

## Increase in Victorians on water hardship programs

Victorian water customers are moving onto hardship programs in record numbers during the coronavirus pandemic, [new data collected](#) by the state regulator shows.

The number of Victorians taking up hardship assistance from the water businesses has increased since April, while there's also been an increase in applications for government utility relief grants.

Commission water director Marcus Crudden says the number of customers in hardship programs increased by 14 per cent between April and August this year, from 19,832 to 22,655.

"Weekly applications for state government utility relief grants have also increased significantly, peaking at 714 applications in the last week of August which is four times the historical average of about 175 per week," he said.

Mr Crudden says it's been pleasing to see Victorians supported by water businesses.

"It is encouraging to see water businesses have responded well by stepping up to provide additional support to those who have been affected by job loss or a reduction in income.

"We have heard consistently at our [regular consumer roundtables](#) with workers in the community help sector that water businesses are leading the way in terms of responding to customers in need," he said.

The data shows since April, water businesses stopped restricting customers' water supply and initiating legal action for non-payment of bills. This support was reflected in the latest [customer sentiment survey](#), with all water businesses seeing increases in trust, reputation and overall satisfaction.

Mr Crudden says the regulator recently [amended its customer service code](#) for urban and rural water businesses to incorporate [new hardship principles](#) developed by the National Cabinet.

"These changes were designed to ensure Victoria's consumer protection framework is consistent, transparent and accessible for the benefit of all," he said.

**About the data:** Data is reported weekly by water businesses and is not audited by the commission. We are collecting a small subset of the annual data that is included in our annual water performance report.

**For further information call: Clayton Bennett, Senior Communication Adviser, 0447 933 140**

To keep up to date, visit us at [esc.vic.gov.au](http://esc.vic.gov.au) or follow us on LinkedIn and Twitter