

The Hon. Daniel Andrews MP
Premier of Victoria
Office of the Premier
1 Treasury Place
Melbourne, Victoria
Australia, 3002

15 July 2016

Dear Premier

Utility Concessions—extending access to asylum seekers

We are writing to you with a request to extend electricity, gas and water concessions to asylum seekers living in the community to enable them to have access to essential services and lead a dignified life.

Consumer Action wrote to you on 23 November 2015 recommending a proportion of the 2016 budget be allocated to expanding the utility concessions framework for people seeking asylum on bridging visas. We understand that the budget has not been extended for this purpose. However, we continue to advocate that utility concessions are instrumental in providing equitable access to energy and water services. We encourage you now to ensure the concessions framework is accessible by all energy and water customers who are facing financial disadvantage and that this includes those people seeking asylum. As you know, in the Victorian community there are approximately 10,000 people seeking asylum living on bridging visas, and they are increasingly experiencing difficulty in paying their utility (electricity, gas and water) bills.

Our agencies, organisations and utility businesses have assisted a number of Victorian families and individuals who struggle to pay for essential services. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that, despite their low-income status, people seeking asylum are not eligible for a Commonwealth concession card that would entitle them to access concessions provided by the Victorian Government.

The majority of people seeking asylum on bridging visas receive only 89% of the Commonwealth Newstart Allowance, which amounts to less than \$500 a fortnight. In Victoria, those people who have been refused any immigration status receive no income, and are reliant on community based organisations for access to basic needs including food and minimal emergency relief support. Asylum seeker households must cover accommodation costs, utilities, travel, food and education. The impact of this is that many face decisions of eating, heating their homes, or a downward spiral of debt and disconnection.

It is well understood that when people are at home during the day, they are using more energy and water, resulting in higher bills. This particularly applies to those people seeking asylum who have not been granted work rights, or who otherwise have faced difficulty securing employment. Access to appropriate hardship support is challenging, and difficult to seek out. It is also pertinent to note that a majority of these people have come from tropical climate conditions and use more energy to keep warm.

The legacy of this is that we are setting them up to fail. While these households have limited support, and are ill-equipped to navigate the market, it is the simple fact that they have insufficient income to cover the costs of their energy use that results in them are entering our economy with a debt that may be difficult, or impossible, to recover from.

We have come together as a cooperative of energy retailers, asylum seeker agencies and advocates responsible for providing on ground support to people seeking asylum to do what is in our collective power to provide access to affordable energy and water.

Independent of government, we are collaborating with energy and water retailers and asylum seeker agencies (listed below) on measures that will extend available programs to people seeking asylum, for example, hardship programs that will assist them through more targeted case handling, finding optimal tariff arrangements, introducing energy efficiency support and tailored arrangements such as debt waivers, payment matching or appliance replacement (depending on the existing programs of the various retailers). We are also reviewing our communications to ensure case workers can access this information. Further, collectively we have identified education opportunities at various points in the asylum seeking pathway into our community, including arrival and housing allocation.

Extending water, gas and electricity concessions to this group will support these efforts and improve their ability to have access to essential services and assist them to meet their payment obligations. We have committed to work together to ensure that people seeking asylum have equitable and affordable access to energy and water, and invite the Victorian Government to support these efforts through utility concessions.

We would appreciate an opportunity to meet with you to discuss our proposal. Please contact Mick Bellairs on 03 8554 6904 or at michaelb@consumeraction.org.au should you have any questions or to arrange a meeting.

Yours sincerely



Gerard Brody, Chief Executive Officer

Consumer Action Law Centre

On behalf of:

AGL Energy Limited
EnergyAustralia
Origin Energy Limited

AMES Australia
Australian Red Cross
Brotherhood of St Laurence
Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre
Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

Kildonan Uniting Care
Lentara UnitingCare
Refugee Council of Australia
Victorian Council of Social Services

CC/ Minister for Energy & Environment, Minister for Families & Children, Minister for Water, Minister for Health.