



Better outcomes for energy consumers using life support equipment at home

Executive summary

August 2021



Australian
Energy
Foundation

About AEF

The Australian Energy Foundation is leading the way to an equitable zero carbon society. We accelerate the energy transition by empowering communities to take action.

Through our energy expertise, tenacity, and partnerships, we:

- Demonstrate the pathways to a zero-carbon society.
- Influence and inspire to build understanding, investment and action.
- Deliver solutions that have a positive impact.

We are practical visionaries; a national for-purpose organisation whose work benefits all Australians.

Australian Energy Foundation

Melbourne

Level 1, 200 Sydney Road,
Brunswick VIC 3056
PO Box 276, Brunswick VIC 3056
T 03 9385 8585 E info@aef.com.au

Sydney

13/03, 6 O'Connell Street,
Sydney NSW 2000



aef.com.au

ABN 72 095 439 160

This project was funded by Energy Consumers Australia (www.energyconsumersaustralia.com.au) as part of its grants process for consumer advocacy projects and research projects for the benefit of consumers of electricity and natural gas.

The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of Energy Consumers Australia.

1. Executive summary

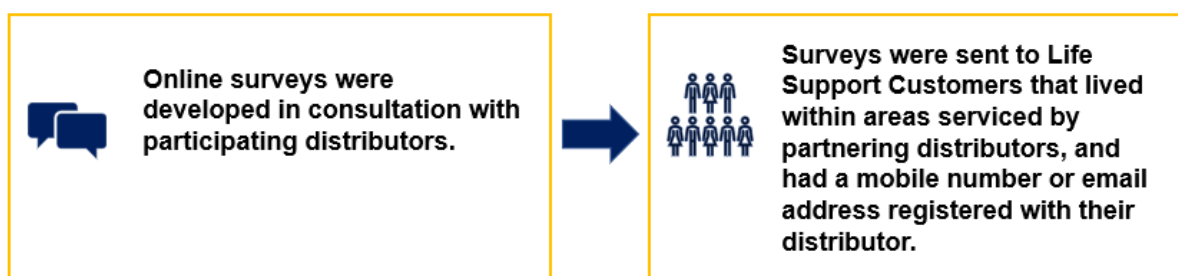
1.1. Background

Life Support Customers are a growing portion of energy industry customers. Life Support Customers are people requiring life support equipment at their premises. The energy industry has developed regulations to protect these customers. Currently, there is limited data available regarding Life Support Customers. Understanding the diverse needs and specific circumstances of Life Support Customers is critical to providing appropriate services.

1.2. Aims and methodology

This research (funded by Energy Consumers Australia) aims to identify ways Life Support Customers can be best supported by the energy industry they rely on, including identifying any changes to energy regulations that will ensure positive outcomes for them. To get a comprehensive understanding of the issues at play, the Australian Energy Foundation (AEF) engaged with consumers, industry, and consumer advocacy groups.

To access the customer voice, AEF partnered with electricity distributors from different states to engage life support customers via online surveys. We were able to identify information needs of life support customers and the level of support that consumers require to ensure they had positive outcomes. While we included feedback from consumers from processes involving both electricity distributors and electricity retailers, the focus of the research was to identify improvements to services largely managed by distributors.



4,000 Life Support Customers participated in an initial survey, of which 3,600 consented to have their responses analysed for this study. 550 participated in a follow-up survey, and 500 consented to analysis for this study.

1.3. Findings

Survey responses analysed provided insight into characteristics of life support customers, their energy needs, and expectations from the service. Key findings are summarised below. Refer to full report for more detailed findings.

1.3.1. Registration processes

The initial survey of 3,600 life support customers found that:

- **48%** found out about registering from their medical practitioner.
- **7%** found the registration process difficult. Many customers conflate the onerous concession reapplication process with their overall experience with the Life Support Customer registration process.
- **93%** do not expect changes to their registrations over the coming year.
- At least **3%** confirmed they either tried to deregister in the past (as can be observed from quotes¹ below), or don't recall signing up as a life support customer.

"I advised you 6 or 7 years ago there was no longer a life support resident".

"I have not had a life support machine at home since April 2019 when I had a kidney transplant, I did inform you, but it appears your records were not updated".

1.3.2. Objectives of being a Life Support Customer

The follow-up survey of 500 life support customers identified the following information.

Customers self-assessed² their life support needs as follows:

59% Use their life support equipment to sustain their life.

41% Use their life support equipment to make their life more comfortable.

¹ Quotes from participants 1 and 2.

