
Energy watchdogs ramp up monitoring to protect customers

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Electricity and gas

Federal and state energy regulators are keeping an eye on payment plan, hardship, disconnection and credit collection figures as energy businesses are called upon to put customers first during the current global health crisis.

The Australian Energy Regulator (AER) and the Essential Services Commission of Victoria today launched a joint effort to collect data to rigorously monitor the ability for energy customers to pay their energy bills in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

AER chair, Clare Savage and commission chair, Kate Symons have called on retailers to cooperate by volunteering more timely data, above what they are currently required to provide.

“When people have lost their jobs or business through no fault of their own, it is only fair to expect that they be given any and all help possible, and that includes from their energy providers,” Ms Savage said.

“We are asking retailers to provide more timely information to us about matters such as hardship, payment plans, disconnections and credit collection so we can monitor how customers are being supported during this time.

“This information will also give us the ability to respond quickly and appropriately to early warning signs of energy customers experiencing distress.”

Last month the AER launched its [Statement of Expectations of energy businesses: Protecting consumers and the energy market during COVID-19](#) that outlined principles retailers in the National Electricity Market (NEM) should adopt to support residents and small businesses experiencing financial stress.

At the same time, the Essential Services Commission outlined the [support energy retailers must offer Victorians customers who are facing payment difficulties](#).

“We are pleased to see a positive response from retailers to our Statement of Expectations and access to more timely data will help us see if our expectations are being met,” Ms Savage said.

Ms Symons said the full economic impact of the crisis has not yet been felt.

“Representatives from the community sector have warned we’re in a ‘calm before the storm’ when it comes to energy bill stress, predicting calls for help will skyrocket over coming months.

“Having real time data will be important to ensuring we can respond quickly to the needs of energy customers,” she said.

Outcomes of the monitoring will help inform government responses to the crisis.

It will also inform whether any changes are needed to existing guidelines or rules to better protect customers. This includes rules and guidelines on minimum disconnection levels, customer hardship, and compliance procedures.

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