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Media Release

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1 in 5 Australians struggling to pay a Telco bill.

Households are increasingly feeling the impact of higher costs of living. New research by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN), conducted in March, has revealed a fifth of consumers reporting that they missed a payment for a phone or internet service because they could not afford it.

Among those that were surveyed, of those responsible for paying telco bills in their household, 38% experienced phone and internet payment problems in the last 2 years. Over a quarter (26%) of the 1000 consumers surveyed regarded their phone and internet costs as unaffordable.

“Australians are enduring significant cost-of-living pressures, and telecommunications affordability is a prominent issue for low-income consumers. In 2023, having a home internet connection is essential. Without it children can struggle to complete homework, and families can find it extremely difficult to access online services such as telehealth, banking, and important government services to name just a few,” said ACCAN CEO, Andrew Williams.

ACCAN’s survey also revealed that to help pay for telco products and services in the last two years:

- 14% used a payday loan.
- 16% used wage advance products.
- 24% borrowed from friends or family.

Not being able to afford telecommunications products or services can result in additional harm. When considering their telecommunications bills in the last 2 years, consumers reported:

- 21% went without other essentials such as food or medicine to pay a bill.
- 20% used their phone and/or internet less than they needed to help save money.
- 9% were contacted by a debt collector about a phone or internet debt.
- 19% incurred fees from their phone or internet company for paying their bill late.

ACCAN’s No Australian Left Offline initiative details the benefits of introducing a 50mbps unlimited broadband service offered at a wholesale price of \$20 per month by NBN Co to households receiving government financial support. Implementing a concessional broadband service would make it easier for consumers receiving government support to access education services, find and gain employment and reduce social isolation.

92% of respondents indicated their support for an affordable (base level) internet plan to be available to consumers.

“If Australia is to be a leading digital economy and society by 2030, at a minimum we need to make sure that all households are able to afford what’s needed to get them online and stay connected,” said Mr Williams.

Elle Morrell, Community Development Manager at the Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre in Melbourne, says these statistics don’t tell the full story of the people she sees every day and who, she says, are struggling to stay connected.

“Unfortunately, these statistics are not just statistics but are people’s lives everyday as they struggle with digital inclusion in our community. Access to digital connection is as essential a service today as access to electricity. We saw through COVID-19 lockdowns how crippled some sections of the community were in staying connected and accessing basic services such as telehealth and education. This should be a priority area for our government, NBN Co and Telcos to provide a fair service to everyone.”

The Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) is Australia’s peak communication 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.
