

COVID-19 telco principles fail to adequately protect telco consumers: ACCAN

[Today's renewal of the telco COVID-19 principles](#) by the telecommunications industry is a symbolic effort but will not sufficiently protect telco consumers, according to the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN).

First introduced in April 2020, the telecommunications hardship principles for COVID-19 were co-designed by the Federal Government and the telecommunications industry to provide a consistent baseline across industry to help customers stay connected, including those who are experiencing hardship.

“While we’ve welcomed the telco industry’s vocal support for Australians experiencing hardship during the COVID crisis, the fact of the matter is that these principles don’t actually offer any additional support for consumers in need,” said ACCAN CEO Teresa Corbin. “They are simply re-emphasising their existing obligations under the TCP Code and Complaints Handling Standard.”

“If ever there was a time for additional measures to safeguard consumers— it’s now. The impact of rolling lockdowns is taking a serious toll on small businesses and consumers alike.”

A report by Financial Counsellors Australia in April 2021 stated that the financial hardship practices of telecommunications companies are significantly worse than those offered by other industries, such as banking. Earlier reports by [the Consumer Action Law Centre](#) and [Consumer Policy Research Centre](#) also highlight the negative experiences that consumers had with telco providers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We know that vulnerable people in hardship are not getting the support they need from their telco provider. This puts them at risk of losing their connection which is vital for work, education and health,” said Ms Corbin.

“There needs to be a quick and easy process to get hardship arrangements in place for telco customers in need. Telecommunications are an essential service, and it is time for them to be treated as such.”

As well as addressing financial hardship, ACCAN is calling on the telecommunications industry to automatically extend the expiry of prepaid mobile phone credit and relax the data restrictions for mobile plans to allow communications consumers to stay connected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The peak body for communications consumers has also emphasised the need for small businesses to be able to hibernate services during periods of lockdown.

“There are thousands of small businesses across the country who have had to either close their businesses or move their staff to a working from home arrangement because of the various lockdowns currently in place in response to the current COVID-19 outbreaks,” said Ms Corbin.

“Small businesses should be able to pause their phone and internet connections while they are not in use so that they are faced with one less financial stress during this period.”