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## COVID-19 highlights need for affordable, reliable communications

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) has called on the nation's telecommunications networks to ensure that no Australian is left offline during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the world is undoubtedly entering uncertain times, it has been widely acknowledged that telecommunications networks will have an increasingly important role in keeping consumers connected. COVID-19 is expected to highlight the now vital role of reliable telecommunications services in the everyday lives of Australians, whether for work, education, health, or social use.

"The fact is that an internet connection is now a basic utility," said ACCAN CEO Teresa Corbin. "If people can't afford to be online, or aren't guaranteed a reliable connection, there can be serious consequences."

As the consumer voice for phone and internet users, ACCAN has welcomed the government's expansion of telehealth services during the pandemic.

"These new telehealth services could benefit some of the most vulnerable members of our community. However, it is often these same vulnerable people who are struggling with the costs of keeping connected."

ACCAN's research shows that low-income households pay three times as much of their income to stay connected as their more fortunate counterparts.

"If we want people to use and benefit from these telehealth services, the reality is that the affordability of broadband services has to be addressed."

The resiliency of telco networks will also be tested in the coming weeks and months as social distancing efforts prompt more and more people to turn to online services. With many workplaces now requiring staff to work remotely, the NBN in particular will need to be able to adapt to changing consumer demands.

"Ordinarily, consumers are concerned about the download speeds that their home broadband service can achieve," explained Ms Corbin. "However, with more people working from home, there's going to be an increased demand for upload speeds as well."

"It's important that you check what plan you are on so you're aware of what speeds you should be getting – both upload and download. If you're not getting what you've paid for, contact your telco to request a free line-speed test. It's their responsibility to ensure that your service is capable of achieving the speeds they've promised."

Efforts to constrain COVID-19 are also impacting telco customer service. Call centres and online help options have been affected and consumers will face longer wait times for assistance.

Where possible, ACCAN advises consumers to use reliable information to troubleshoot their issues. ACCAN's own advice and phone and internet tips can be found at <http://accan.org.au/tip-sheets>