

Monday, 23rd March 2020

Government must act to address broadband affordability as unemployment predicted to rise

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) has urged the Federal Government to prioritise a specific stimulus strategy for telecommunications services to keep Australians connected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Continuing social distancing and self-isolation efforts have resulted in millions of Australians increasingly relying on their home broadband service. As Australia's peak body representing telecommunications consumers, ACCAN is calling on the Government to fast-track a proposal for a wholesale broadband concession that would provide financially stressed Australians with cheaper home broadband.

ACCAN's proposal would see NBN Co offer households on limited incomes a 50 mbps unlimited broadband service at a wholesale price of \$20 per month. This would allow telcos to offer broadband plans for as little as \$30 per to struggling households on government income support.

"The fact is that a reliable broadband service is now a vital utility in our everyday lives," said ACCAN CEO, Teresa Corbin. "We're seeing more and more people being asked to work or study from home each day, but that's simply not possible if they can't afford to be online."

Since launching, ACCAN's "No Australian Left Offline" concessional broadband proposal has garnered support from over 30 organisations including The Smith Family, The Benevolent Society, National Rural Health Alliance, and Council on the Aging (COTA).

The nation is facing economic uncertainty and it is widely acknowledged that unemployment rates are likely to climb in the near future as the hospitality, retail and tourism sectors are increasingly impacted by COVID-19 social distancing efforts.

"Families are already struggling with the cost of living. If the economic downturn continues, it's going to mean that people will have to start making choices between which utilities they can afford to keep on," said Ms Corbin.

As education and health services are increasing offered online, those that are unable to afford a home broadband service risk being left behind.

"Just last week ACCAN was contacted by a student who has spent over \$500 in four months on excess data fees after having to use their mobile phone to complete school work because they do not have home broadband."

"If these affordability issues are not urgently addressed, we are undoubtedly going to see a deepening of the digital divide. This will have long-term economic, health and social impacts on countless Australians for years to come."