

New measure to help people who can't pay phone bills

ACIF guideline targets financial hardship

Households in difficulty with their phone bills can look forward to more sympathetic treatment from telecommunications companies.

A new guideline just released by the Australian Communications Industry Forum (ACIF) provides a range of alternatives to heavy handed debt enforcement where people are in genuine financial hardship caused by their telecommunications bills.

The ACIF guideline sets out a number of processes that should be followed by communications service providers to assist customers who are experiencing difficulties paying their accounts. ACIF urges companies to develop internal policies and processes based on the guideline.

High phone bills are often cited as a cause of household financial difficulties, explained ACIF chief executive officer, Anne Hurley. Sometimes it will be a one-off crisis but in other cases it might be an ongoing issue. In either circumstance it is in the interests of both the customer and the provider to find an amicable solution.

Using the processes outlined in the new ACIF Guidelines, both parties would discuss options for retaining some level of telecommunications service while managing future spending within affordable limits. For instance, it might be agreed to switch to a pre-paid service, introduce call barring or provide some other form of restricted access.

Any financial arrangement should ensure that the customer not go further into debt, that the terms are reasonable for both parties and that the service provider consider suspending further debt collection while the agreement was being discussed and implemented.

The guideline also encourages companies to establish relationships with financial counselling services to help them develop hardship policies for dealing with debt stricken customers.

A copy of the new guideline is available on the ACIF website.

About ACIF

ACIF is a member-funded organisation established in 1997 to facilitate communications self-regulation in the interests of both industry and consumers.

ACIF provides a neutral forum in which all participants and end-users in the Australian communications industry can work together to foster an efficient, competitive environment through self-regulatory processes, technical codes and standards.