNITIES PROJECT

The Blue Communities Project is a joint initiative of the Blue Planet Project, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Council of Canadians. Eau Secours is a partner in Quebec. This project builds on nearly two decades of Water Watch work in coalition with many other groups to protect and promote public water.



This guide will help community activists and local leaders protect the water commons—shared water resources—in the face of increasing pressure to put water up for sale and privatize water services. The Blue Communities principles also draw attention to the many First Nations deprived of clean, safe drinking water and adequate sanitation, and the importance of respecting Indigenous water rights and the human right to water. As a public sector worker, municipal councillor or community activist pursuing the creation of a “Blue Community,” you will become part of a growing movement for public water in Canada and around the world.

1. Indigenous communities include First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. Some First Nations rely on bottled water because of the lack of clean drinking water. A ban or the phasing out of bottled water at community facilities and community events would only apply where potable water exists. The third resolution would promote community-run water and wastewater services. See the Blue Indigenous Communities section for more details.

Why Blue Communities?

Waterways in Canada are increasingly polluted and depleted by unsustainable industrial, agricultural, and municipal activities. Our water services face the growing threats of underfunding and privatization. The need to protect water resources and services is urgent and governments must play a central role in ensuring water is used responsibly and allocated fairly.

The push to privatize water and sewage systems through long-term contracts, known as public-private partnerships (P3s), began in the late 1990s. During its mandate, the Harper government made water privatization part of its agenda through funding mechanisms that promoted, and in some cases, required P3s. This funnelled public money destined for water infrastructure to the hands of for-profit water corporations. The Trudeau government, elected in October 2015, ended the requirement that municipal infrastructure projects over \$100 million go through a mandatory P3 screen. However, the federal government has not ruled out P3s for water and wastewater projects, and has actually promoted P3s as a solution to the water and wastewater infrastructure deficit.

In the meantime, the bottled water industry sells water – a shared community resource – for huge profits. Greenhouse gases are emitted and watersheds destroyed as a result of producing and transporting bottled water. Bottled water production places significant stress on increasingly scarce water sources.

On July 28, 2010, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution recognizing the human rights to water and sanitation and acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realization of all human rights. On September 23, 2011, the United Nations Human Rights Council passed a resolution on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation, and called on governments to take concrete action by developing plans of action, establishing monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and ensuring affordable services for everyone. In June 2012, Canada recognized the human rights to water and sanitation at the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. But Canada has yet to develop a plan of action to implement these rights.

Municipalities are responsible for water quality, supply, treatment and conservation. The adoption of a water commons framework to address pollution, degradation, depletion, and privatization at the community level is crucial in the battle to preserve water and ensure fair access to all. Blue Communities are municipalities or Indigenous communities that adopt resolutions recognizing water as a commons and the human right to water, and that commit to resisting the corporate takeover of water.

Blue Communities is an opportunity for people – community residents, unionized workers, Indigenous peoples, environmentalists, students and other community leaders – to come together to protect water. Working together to make your community a Blue Community is a great way to build relationships and ensure governments are accountable for providing safe, clean drinking water for everyone.

WHAT COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS CAN DO:

- Support a municipal declaration recognizing the human rights to water and sanitation.
- Ask your Member of Parliament to pass legislation recognizing the human rights to water and sanitation in federal law.

WHAT MUNICIPALITIES CAN DO:

- Sign a municipal declaration recognizing the human rights to water and sanitation.
- Call on regional municipal bodies to recognize the human rights to water and sanitation.

Recognize water and sanitation as human rights

Water is essential to life – no one should be able to control it or exploit it for profit. The human right to water entitles everyone to sufficient, safe, accessible water for personal and household uses. The human right to sanitation would ensure that everyone has access to toilets or latrines that provide privacy and a safe and dignified environment that is physically accessible, affordable and culturally sensitive.

Since 2010, the United Nations has passed several resolutions recognizing the human rights to water and sanitation and has called on governments to develop concrete plans of action.

Human right to water violations

At any given time there are more than 100 drinking water advisories in First Nations where people cannot drink the water straight from their tap. The drinking water advisories include boil water advisories and “do not consume” orders and range from a few months to over 20 years. The majority of advisories in First Nations are for public and semi-public water systems. There are often a handful of advisories in place for community centres, schools and daycares. The number of people affected ranges from 0 to 5,000, yet for many communities the number of people affected is marked “unknown” on the Health Canada website.

The federal government must enshrine the human rights to water and sanitation in Canadian law in order to ensure that people living in municipalities and Indigenous communities are legally entitled to sufficient quantities of safe, clean water for drinking and household uses and water for sanitation. The federal government must also address access inequalities immediately. The lack of safe drinking water and sanitation in Indigenous communities is one of the most serious violations of the human rights to water and sanitation.

In the current global water crisis, billions of people still lack access to basic water and sanitation services. Every day, thousands of people die from preventable diseases that they contracted because they do not have access to clean water. The recognition of water as a human right in international law allows the UN to hold governments accountable for ensuring that their populations have access to safe, clean drinking water and water for sanitation purposes. The Canadian government must do its part to implement the human rights to water and sanitation in this country.

(See Good Practices on page 11 for examples on how governments have implemented the human right to water.)

At the same time, the rights of corporations, whose activities drain, contaminate and destroy watersheds, are protected in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and other international trade and investment agreements, including the Canada-European Union Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA). Canada must protect water sources and services from current and future trade deals.

