

Friday, 27th March 2020

Community sector organisations call on Government to act on communications affordability issues

A coalition of nearly 30 community sector organisations and advocates has urged the Federal Government to address the affordability of communications services and equipment to support Australians in need during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a letter to the Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety Cyber and the Arts, Paul Fletcher, cross-sector community organisations including Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), CHOICE, The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS), and The Smith Family outlined several recommendations that would enable communities to keep connected, work remotely, and access essential services such as education, government services, and telehealth.

“The introduction of the Coronavirus Supplement and households support payments are very important measures, that will be welcomed by many households,” said ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin. “However, we need to do more.”

As schools across the country begin to close or recommend at-home education, many families are facing increased financial pressure.

“The reality is that not everyone has access to a home broadband service or equipment like a laptop or tablet. We need to make sure that everyone in our community has the tools they need to succeed, especially in these difficult times,” said Ms Corbin.

In addition to calling on the Federal Government to fast-track ACCAN’s proposal for a wholesale broadband concessional product, community organisations have highlighted the need for a free telephone service that allows people with low digital literacy to receive direct technical and skills support.

“We know that everything from health services to government services are moving online. While this can have many benefits, we want to make sure that all members of the community have the chance to access these services.”

Community organisations also recognised the positive measures that some telecommunications companies had rolled-out to consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We’ve been pleased to see that telcos like Telstra and Optus have announced a pause on disconnecting customers or charging late fees. We’d like to see that extended for the whole telco industry, and for them to pause debt collection activities,” said Ms Corbin.

“Communications services are essential and they need to be treated as such.”

Community groups said that further work is needed from the telecommunications industry to address telecommunications drop-outs in remote and very remote communities.

Signatories:



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The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is Australia's peak communications consumer organisation. The operation of ACCAN is made possible by funding provided by the Commonwealth of Australia under section 593 of the Telecommunications Act 1997. This funding is recovered from charges on telecommunications carriers.



26 March 2020

The Hon Paul Fletcher, MP
Minister for Communications

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Dear Minister

COVID-19 Response

There are 2.5 million Australians who are not connected to the internet either because they cannot access it, lack the ability to engage or cannot afford it. People on low-incomes or living in remote areas are particularly impacted.

The COVID-19 virus is having a profound impact on our community, and communications is playing an even more important role than ever in keeping the community connected, facilitating remote working, enabling the delivery of essential services such as telehealth and education, and responding to emergency services especially in remote areas.

We applaud the significant measures taken by the Federal Government to assist households and individuals through the Coronavirus Supplement and household support payments. These measures will assist recipients to meet their ongoing financial commitments at this time.

As community sector organisations working with low income consumers, we are profoundly aware that more is needed.

Unfortunately, there are many consumers on limited incomes in our community who will remain isolated and struggle in these circumstances due to barriers in accessing communications services and equipment, the most significant of which is affordability. This pre-existing problem is heightened now, creating serious concerns for service delivery agencies struggling to maintain contact with their clients, and imposing a serious strain on low income families confronted with increased demand for communications services and equipment as their children require online educational support while in confinement. While service providers are attempting to scale up telehealth and other virtual services, lack of access to hardware and data for some clients is a significant barrier to this approach. This is a particular concern for older people and people with disability who are reliant on the support of service delivery agencies.

Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN)
Australia's peak body representing communications consumers

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We are also receiving reports from remote and very remote communities, including Indigenous communities, that telecommunications services are now dropping out with increasing frequency. The significant concern will be if emergency calls for evacuating very ill patients and telehealth assistance fail.

The connectivity problems for many individuals are additionally exacerbated by the closure of libraries, cutting off those reliant on library public WiFi and desktop computers.

We urge you to initiate the following measures to alleviate these barriers as follows:

- Work with NBN Co and Minister Corman to enable NBN to offer targeted low-cost broadband for households of those eligible for income support payments including Jobseeker Payment, pensions, Parenting Payment, student payments, Special Benefit recipients of the Commonwealth Health Care Card and low-income families eligible for Family Tax Benefit Part A. This proposal is fully outlined in ACCAN's [No Australian Left Offline](#) policy proposal (see attached).
- Fund and work with State and Territory governments and the telecommunications industry to offer a relief package of basic telecommunications equipment for households without functional equipment, or who require additional equipment to meet the needs of school age children.
- Establish a free telephone service for people with low digital literacy to receive direct technical and skills support.
- Ensure that people can connect by phone with Services Australia and employment services without charge.
- Provide support for community service providers facing difficulties transferring to or scaling up virtual services. Many providers have limited capacity and are having difficulties offering telehealth or other virtual services to vulnerable clients.
- Work with the telecommunications industry to add to their positive initiatives so far by:
 - ensuring all customers, including pre-paid customers with expired credit, have ongoing data free access to important government health information, My Gov and Centrelink websites, education platforms and services, and employment services, particularly for people with only pre-paid mobile services as a way of staying connected;

- o implementing measures to prevent disconnections until the crisis is over - noting both Telstra and Optus have put arrangements in place but this should be an industry wide response;
- o implementing industry wide moratoriums on late fees and penalties for all consumers, and on debt collection referrals and collections;
- o implementing measures to address telecommunications drop- outs in remote and very remote communities, in consultation with affected communities. This could include upgrades to software, providing more satellite phones as a back-up, or prioritising voice over data and
- o assisting Telstra to make their WiFi enabled payphones free during this time, targeting the needs of homeless people.

Together with your ongoing dialogue with the industry to monitor and increase network capacity at this critical time, these measures are urgently needed to provide a safety net that mitigates against enduring economic, health, educational and social impacts.

Australians are more dependent on connectivity than ever before and without immediate action we face an alarming escalation of the digital divide at a time when we can least afford it.

We are keen to discuss our proposals with you in more detail, with Teresa Corbin, ACCAN CEO as the key anchor contact.

Signatories:

ACCAN
 Anglicare Australia
 Australian Seniors Computer Club
 Association
 ACOSS
 ACTCOSS
 SACOSS
 TASCROSS
 QCOSS
 NTCOSS
 WACOSS
 NCOSS
 Australian Digital Inclusion Alliance
 The Benevolent Society
 Choice
 Combined Pensioners and Superannuants
 Association

Common Grace
 Connecting Up
 Consumer Action Law Centre
 First Nations Media
 Good Things Foundation
 InfoXchange
 Leep
 National Seniors
 The Smith Family
 Technology for Ageing and Disability WA
 Uniting Care Australia
 Women with Disability Australia
 WorkVentures
 Professor Julian Thomas
 Chris Dodds, Chair, Telstra Low Income
 Measures Advisory Committee



Cc:

The Hon Scott Morrison, MP, Prime Minister

The Hon Mark Coulton, MP, Minister for Regional Communications

The Hon Josh Frydenberg, MP, Treasurer

Senator the Hon Mathias Cormann, Minister for Finance