

Customer Hardship Policy (Victoria)

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Preamble

Pacific Blue Retail Pty Ltd is committed to providing residential customers experiencing difficulties in paying their energy bills the opportunity to establish sustainable payment arrangements to manage their bills through our Customer Assistance Program (Program).

Pacific Blue Retail recognises the supply of energy is an essential service for residential customers.

Pacific Blue Retail understands that, because disconnection can have a significant impact on members of the household, disconnection of the supply of energy due to the inability to pay energy bills is a last resort option.

The Energy Retail Code, which sets out retailers' obligations and minimum customer entitlements, takes precedence over this hardship policy in all circumstances.

This policy outlines the minimum standards of assistance for residential customers anticipating or experiencing payment difficulties so that disconnection is a last resort

This policy comes into effect as soon as practicable, and no later than seven days, after approval by the Essential Services Commission.

1. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to identify customers experiencing payment difficulties and to assist those customers to better manage their energy bills on a transparent and consistent basis, through participation in our Customer Assistance Program. All customers with arrears are entitled to access entitlements in our Customer Assistance Program. The intention of this policy is to compliment other assistance that Pacific Blue Retail may provide to customers experiencing payment difficulties.

2. Customer Assistance Program

2.1 Information for Customers

Information regarding Pacific Blue's Customer Assistance Program and how to access it will be provided to residential customers:

- a. who have not paid a bill by its pay-by date and contact Pacific Blue Retail; or
- b. who have not paid a bill by its pay-by date and have arrears of more than \$55 (inclusive of GST) within 21 business days after the pay-by-date.

Pacific Blue Retail will allow the customer no less than 6 business days to consider the information given under clause (a) and (b) above to request further information, and/or put forward a payment proposal in line with Pacific Blue Retail's Customer Assistance Program. Pacific Blue Retail will advise customers how to access assistance on all reminder and disconnection notices

2.2 Identifying Customers Experiencing Payment Difficulties

In addition to the information provided in section 2.1 any customer experiencing payment difficulties can opt to become a participant in our Program when:

- a. the customer advises us directly that they are having financial difficulties;
- b. we become aware during our dealings with the customer they are experiencing difficulties in paying their bills; or
- c. the customer advises us through a third party (e.g. financial advisor, welfare agency) they are having financial difficulties.

2.3 Establishing Customer Eligibility

- a. Once it has been established the customer is experiencing difficulties in paying their bills, Pacific Blue Retail will work with the customer to develop a sustainable solution to meet current and/or future energy costs in line with their entitlements under standard or tailored assistance offered by Pacific Blue Retail.

- b. Information will be provided to the customer on their rights and obligations associated with any payment plans offered under the Program, review their energy use, and discuss relevant government programs and other support services available to our customers.

Our staff will receive regular training to identify, refer and assist customers experiencing payment difficulties in an empathetic, respectful and fair manner.

2.4 Standard Assistance available to customers

All residential customers of Pacific Blue Retail are entitled to minimum forms of assistance to enable customers to avoid getting into arrears. These minimum standard forms of assistance are offered in conjunction to further entitlements available under the Pacific Blue Retail hardship program. The standard forms of assistance that Pacific Blue Retail offers are:

- a. making payments of an equal amount over a specified period;
- b. options for making payments at different intervals;
- c. extending by a specified period the pay-by-date for a bill; and
- d. paying for energy use in advance.

2.5 Tailored Assistance available to customers

Tailored Assistance is available to all customers in arrears. Tailored Assistance consists of the following measures:

