

A Response to "Supporting Customers, Avoiding Labels - Energy Hardship Inquiry Draft Report", September, 2015

Introduction:

This Response is a continuation of a process which began in June 2013 with a letter from Members & Associates of the St Andrews Bendigo/Axedale congregation of the Uniting Church in Australia to the then Minister for Consumer Affairs (Hon Heidi Victoria) entitled "Unfair Energy Disconnections Rise in Victoria".

The process has been continued with communications between the Essential Services Commission and the Bendigo Uniting Churches Social Justice Group (BUCSJG).

The Convener of the BUCSJG (Garth Phillips) attended the Bendigo Public Forum on 18 September last.

This Response has been developed by the BUCSJG.

The Response:

1) Section 7.2 (Overview of the Proposed Framework)

Is 28 days sufficient before disconnection if the customer doesn't pay their bill & does not engage with their retailer?

What if the customer is hospitalized for a protracted period & has no ready means of monitoring communications from the retailer (and others)? Lengthy periods of hospitalization/rehabilitation/recovery would not be uncommon for the elderly.

Could an enhanced method of communication be contemplated? A home visit/enquiry of neighbours would not seem unreasonable.

2) Minimum Standard for Admissible Communication between Customer & Retailer

Ultimately, the success of the provisions of this Draft Report depends on effective communication between the Customer & the Retailer. What forms of communication are admissible?

The Draft Report refers to "web-site & call centre" (p103); "phone" (p106); "formal communication" (p107); "required to contact a customer" (p108) & "not necessarily involve a physical visit to the customer's home" (p108).

Each of these above means of communicate assumes a facility/faculty. Not all customers have access to computers. Some times credit runs out on mobile 'phones when customers are negotiating Retailer "telephone trees" in attempting to make contact.

This is not an easy one!! Perhaps the way forward is to link the most reliable means/method of communication with the level of risk of disconnection in the path towards disconnection. This would minimize the chance of disconnection.

Generally, it could be useful to encourage customers to engage in good business practice - keeping a record of communications to & from the Retailer. This is not easy with 'phone conversations. However, future difficulties can be minimized if, at the end of 'phone conversations, the customer seeks verification of what has been decided.

3) Use of Electricity Usage monitoring Devices

The Bendigo Sustainability Group has received funding from the State Government to provide Community Energy Awareness Forums. As part of this program electricity usage monitoring devices were being offered to customers.

Wider knowledge about this facility could assist customers to manage their usage & hopefully, the possibility of disconnection.

Prepared by the Bendigo Uniting Churches Social Justice Group, 5 October 2015.