

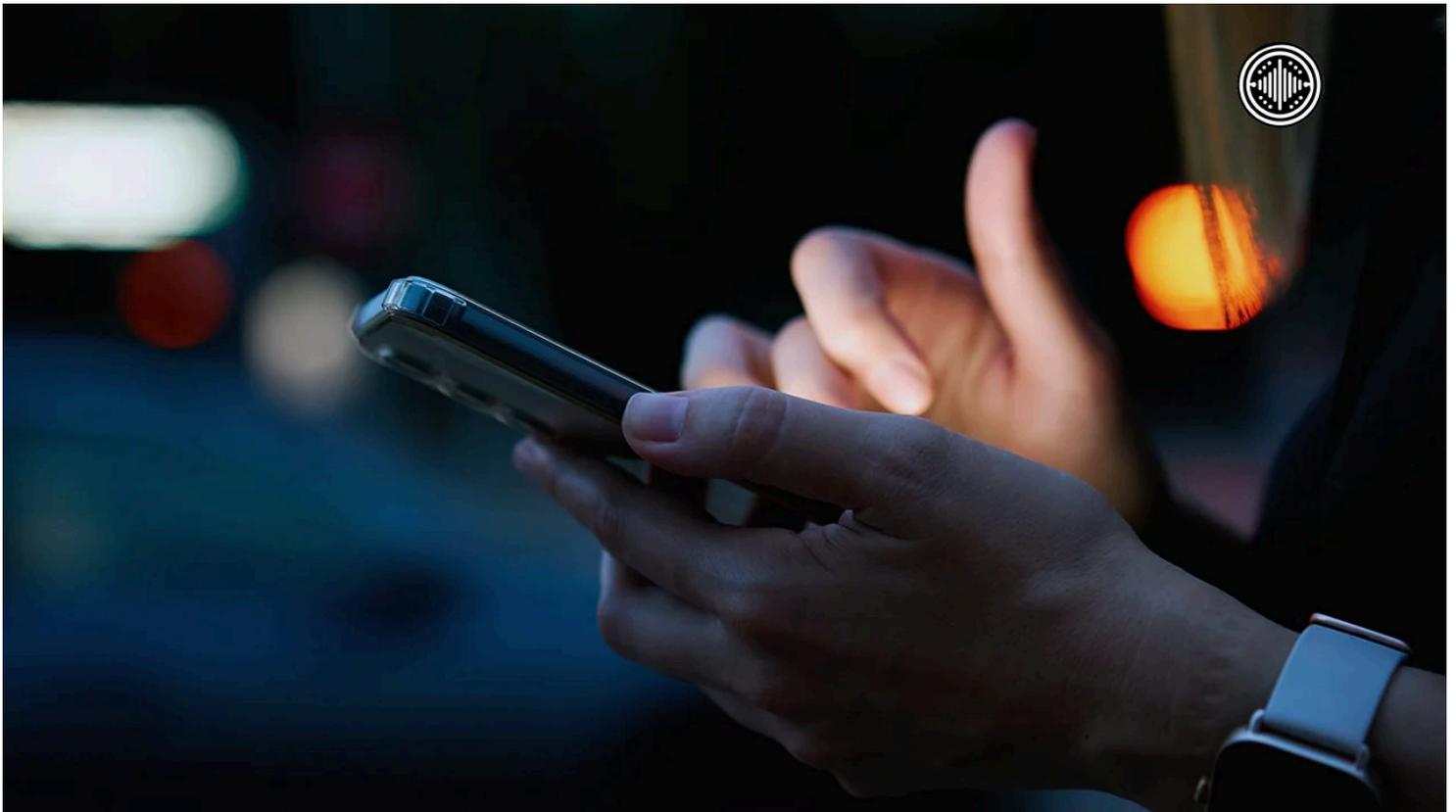
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Telco Bills Forcing Families to Sacrifice Essentials

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A recent report by the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) has revealed that some low-income Australians are choosing to pay their phone and internet bills over vital expenses such as food, rent, or petrol. The report, which reviewed over 900 complaints related to financial hardship between March 2024 and March 2025, highlights growing pressure on households struggling to stay connected.

The TIO's findings indicate that the rising cost of telecommunications services is placing a serious strain on vulnerable Australians. Some customers reported that when seeking help

from telco providers, they were met with indifference or made to feel ashamed. In several cases, payment arrangements were ignored, leading to unexpected debits that worsened their financial situation.

One anonymous customer shared how a provider withdrew funds from their account despite an agreed-upon payment plan, leaving them unable to afford fuel to access food support for their family. Another was denied a refund after being assured of a delayed payment, only to have the payment taken anyway, highlighting inconsistencies in how telcos handle hardship cases.

TIO Ombudsman Cynthia Gebert said that reliable access to phone and internet services should be treated as essential, particularly for those in regional and remote areas. “The consequences of losing access can be serious. It can mean missing out on work, falling behind on bills, or being unable to access support services,” she said.

Ms. Gebert urged telecommunications companies to provide more flexible and supportive policies for those in financial stress, especially as the cost-of-living pressures continue to mount. “People managing basic living expenses are often just one unexpected bill away from crisis,” she added.

The report also noted that some providers refused assistance until a payment was officially overdue, despite customers seeking help proactively. Other issues included billing errors, such as overcharging or withdrawing funds on incorrect dates.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) recently introduced new regulations under the Telecommunications (Financial Hardship) Industry Standard 2024, requiring telcos to clearly outline and promote hardship assistance programs. This report marks the first full year since the new rules came into effect.

Industry accountability remains a key concern. Ms. Gebert emphasized the need for trust and transparency. “Telcos must embed fairness and understanding into their operations. These are essential services, and providers have a responsibility to treat struggling customers with dignity.”

With connectivity now tied to accessing employment, government services, and family communication, the report reinforces the idea that telcos must balance business with basic responsibility to the public, particularly those most at risk.