



2<sup>nd</sup> of July 2018

Michael Bradley  
Director  
Australian Energy Market Commission  
201 Elizabeth street  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Mr Bradley,

I am writing to you to provide a letter of support for PIAC's submission to the Australian Energy Market Commission's (AEMC) consultation on strengthening protections for customers in hardship rule change. The Physical Disability Council of NSW (PDCN) is the peak body representing people with physical disabilities across New South Wales. This includes people with a range of physical disability issues, from young children and their representatives to aged people, who are from a wide range of socio-economic circumstances and live in metropolitan, rural and regional areas of NSW.

PDCN is an active member of the Energy and Water Consumers' Advocacy Program (EWCAP) a community-based reference group representing the interests of low income and other residential consumers of electricity, facilitated by the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC). PDCN supports PIAC's submission against the consultation paper for the AEMC's strengthening protections for customers in hardship rule change.

PDCN believes the recommendations made by PIAC in their submission will improve customer protections in NSW and the adoption of more robust guidelines concerning hardship are essential to improving the support and assistance provided by retailers to all individuals experiencing payment difficulty.

Greater consumer protections and support for persons facing payment difficulty are essential for people with a physical disability, whom alongside experiencing greater incidence of economic disadvantage, frequently have higher electricity bills and as a result may struggle to pay their energy bills on time, often accumulate arrears and energy related debt.

Many people with physical disabilities receive either a Disability Support Pension or a minimal wage with part-time employment often their only option. Furthermore, the additional costs associated with having a physical disability, such as purchasing mobility equipment, high medical and pharmaceutical costs or regular taxi transport also have a bearing on the ability of people with disabilities to pay significant energy and water costs.

PDCN believes that many individuals in the cohort we represent contribute a larger percentage of their minimal household earning on electricity. PDCN recognises that electricity costs vary depending on individual need however, the use of additional electrical appliances to maintain independence and/or mobility contribute to these costs. For people with disability additional reliance on electricity may include:

- The need to recharge a motorised wheelchair on a daily basis
- The need to run the washing machine more frequently due to incontinence
- The use of a domestic electric door opener to provide greater security
- The need for constant power for life sustaining medical equipment, and other disability related devices

PDCN supports PIAC's position in this submission regarding the importance of the amended rule that defines 'hardship' as **any consumer experiencing payment difficulty**. We believe this amendment is essential as the current rules have resulted in retailer policies that only require the best support measures be offered to 'customers experiencing payment difficulty due to hardship'. As there is no clear definition of who is in hardship and as it is not in the retailer's interest to define people in this way, many consumers will not receive sufficient support to continue to access essential energy services through periods of financial difficulty.

This is a significant problem for financially vulnerable persons including people with disability and is further compounded by individuals being unlikely to self-identify as experiencing hardship due to shame or embarrassment. Consumers are also unlikely to know their entitlements and to ask for assistance to access retailer 'hardship' programs. PDCN believes the rule change is vital to ensure additional burden is not put on the consumer experiencing payment difficulty to demonstrate their eligibility to qualify as being in hardship.

PDCN also supports PIAC's position that enforceable guidelines are necessary to guarantee consistency across retailer support programs, and to ensure that the regulator can better monitor and enforce retailer's actions and the outcomes for consumers.

In addition, PDCN supports PIAC's recommendation that the guidelines be drafted to be consistent with the structure and principle of the recently implemented Victorian Essential Services Commission Payment Difficulty Framework, which removes subjective distinctions between hardship and non-hardship customers and includes minimum entitlements to support for all customers in payment difficulty.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Serena Ovens', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Serena Ovens  
Executive Officer