

Thousands of Victorians calling for energy assistance

New data shows Victorians worried about paying electricity bills because of the coronavirus pandemic have been reaching out to electricity retailers with around 10,000 calls for help every week for the past few months.

The Essential Services Commission says data from Victorian electricity retailers shows 116,805 calls for help were made to retailers between 30 March and 31 May 2020.

The commission's energy director Sarah McDowell says the number of calls highlights the importance of having the right support framework available to all Victorian consumers.

"Our [payment difficulty framework](#) sets out a clear set of obligations requiring retailers to offer support to households before they get into trouble including flexible payment options as well as information about lowering energy bills or accessing concessions.

"Our framework is now the national standard, referred to by consumers and other states as the benchmark to measure other regulatory frameworks against," she said.

On a positive note, the data shows the number of disconnections for non-payment fell to almost nothing over the past month despite being at the height of coronavirus restrictions.

"In the early days of the pandemic some requests for disconnection for non-payment were made by retailers, however virtually no requests have been made since mid-April.

"This is a good sign that the industry has responded to calls for compassion and in line with national and state expectations to put customers first at this time," she said.

The data also shows average arrears for residential electricity customers who were receiving assistance in May increased by four to nine per cent and the average amount owed was \$1515.

The total number of residential customers missing paying bills by the due date stabilised in May, falling from an average 9,367 per week in April to 7,469 per week.

The commission is [collecting data](#) from energy retailers on a regular basis to keep track of how the coronavirus pandemic is affecting households and small businesses.

The data does not allow any specific conclusions to be drawn on the impact of the pandemic because datasets may not be complete, debt levels have a lag time and payment assistance data may not pick up alternative deferred payment options being offered by some retailers.

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