² Some people generally tend to underestimate their health requirements (or vice versa). In the absence of qualified opinions from medical professionals, these self-assessments of life support needs or insights should only be used to understand customer needs as they viewed them.

Getting priority restoration after a power outage is the most important benefit of registering as a life support customer. Customers believe their status as a Life Support Customer registrant affords them this benefit, despite not being one of the protections under existing regulations.

Benefits of registering as a life support customer



Other benefits of registering cited by consumers include:

- Protection from disconnection due to non-payment of power bills.
- Identifying their energy needs for distributors to consider when scheduling maintenance.

1.3.3. Concession reapplication process

Most consumers identified the concession / rebate reapplication process as being an unnecessary, costly time-consuming requirement. This was the case for consumers accessing concessions in states where this reapplication is a requirement.

Many of these customers were dissatisfied with the process (as can be observed from quotes below³), citing multiple visits to their doctors to have the necessary paperwork completed as an undue burden on their finances and time (for them and their doctors).

"Biggest headache has been the renewal of the concession with energy retailer. I need this for life."

"I used to claim a rebate but have not renewed for a while because the rebate was not worth the trouble".

"The visit to the GP costs as much as the rebate itself".

"Please don't respond with, 'It's a government requirement'. Use some common sense, and get the rules changed."

³ Quotes from participants 5, 6, 7, and 8

1.3.4. Life support customer characteristics

The initial survey of 3,600 Life Support Customers found that:

- **56%** of life support customers surveyed are over 65 years of age.
- **33%** do not have a carer or partner at home.
- **9%** experience great difficulty managing their bills, despite qualifying for and accessing life support concessions.
- Some consumers may ration their energy consumption or make other sacrifices to afford their energy bills as observed in the comments below⁴.

“Even though I get a discount, my bill is still especially high in winter because of the continued use of a heat pump”.

“Sometimes we don’t eat”

We use power sparingly to reduce the cost”.

“As a disabled person we spend a lot of money on medical needs than the general population, so I think we need more assistance ”

1.3.5. Life support equipment information

The initial survey of 3,600 Life Support Customers found that:

- As many as **26** different types of equipment were identified as being used by customers across three states.
 - **62%** use Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) machines at home.
 - **19%** of households use more than one life support machine
- **62%** use their life support equipment continuously through the night
- **8%** use their life support equipment continuously throughout both day and night
- **68%** expect power to be restored within two hours of an unplanned outage occurring.

⁴ Quotes from participants 9, 10, 11, and 12

- Typically, customers that do not have an action plan in place are more likely to expect power to be restored as soon as possible as can be observed in the quote below.

“No backup, I expect you to restore power ASAP”

1.3.6. Preparedness for power outages


Initial surveys of 3,600 Life Support Customers found that:

- **54%** do not have a prearranged plan for coping during a power outage for reasons cited below:
 - They do not need one for short outages.
 - Do not know what they can do.
 - Do not believe it is their responsibility to have one.
- Many people who use multiple equipment or use their life support equipment continuously throughout the day have multi-step action plans in the event of an outage.
- Only **7%** have access to back-up power.



Many Life Support Customers do not have an adequate prearranged plan, particularly for coping during extended outages.

The following persona has been developed to highlight the importance of consumers developing an adequate action plan for coping during short and extended outages. It also draws attention to the complexity of some life support customers circumstances, when multiple equipment types are used, and when living alone⁵.



Maria is in her 60s and on a disability pension. She lives alone and uses multiple life support equipment at home, each with varying energy needs.

She is dependent on oxygen supply, continuously every hour of the day (24/7 requirement). She uses an oxygen concentrator and a variable positive airway pressure (VPAP) machine connected to an oxygen supply. In the event of a power outage, she relies on portable oxygen equipment (bottles) which last about 3 hours.

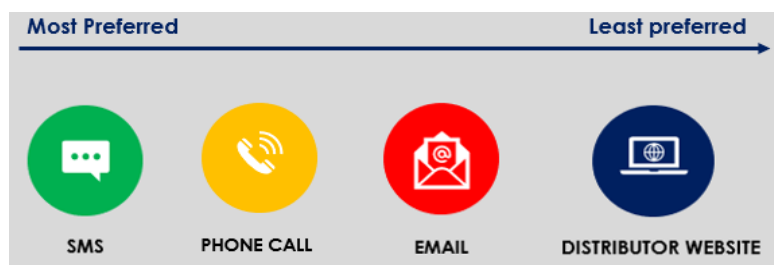
Maria also uses medically required cooling (air conditioning system), with programmed settings to run during hot days as extreme heat exacerbates her breathing. She would be unable to cope during a long power outage or one that takes place during extremely hot weather.