- a. repayment of arrears over not more than 2 years by payments at regular intervals of up to one month;
- b. advice from Pacific Blue Retail about payment options that would enable a customer to repay their arrears over not more than 2 years;
- c. specific advice about the likely cost of a customer's future energy use and how this cost may be lowered;
- d. specific advice about any government and non-government assistance (including Utility Relief Grants and energy concessions) available to help a customer meet their energy costs;
- e. practical assistance to help a customer lower their energy costs including, but not limited to:
 - (1) the tariff that is most likely to minimise the customer's energy costs, based on Pacific Blue Retail's knowledge of the customer's pattern of energy use and payment history; and
 - (2) practical assistance to help the customer reduce their use of energy, based on the customer's pattern of energy usage and on the circumstances of where the customer lives, provided there is scope for action to be taken for that purpose; and
 - (3) information about how the customer is progressing towards lowering their energy costs given at sufficient intervals for the customer to be able to adequately assess that progress.
- f. an initial period of at least 6 months during which:
 - (1) repayment of the customer's arrears is put on hold; and
 - (2) the customer pays less than the full cost of their on-going energy use while working to lower that cost.

Pacific Blue Retail may extend this assistance for a further period if the extension assists the customer to continue to lower the cost of their energy usage. At the completion of any extension the customer can access the Tailored Assistance options mentioned in clauses 2.5 a to d above.

Note: A customer is entitled to the assistance mentioned in clause a to d above while continuing to pay the full cost of their energy usage.

Note: A customer is entitled to the assistance mentioned in clause c to f if they cannot pay the full cost of their on-going energy usage.

2.6 Assessment of Customer Circumstances

To ensure the best outcome for each customer experiencing financial difficulties, the Customer Assistance Team member will, based on each individual case, assess:

- a. the suitability and bill impact of the customer's energy product and tariff, with specific regard to;

- (1) its cost effectiveness;
 - (2) the customer's overall energy consumption;
 - (3) the previous tariff, where applicable; and
 - (4) the availability or existence of dedicated circuits or controlled loads
- b. the potential benefits of:
- (1) available grants, concessions or financial counselling services that may be available, as outlined in identifying appropriate programs and services for customers section of this document, including similar community programs;
 - (2) an energy efficiency audit, the purpose of which is to establish whether savings can be achieved by altering the type and or use of appliances within the household, either:
 - i. over the phone, where practical, to assess the type and condition of appliances and their common use; or
 - ii. on-site, where it is appropriate to do so factoring in location, proximity and relevant health and safety requirements, to assess the type and condition of appliances.
- c. When considering whether to facilitate energy efficiency audits the Customer Assistance Team will consider:
- (1) the location, proximity and resources required to facilitate the audit, whether that be by Pacific Blue Retail staff or a third party;
 - (2) the relative age of the property and the types of appliances in use (including their general age);
 - (3) the type and frequency of use for each of those appliances;
 - (4) relevant occupational health and safety risks; and
 - (5) for field audits, whether there will be partial cost to the customer, and how the benefits of incurring such a cost will be established.

Note: where a field audit is considered appropriate, Pacific Blue Retail will consider whether the potential savings that may be achieved exceed the contribution required, communicate the potential benefits to the customer and seek the customer's consent to any costs that they may incur as a result conducting a field audit.

Subject to the completion of an energy efficiency audit, whether over the phone or on-site, identifying an issue with an appliance specifically, Pacific Blue Retail will consider appliance replacement or repair which will only be carried out by a suitably qualified trades person.

Note: any appliance replacement will be considered on a case by case basis and negotiated directly, either with the customer and or the property owner, depending on the nature of the occupancy, and may be facilitated by a third party.

Where any changes are made to a tariff or where an energy audit or appliance replacement is considered, whether or not they impose costs, the customer must provide explicit informed consent to these changes, or where the customer cannot provide such consent, such as where the customer is not the owner of a property, they must facilitate consent being obtained.

2.7 Payment Plans

- a. Customers with an active Payment Plan will receive:
- (1) specific information, in writing, about their payment plan including:
 - i. the total number of payments to be made to pay the arrears; and
 - ii. the period over which the payments are to be made; and
 - iii. the date by which each payment must be made; and
 - iv. the amount of each payment.
 - (2) regular review of the adequacy of payments being made under the payment plan within the Program to ensure they are sufficient to cover the customer's usage as required; and

