

Water hardship rising to new heights

The number of households needing help with water bills has hit a new peak as the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic continues to be felt across the state.

New data from the Essential Services Commission shows the number of metropolitan customers being given hardship grants in February was higher than at any other time over the past year.

The commission's water director Marcus Crudden says just under 200 metropolitan customers were awarded hardship grants each week in February.

"That's around 16 per cent above the pre-pandemic norm, and the highest weekly average since we began these reports in April last year," he said.

Mr Crudden says the latest monthly data shows the number of households receiving assistance has been growing steadily since the start of the pandemic.

"There are 5400 more metropolitan customers and 900 more regional customers in hardship programs now than when we first started collecting this data in April last year," he said.

Mr Crudden says water businesses are expecting more customers to need help in the months ahead as national income support schemes are wound back.

"Victoria's water businesses have been proactive in letting customers know what help is available but they are concerned what will happen when JobKeeper and JobSeeker are wound back to pre-pandemic levels," he said.

The latest data collected by the commission since April 2020 shows:

- The number of customers in hardship programs rose by 2.3 per cent from 25,515 in January to 26,099 in February (metropolitan 19,454 to 19,890, regional 6061 to 6209).
- The number of [utility relief grant](#) applications increased to an average of 550 per week, up from 421 in January (two to four times higher than the pre-pandemic historical weekly average).

The [coronavirus data report](#) is now available on the commission's website.

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

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