

OPEN LETTER TO ENERGY RETAILERS: BILLS RELIEF DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Posted by Thuy Linh Nguyen 80.20sc on May 28, 2020

28 MAY 2020 UPDATES

We received the following responses from energy retailers:

- From Origin Energy: <http://tiny.cc/hb3ppz> (<http://tiny.cc/hb3ppz>)
- From AGL: <http://tiny.cc/n92ppz> (<http://tiny.cc/n92ppz>)
- From Alinta Energy: <http://tiny.cc/4zcupz> (<http://tiny.cc/4zcupz>)

A full analysis and report of the Response of Energy Retailers to come...

TO THE CEOS OF ENERGY RETAILERS,

12 May 2020

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 (https://www.sydneyalliance.org.au/covid_19_response?

recruiter_id=1198&fbclid=IwAR3ae36sltj6LDY1O-MiljU6ILBShiWBFeckmWSaIN8r-iYFb6r2k16xKNA) 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 (<https://www.aer.gov.au/publications/corporate-documents/aer-statement-of-expectations-of-energy-businesses-protecting-consumers-and-the-energy-market-during-covid-19>) 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 (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-24/centrelink-minister-stuart-robert-not-anticipate-coronavirus/12080612>) 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 (<https://piac.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/PIAC-CTTE-Consolidated-Report-FINAL.pdf>) 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 (<https://piac.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/PIAC-CTTE-Consolidated-Report-FINAL.pdf>) 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

Over 15,000 members, volunteers and employees working to shape more just and compassionate communities across NSW.

Mel Gatfield

NSW Secretary

United Workers Union

Over 150,000 members nationally.

Imam Shadi Alsuleiman

President

Australian National Imams Council

(ANIC)

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

Emma Maiden

Head of Advocacy

Uniting

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

Maha Abdo

Chief Executive Officer

Muslim Women Australia

Alex Claassens

NSW Branch Secretary

Rail, Tram & Bus Union

Representing 14,000 workers in the transport industry.

Michael Thomson

NSW State Secretary

National Tertiary Education Union

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

Fr. Peter Smith

Justice and Peace Promoter

Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney

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

Leo Patterson Ross

Chief Executive Officer

Tenants' Union of NSW

Representing the interests of 2 million people who live in rented homes in NSW.

Meagan Lawson

Chief Executive Officer

*The Council of the Ageing NSW
(COTA NSW)*

Peak organisation representing 1 million people over 50 in NSW.

Chris Gambian

Chief Executive Officer

*Nature Conservation Council of
NSW*

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

Patrice Moriarty

Social Justice Coordinator

Catholic Diocese of Parramatta

320,000 Catholics from Parramatta to the Megalong Valley.

Anne Lane

President

*Society of Presentation Sisters
Australia and Papua New Guinea*

Representing 200 members.

Cecily May

Secretary

*Catholics in Coalition for Justice and
Peace*

250 Members

Michal LevyMember of *Emanuel Synagogue*

Representing *Jewish Voices for
Power* with 50 Members.

Ahmed Omar Mowafaq

Secretary

*Australian Arabic Organisation
Incorporated*

30,000 Australian Arabic
community members in Western
Sydney.

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.

Yumi Lee

Manager

Older Women's Network NSW

Representing older women across
NSW

Bipin Paul

Small Business Owner

Australian Malayalee Community
Member

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*

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.

Asha Ramzan

Executive Officer

Sydney Community Forum

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

Jan Barnett

*Josephite Justice Network or the
Sisters of St Joseph*

Representing approximately three
thousand women and men.

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

Representing 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.

Azra Ahmed

President

*Pakistani Australian Women
Association Inc (PAWA)*

Working among the Pakistani
Women in St George Area


Randa Kattan

Chief Executive Officer

Arab Council Australia

Signatories as at 12 May 2020.

 FACEBOOK ([HTTP://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/SHARER/SHARER.PHP?
U=HTTPS://WWW.SYDNEYALLIANCE.ORG.AU/COVID-19BILLS](http://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https://www.sydneyalliance.org.au/covid-19bills))

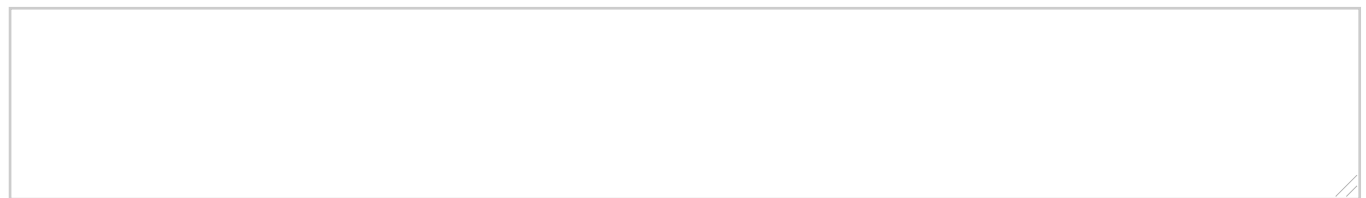
 TWITTER ([HTTP://TWITTER.COM/SHARE?
URL=HTTPS://WWW.SYDNEYALLIANCE.ORG.AU/COVID-
19BILLS&RELATED=SYDNEYALLIANCE&TEXT=OPEN+LETTER+TO+ENERGY+RETAILERS%3A+BILLS+RELIEF+DURING+COVID-
19+PANDEMIC](http://twitter.com/share?url=https://www.sydneyalliance.org.au/covid-19bills&related=sydneyalliance&text=open+letter+to+energy+retailers%3A+bills+relief+during+covid-19+pandemic))

 EMAIL ([MAILTO:?BODY=HTTPS://WWW.SYDNEYALLIANCE.ORG.AU/COVID-19BILLS](mailto:?body=https://www.sydneyalliance.org.au/covid-19bills))

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