What support might be needed? Maria would benefit from a consultation with her distributor or medical practitioner to develop a multi-step plan for coping during short and extended outages. If available, she could benefit from a battery rental program or assistance with procuring suitable back-up power for her needs such as Uninterruptible Power Supply. Maria ultimately needs to include in her action plan, calling for an ambulance to assist with her move to the hospital.

1.3.7. Customer communication preferences

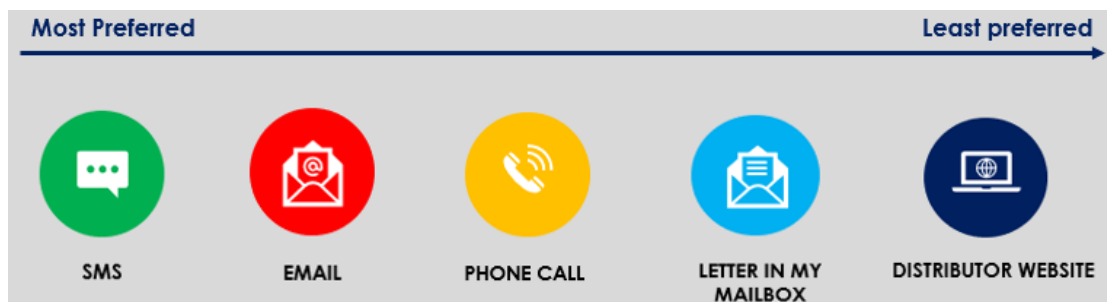
The initial survey of 3,600 Life Support Customers found that:

Most customers prefer communication about an **unplanned outage** to be made by SMS (as seen in the graphic below. Many prefer to be contacted twice, at the beginning (to confirm the outage and expected duration) and at the end, when outage has been resolved. However, some pointed out they may be unreachable in an outage as phone lines would also be down.




⁵ 19% of households use multiple types of equipment. 33% do not have a partner or carer at home.

In the event of a **planned outage**, most customers prefer to be contacted by SMS. Receiving a notification by post was also selected by some as seen below.



The following persona has been developed to highlight additional impacts of power outages on customer responsiveness and preparedness. Many consumers indicated that they would not be contactable during an outage, particularly if they did not have mobile phones, or their mobile phones had not been charged beforehand.



Mohammed is in his 50s, semi-retired, and lives with his partner. Power outages shut down most of his communication devices (i.e., phone line, Wi-Fi, TV). The first thing that Mohammed needs to know is the extent of the outage, e.g., is the issue with their fuse box, their building, the street or wider spread? Once Mohammed knows the extent of the outage he can start to plan e.g., (i) who does he call by mobile (they have an emergency battery for it)?; (ii) does he check with a neighbour? or (iii) get in contact with their distributor?

What support might be needed? The majority of customers prefer to receive notifications by SMS to confirm the outage is with their distributor and that they are working on fixing the problem. As soon as their distributor is aware of an outage that could be affecting Mohammed, they should contact him quickly by SMS, so Mohammed doesn't contribute to overloading helplines or experience long call centre wait times.⁶ Distributors could provide additional guidance through consumer education which includes keeping their mobile phones charged at all times, having access to a portable battery-operated radio, or consider purchasing satellite phones.

⁶ Fact sheet: Communication during emergencies, Department of Communications and the Arts

The follow-up survey of 500 Life Support Customers found that:

- **97%** of customers want to receive information on estimated length of an unplanned outage as this informs their resulting actions e.g., switch on back-up power, relocate elsewhere, change sleep schedule etc.
- **73%** want confirmation when the outage has been fixed and **38%** want information on locations that still have power where they could relocate to.
- **70%** of customers are happy to receive notifications that a planned outage may occur (even if it meant false alarms) compared to **30%** of customers who prefer to be notified only when it is certain that a planned outage will affect them.
- **39%** of customers found it difficult to find out more information about an unplanned outage. Many of these customers suggested their distributor should send an SMS to confirm the outage, then provide useful information about the status of the outage.
- Suggestions for improving accessibility of information include allowing enough capacity for customers to speak to a human call centre operator and providing notifications on electricity retailer apps (or develop distributor apps).

1.3.8. Support required to develop and implement action plans

Information requested by customers which will make it easier for them to develop an action plan for dealing with an outage include:

- Alternative / back-up power options to investigate.
- Checklist of items to arrange or put in place (including example action plans).
- List of localised areas to charge their equipment.
- Suggestions for coping during extended outages.