Canadian municipalities and the rights to water and sanitation

Responsibility for water is shared between municipal, provincial and federal governments. This means the right to water must be recognized and implemented at every level of government.

It is crucial that municipalities adopt a water commons framework and recognize the rights to water and sanitation in order to:

- Safeguard against a pricing scheme that would limit access to drinking water and wastewater services.
- Ensure all residents have equal access to adequate supplies of safe, clean water and sanitation.
- Provide citizens with information on their water supply and the operation of their water services.
- Promote water conservation, treatment, reuse and source protection to enhance water quality and quantity.

Many Canadian municipalities already meet these criteria. However, official recognition of the rights to water and sanitation at the municipal level would cement these principles. It would also create much-needed momentum and apply pressure on other levels of government to play their role in implementing water and sanitation as human rights.



BLUE COMMUNITY: KINGSTON, ONTARIO



Robyn Hamlyn and Kingston, Ontario Mayor Mark Gerresten

"I guess it was really scary for me," Robyn Hamlyn, young water warrior explained. "Before, I had no idea that the Earth was running out of water."

Since seeing the movie *Blue Gold*, based on Maude Barlow's book by the same name, Hamlyn has been inspired to take action and has been turning cities into Blue Communities all across Ontario.

When she was 12, Robyn Hamlyn approached the city of Kingston and succeeded in getting it to recognize water as a human right in 2011. The next year the town of Ajax adopted the resolutions after receiving a letter from the then-13-year old water warrior. The young activist has contacted dozens of municipalities across Ontario and is speaking at city council meetings throughout the province to draw attention to the importance of protecting water and the Blue Communities project.

SAMPLE RESOLUTION – RECOGNIZE THE RIGHTS TO WATER AND SANITATION

WHEREAS almost 2 billion people around the world do not have access to clean drinking water, 4 billion people face severe water scarcity and 2.5 billion people do not have adequate sanitation; and

WHEREAS Indigenous communities in Canada have been disproportionately affected by lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation; and

WHEREAS on July 28, 2010, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution recognizing the human rights to water and sanitation; and

WHEREAS on September 23, 2011, the United Nations Human Rights Council passed a resolution on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation and called on governments to take concrete action by developing plans of action, establishing monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and ensuring affordable services for everyone; and

WHEREAS the Canadian Union of Public Employees, Eau Secours and the Council of Canadians have asked Canadian municipalities to assist in their effort to have the federal government protect water and sanitation as human rights;

WHEREAS recognizing the rights to water and sanitation is one of three steps needed to declare *[name of municipality]* a Blue Community;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that *[name of municipality]* recognizes and affirms that water and sanitation services are fundamental human rights.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that *[name of municipality]* will refrain from shutting off water and wastewater services in any residence where residents have an inability to pay their bills, and furthermore that *[name of municipality]* will make every effort to work with the resident to remediate the debt.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that *[name of municipality]* will call on the federal and provincial governments to enshrine the human rights to water and sanitation in federal and provincial law.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that *[name of municipality]* will call on the Government of Canada to develop a national plan of action to implement the human rights to water and sanitation.

SAMPLE LETTER TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

The movement to recognize and uphold the human rights to water and sanitation is spreading from community to community. Yet communities need federal leadership. Blue Communities commit to calling on the federal government to develop a plan of action to implement the human rights to water and sanitation. Once your municipality becomes a Blue Community, your mayor can customize this sample letter and send it to the federal government.

Dear Environment Minister [name of current minister] and Minister of Infrastructure and Communities [name of current minister]:

The municipality of [name of municipality] recently became a Blue Community. A Blue Community is one that adopts a water commons framework by taking three actions:

1. Recognizing water and sanitation as human rights
2. Banning the sale of bottled water in public facilities and at municipal events
3. Promoting publicly financed, owned, and operated water and wastewater services

A water commons framework treats water as being shared by everyone, and the responsibility of all. Water is central to our lives and so it must be governed by principles and policies that allow for reasonable use, equal distribution and responsible treatment in order to preserve it for nature and future generations.

On July 28, 2010, 122 countries overwhelmingly voted to pass a resolution recognizing the human rights to water and sanitation. Since then, the UN Human Rights Council has passed two resolutions calling on governments to develop comprehensive plans and strategies to implement these rights, assess the implementation of the plans of action, ensure affordable water and sanitation services for everyone, and create accountability mechanisms and legal remedies.

We applaud the government of Canada for endorsing the human rights to water and sanitation at the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in June 2012. However, to give the resolutions life, we urge the federal government to enshrine water and sanitation as human rights in federal law and develop a plan of action that will implement these rights.

At any given time there are over 100 drinking water advisories in First Nations. Some of the long-standing water advisories include Shoal Lake No. 40, which has been under a water advisory for more than 17 years, as well as Kitigan Zibi and Nazko First Nations, both under do not consume advisories for more than 15 years.

As part of being a Blue Community, our municipality is opposed to the privatization of water and wastewater services, including through public-private partnerships. We urge you to support municipal infrastructure by investing in a national water and wastewater fund that addresses the growing needs of communities to maintain and strengthen water and wastewater systems. We call on the Government of Canada to respect the autonomy of municipalities and First Nations by providing needed infra-