



Media Release

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USO needs to guarantee essential communications services

In its [submission](#) to the Productivity Commission's review of the [Universal Service Obligation](#) (USO), the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network ([ACCAN](#)) has proposed an expanded scope for the USO, broader affordability measures and changes to ensure greater inclusion for people with a disability. The proposed changes would ensure that all consumers have access to essential communications services.

The current USO only guarantees supply of a standard telephone voice service. ACCAN believes this scope must be broadened to also guarantee data services, essential content (education and government services) and include service guarantees for connection, fault repairs and reliability standards.

"Communications services are essential for consumers to get access to government services, education and more," said ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin. "In today's digital age we need a USO with a broader scope and one that takes into account the breadth of services we are using, including data services and content. We also need a USO that is going to guarantee that we have timeframes around getting connected to voice and data services and that these services are reliable."

ACCAN has identified inadequacies in current low income support arrangements, and proposes that these be reviewed to overcome communications affordability barriers. Previous [ACCAN and SACOSS research](#) found that many low income consumers are struggling to pay their telecommunications costs with 62 per cent of respondents either experiencing difficulty paying, having to cut back or stop using one or more telecommunications services for financial reasons in the last 12 months. Affordability measures going forward should be retail service provider independent to give consumers choice in their provider.

"Our research shows that low-income consumers do struggle to get and stay connected to telecommunications services. Affordability issues could be addressed through a revised Centrelink Telephone Allowance or through the expansion of carrier licence conditions so that all retail service providers are required to offer low-income support and services," added Ms Corbin. "Another alternative could see nbn provide eligible end users with a coupon or voucher for discounted services to be redeemed from their choice of service provider."

ACCAN's submission outlined two recommendations related to greater accessibility for people with a disability. The first is that a Disability Telecommunication Service be established to provide communications information, equipment provision, training and support. The second recommendation is that the National Relay Service (NRS) should be expanded to include services for Deafblind and multilingual consumers, with all services offered 24 hours per day.

MEDIA CONTACT

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The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is Australia's peak communications consumer organisation. The operation of ACCAN is made possible by funding provided by the Commonwealth of Australia under section 593 of the Telecommunications Act 1997. This funding is recovered from charges on telecommunications carriers.

“A disability equipment program that is flexible and reflects the current communications technologies and consumer trends is needed under the USO,” said Ms Corbin. “People with disability have diverse communications needs and therefore an updated USO must move away from a one-size-fits-all equipment program.

“The NRS provides consumers who are Deaf, hearing-impaired or speech-impaired with functionally equivalent availability to the standard telephone service available to general consumers. However, at the moment the video relay service is only provided on a limited basis which excludes Auslan users from functionally equivalent services. ACCAN argues that video relay needs to be provided on a 24/7 basis.”

For more information, contact Luke Sutton on luke.sutton@accan.org.au or 0409 966 931. For the latest updates, follow ACCAN on [Twitter](#) or like us on [Facebook](#).

FYI – ACCAN’s 2016 National Conference, [ACCANect: Equipping consumers to stay connected](#), is coming up – it will be held in Sydney on 14-15 September. We have an [exciting program planned](#). The event will focus on how to empower consumers to get and stay connected to the phone and broadband services they need. Get in touch with us to arrange a media pass.

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