Support customers require in implementing their action plans include:

- Accessing back-up power as energy security is important to consumers.
- To be given as much advanced notice of planned outages as possible.
- Receiving timely and informative notifications.
- Information on expected timing and duration of outage.

The following persona has been developed to highlight the impact of knowing the estimated length of an outage on contingency planning⁷.



Jo & Ash find power outages very scary as they are primary caregivers for their child who relies on multiple pieces of life support equipment at home. They always call their distributor when there is an unplanned outage, before deciding what to do next. The advice they receive is always the same, to go to a hospital. In their case this would mean calling an ambulance and preparing their child for the travel, which is a very distressing process for the family.

The power is usually back on within half an hour to two hours. Jo & Ash think it would be helpful to have a better idea of estimated restoration times when they call their distributor to avoid taking an ambulance from someone who needs it more and causing a lot of distress to their household when it is not necessary for a short outage. Hospital rooms quickly fill up with people needing to use their life support equipment (particularly during widespread outages).

What support might be needed? Ash would benefit from advice on developing a multi-step plan which includes access to back-up power. Information on best back-up power options to pursue and access to financial support to purchase the relevant system would be of particular importance. She would participate in a battery rental system if it were available. Having access to back-up power would delay transfer to a hospital as long as is safely possible.

1.4. Recommendations

1.4.1. Systems-level reforms: redesigning service to consumers

Survey results and customer comments suggest there are shortcomings in services currently provided. There are improvements that need to be made to ensure consumer energy needs are met, however these require redesigning services to enable long-term solutions. These recommendations go beyond the control of industry as they require changes to regulatory framework. To address these would require involvement by energy regulators, government, and relevant peak groups.

Below is an abridged list of recommendations:



1. Refine terminology: Replace the term “Life Support Customer” with terminology that focusses on the needs of the customer and the resulting energy needs – not the condition. Language such as ‘households with high energy needs’ or ‘connection guarantee consumer’ would then capture consumers that have certain equipment or

⁷ 97% (of 500 consumers) want to know the estimated length of an outage, before they can determine their resulting action.

energy needs, but that do not identify with current 'Life support Customer' classifications. This reframing of terminology then allows different tiers of energy needs to be captured.



2. New criteria: For medical organisations (e.g., Australian Medical Association) and relevant Government bodies to lead the establishment of new criteria to define prioritisation of service to consumers using life support equipment according to their energy and health needs. Possible guidance on this process could be how the National Disability Insurance Scheme recognises the different values of support services by using a range of classifications and criteria to differentiate dependencies and needs of medical equipment.



3. Back-up power access: Consideration should be given to increasing access to back-up power for consumers as required through implementing a suite of financing options. These could include interest-free or low-cost loan schemes, rebates for batteries, generators, and increased solar rebate schemes.



4. Back-up power education: Education should be provided to ensure consumers were able to connect and operate back-up power effectively.



5. Standardise processes and forms: Simplify processes for consumers and industry by standardising concessions, registration, and deregistration across the National Electricity Market, including development of a standardised registration form. This form could contain relevant information for both distributor and retailer and including the confirmation from medical professionals on individual consumer energy needs.



6. Establish a central database: Explore the establishment of a central database so that consumer information can be shared and updated by both distributors and retailers as required.



7. Distributors to manage registration: Consumers should be encouraged to register with their distributor (not their retailer) when first registering for life support customer status.



8. Streamline concessions: Have a one-off concession application form, or at least, extend the reapplication period beyond the two-year cycle.

1.4.2. Service-level recommendations for distributors

In addition to the above, AEF have also identified recommendations that distributors could consider for improving services to life support customers in the short-term. Some key points to consider are:

- The development of education resources for call-centre staff members and consumers, to address gaps in knowledge.
- Expanding the communication platforms to include SMS and email, with the ability for consumers to opt-in and opt-out for outage notifications so consumer preferences are accommodated.
- Extending planned outage notifications beyond the current four days in advance, to give customers adequate time to prepare and implement their action plans accordingly.

1.5. Conclusion

By engaging with consumers across the National Electricity Market, we have been able to gain valuable insights into the life support customer journey. We have learnt that for some Life Support Customers, there are services received that are valuable and very much appreciated. However, for other Life Support Customers there is still a need for service improvement via education and providing tailored services. Additionally, through this research we have attempted to take key concerns experienced by Life Support Customers and link them to potential systemic changes to provide longer term solutions and to future-proof services for increasing volumes of consumers needing support.