

HATFIELD RESIDENT FELLOWSHIP

PROJECT BRIEF **Water Debt Transfer**

Project Dates: July 2024 – February 2025

PROJECT GOAL

The main goal of this project is to build a clear and practical framework to investigate the practice of unauthorized transfer of water debt by the Portland Water Bureau, and better understand the nature of this problem. To accomplish the overarching goal there were several goals along the way. The first goal of this project was to clean up and analyze the data that was sent to the Ombudsman's office (before my time) to ensure accuracy and utility. After the data analysis portion, the next goal was to speak directly with people who have been affected by these practices to get real-life accounts of what they've experienced. By combining these personal stories with data insights the Ombudsman has created a tool to advocate effectively for those impacted.

TAKEAWAYS

The investigation reveals that the legal framework governing this area remains ambiguous, leaving significant discretion in the hands of the agency. This discretion has, in several cases, resulted in the adoption of approaches that lack clarity and transparency. These practices can undermine stakeholder trust and hinder effective oversight. These findings highlight the critical need for establishing well-defined legal standards and transparent protocols to ensure that the agency's actions are both consistent and accountable.

CHALLENGES

One of the primary challenges encountered was the absence of a clear method for identifying what constitutes an "unwarranted" debt transfer. This ambiguity required a creative approach that was not based on a fixed equation, resulting in numerous adjustments throughout the investigation. Additionally, sharing and

accurately identifying the problem with customers proved difficult, as a lack of technical background and detailed historical context for each case necessitated extensive preliminary investigations even before direct discussions could take place. This situation was further complicated by nuances and sensitive conversations that were not fully accessible, ultimately impacting the depth and clarity of the investigation. Furthermore, as new findings emerged, a rescoping process became necessary, leading to a complete restructuring of the initial thesis. Lastly, issues related to sample size and the statistical significance of the findings also posed substantial hurdles in drawing reliable conclusions from the data.

STRATEGY

The approach began with a clear problem-identification phase that involved meeting with the team to review past investigations, their outcomes, and the subsequent actions taken. Once the focus shifted to the water debt transfer issue, I familiarized myself with the initial complaint that had sparked the investigation. I then received a comprehensive briefing from a team member who had previously worked on the matter, which provided essential background and the initial dataset.

- Organized and cleaned the data before initiating the analysis
- Developed key guiding questions—what to measure, how to differentiate between accounts, and determining the specifics of the transfer amounts—to steer the analytical process
- Conducted a detailed, account-by-account review of the comment sections to identify patterns in the timing, reasons, and amounts

of transfers

- Identified potentially problematic accounts through this qualitative review
- Contacted the affected individuals to gather further insights and confirm the findings

RESULTS

I identified multiple accounts where the transfer had occurred, addressing the initial question of whether this issue had happened before and gauging its severity. For each account, I met with a representative at PWB to discuss the unique aspects of each case and explore any available flexibility regarding their total balances. This hands-on approach led to a reduction in the total balance for approximately 75% of the respondents.

- Prepared a comprehensive report based on the findings.
- Outlined the problem from a legal and policy perspective.
- Offered actionable recommendations for internal improvements

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