- (3) desktop review of their energy usage as required by a trained Customer Assistance Team Member; and
- b. A customer with an active Payment Plan will be expected to attempt to maintain the following behaviours:
 - (1) maintain regular contact and advise of any changes in circumstances that may impact on the customers' ability to maintain the payment plan;
 - (2) make payments as per their payment plan;
 - (3) Assist with any review of their energy usage as required
 - (4) adhere to the behavioural expectations outlined above.
- c. A payment plan or revised proposal plan complies with the Pacific Blue Retail Customer Assistance Program if it:
 - (1) provides for the making of payments of equal amounts at regular intervals of up to one month; and
 - (2) would result in the *residential customer's* arrears being fully paid in no more than 2 years after the first payment;
 - (3) provides for payments for energy use being made together with payments to reduce arrears; and
 - (4) is based on a reasonable forecast of the *customer's* energy use over the next 12 months.
- d. Pacific Blue Retail will ensure our customers with an active Payment Plan are:
 - (1) provided with equitable access to flexible payment options;
 - (2) contacted as required to confirm the payment plan and energy tariff are still appropriate and ensure the Program and its components remain appropriate;
 - (3) not charged late payment fees (note: late payment fees do not apply to any small customers in Victoria) and will not be required to pay a security deposit; and
 - (4) not be subjected to debt recovery action or disconnection while they maintain their payment plan.
- e. Where a customer fails to make a payment towards the cost of their on-going energy use by the date on which it was payable, Pacific Blue Retail will contact the customer to discuss varying the amount payable, or the frequency of those payments, or both, to give the customer more time to lower their energy costs.
- f. For customers who are on a Tailored Assistance Plan and not meeting their responsibilities to implement practical assistance offered by Pacific Blue Retail to reduce their usage of energy, Pacific Blue Retail will contact the customer and work with them to identify an implementation timeframe to enable the customer to lower their ongoing energy costs.
- g. A customer's participation in a Payment Plan will cease when the customer:
 - (1) successfully completes the payment plan and returns to paying bills as rendered or informs us they no longer wish to participate in the Program;
 - (2) fails to maintain obligations in relation to a payment plan under the Program (such as repeatedly failing to meet a payment obligation) where Pacific Blue Retail has used our best endeavours to communicate with the customer; or
 - (3) fails to demonstrate a willingness to participate or engage with Pacific Blue Retail in order to take reasonable action towards making payments towards the cost of their on-going energy use.
- h. Where participation ceases, by meeting one of the above conditions, the customer will be notified, returned to normal billing and collection cycles and managed in accordance with regulatory obligations and all other relevant codes and guidelines that may be applicable. Pacific Blue Retail may add any amount unpaid for energy use to the customer's arrears.

2.8 Payment Options

Customers will have several payment options outlined to them which may include:

- a. Payment Plans

- (1) Instalment payments – customers can arrange to pay for their current and/or future energy usage by instalments. The period of the instalment plan between the customer and Pacific Blue should not exceed two years;
- (2) Deferring payment of arrears for up to six months and allowing the customer to pay less than the full cost of ongoing energy use whilst working to lower that cost.
- (3) Flexible Payments – allowing the customer to pay off the account balance in instalments (or a lump sum) prior to the next bill or in additional amounts added to the next bill(s);
- (4) Deferral of the payment due date – to enable the customer to manage short term issues an extension to the due date may be appropriate; or
- (5) Centrepay – Use Centrepay to make regular Deductions from your Centrelink payments. Centrepay is a voluntary and easy payment option available to Centrelink customers. Go to www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/centrepay for more information and to set up your

Centrepay Deductions.

- b. When determining the appropriate, fair and reasonable payment option(s) our Customer Assistance Team member will consider (where provided, any advice from financial counsellors and others), arrears owing and expected energy consumption over a one-year period.
- c. Our Customer Assistance Team is trained to be empathetic to our customers' circumstances and conscious of privacy laws and the confidentiality of personal information.
- d. Should a customer notify Pacific Blue Retail that their circumstances are impacting on their ability to meet their payments; our Customer Assistance Team member will provide advice about arrears and ongoing energy consumption costs and outline payment arrangement options.
- e. