

Open Letter for Effective Bills Relief during COVID-19

Dear the CEOs of Energy Retailers,

We, the undersigned, representing diverse constituents across Sydney and NSW, write this open letter calling on energy retailers to **be proactive** in providing assistance to customers experiencing financial stress due to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Monday 23 March 2020, the Sydney Alliance Council discussed the need to ensure all energy customers in financial stress can access payment support and other forms of assistance via their retailers. The Sydney Alliance Council [endorsed](#) the following asks of energy retailers, to help guarantee energy for all, namely:

- 1. No disconnections.** Companies should continue to offer their services without interruption.
- 2. Pause debt collection proceedings.** People should not be hassled by debt collectors during this time.
- 3. Waive penalty and late fees, including additional interest charges.** No one should pay extra if they are struggling to pay bills on time.

This endorsement affirms and supports the policy recommendations already made by energy consumer advocates and community organisations, including the Public Interest Advocacy Centre and the Consumer Law Action Centre.

We welcome the [expectations set by the Australian Energy Regulator](#) for energy businesses. We also recognise that some energy companies have issued statements outlining how they will support customers experiencing financial stress during this time.

This pandemic is not business as usual. The response that should be forthcoming from retailers is not a slight re-working of existing frameworks for support. Rather, far more proactive measures are needed to protect energy customers and to avoid the accumulation of unmanageable debt.

People who are staying at home do so to protect our communities. The cost of these actions, which benefit us all, should not be borne by individuals and families who are already struggling to make ends meet.

Energy is an essential service. Energy companies that are signatories to the Energy Charter have pledged to put customers at the centre of their work, and to address community expectations.

COVID-19 and Wide-Ranging Economic Disruptions

The disruptions caused by COVID-19 pandemic are having unprecedented and wide-reaching impacts on everyday people. [An estimated 1 million people](#) are set to lose their jobs in the coming months. Currently, many of our members are accessing Centrelink for the first time and worrying about how to afford rent, groceries, and medicine.

Community restrictions regarding social distancing mean that many people are spending significantly more time at home. In coming weeks and months, they will see their energy bills increase at a time when they have a much lower capacity to pay.

While energy bills are not yet front of mind, we wait with trepidation the impact the next quarter's energy bills will have on our members, and particularly on those experiencing other forms of disadvantage, many of which have been brought into stark relief during this pandemic.

Without support and relief, we fear members of our communities will be left burdened by debt and will risk being trapped in compounding cycles of financial hardship.

Furthermore, the scale of economic disruptions mean that time is required before Australia will recover. Vulnerable customers will need time and support to get back on their feet.

Universal access to payment support and other forms of assistance

We recognise energy retailers have existing programs designed to support vulnerable customers. We also understand that while on hardship programs, customers have access to a range of supports and protections, including a commitment to no disconnections.

However, access to such support is not straightforward and is heavily reliant on the customer's own advocacy. This is problematic because:

- [Research](#) shows many people are unaware of their entitlement to support during times of difficulty.
- Access issues, including technology and language barriers, prevent many people from reaching out for assistance. These issues are particularly acute in some communities, and in many rural and regional locations.
- [Reactions](#) to financial stress will be varied and may include denial, shame, anger, and depression. These reactions mean many people will not reach out for support before entering crisis.

Furthermore, eligibility restrictions will see many customers experiencing financial stress fall through the cracks during the pandemic.

We are facing an unprecedented crisis, where families who have never worried about paying a bill are facing this difficult question for the first time. We call on energy retailers to take **proactive** steps to ensure that no one is left behind during the crisis.

Call to Action

We are calling on all energy retailers to:

1. ensure payment support and other forms of assistance are open to any customer having trouble paying their bills;
2. confirm unequivocally that no customers will be disconnected without their agreement during the COVID-19 pandemic till at least 31 July 2020;
3. pause debt collection proceedings until at least 31 July;
4. waive penalty and late fees, including additional interest charges; and
5. communicate clearly the forms of assistance available to their customers, simplify the processes required to access assistance, and put in place proactive measures to reach out to people who are late with their payments.

We will be keeping track of energy retailer's commitments and publishing responses to our membership.

Signed,

Jack De Groot
Chief Executive Officer
St Vincent De Paul Society
NSW

Representing 26,000 members and volunteers and the 1500-plus staff members located in the 10 Central Councils across NSW.

Emma Maiden
Head of Advocacy
Uniting

9000 social justice, community services and chaplaincy workers across NSW-ACT.

Michael Thomson
NSW State Secretary, National
Tertiary Education Union

Representing almost 9,000 workers in universities based in NSW.

Meagan Lawson
CEO, The Council of the Ageing
NSW (COTA NSW)

Peak organisation representing 1 million people over 50 in NSW.

Anne Lane
President, Society of
Presentation Sisters Australia
and Papua New Guinea

200 members

Mel Gatfield
NSW Secretary
United Workers Union

Over 150,000 members nationally.

Maha Abdo
Chief Executive Officer
Muslim Women Australia

Fr. Peter Smith
Justice and Peace Promoter,
Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney

Representing Archbishop
Anthony Fisher OP and the
Catholics of Sydney
Archdiocese.

Chris Gambian
Chief Executive
Nature Conservation Council
of NSW

Representing a community of over 160 conservation organisations and 60,000 voices for nature.

Ahmed Omar Mowafaq
Secretary, Australian Arabic
Organisation Incorporated

30,000 Australian Arabic community members in Western Sydney.

Imam Shadi Alsuleiman
President, Australian National
Imams Council (ANIC)

Peak body representing the Muslim community in Australia, numbering tens of thousands of people.

Alex Claassens
NSW Branch Secretary
Rail, Tram & Bus Union

Representing 14,000 workers in the transport industry

Leo Patterson Ross
Chief Executive Officer
Tenants' Union of NSW

The Tenants' Union of NSW represents the interests of 2 million people who live in rented homes in NSW.

Patrice Moriarty
Social Justice Coordinator,
Diocese of Parramatta

320,000 Catholics from Parramatta to the Megalong Valley

Michal Levy
Member of Emanuel
Synagogue

Jewish Voices for Power
50 Members

Cecily May
Secretary, Catholics in
Coalition for Justice and Peace

250 Members

Mrs Violeta Escultura
President, Alliance of
Philippine Community
Organisations Inc

Serving 5000 Filipino-
Australians within Sydney
metropolitan and regional
areas of NSW.

Mr Ruben Amores, President-
Kapit-bahayan Cooperative
Ltd,

Managing housing
accommodations to 23
multicultural families from low
to medium income within the
Western and South Western
Sydney region

Bipin Paul
Small Business Owner,
Australian Malayalee
Community Member

Yumi Lee
Manager, Older Women's
Network NSW

Representing older women
across NSW

Nirmal Joy
Co-Chair, the Voices for Power
Project

Sandeep Kirpalani
Project Co-Ordinator/Course
Authority
Centre for Social Impact,
UNSW

Social Entrepreneurship
Practicums
UNSW Sydney

On behalf of 1000s of students
who have lost jobs.

Dr Cen Amores
Immediate Past President,
Auburn Small Community
Organisation Network Inc

A network of 49 CALD and
refugee not-for-profit
community organisations
serving 5000 constituents
within the Cumberland LGA
and its surrounds

Carolina Gottardo
Director, Jesuit Refugee
Service Australia

Serving 3,000+ people seeking
protection and have 2,000+
supporters in NSW

Jan Barnett
Josephite Justice Network or
the Sisters of St Joseph.

Number approximately three
thousand women and men.

Asha Ramzan
Executive Officer
Sydney Community Forum

Regional community
organisation active in the
Canterbury, Marrickville,
Kogarah, Rockdale and
Hurstville Local Government
Areas of Sydney

Annie Nielsen
Chairperson
Parramatta Climate Action
Network

50 members working for social
and environmental justice
focusing especially to help
citizens of Western Sydney
bring about positive action on
Climate Change

Shane Slade
Council Member
Engadine Uniting Church
45 Congregational Members

Sheikh Adid Alrubai
Chairman
Muhajirin Association For
Community Development Inc.

Serving 500 people in Western
Sydney

Catherine Stuart
Secretary
Wollondilly Resilience Network
(WRen) Inc.

A network of over 65
Wollondilly, Wingecarribee
and Macarthur residents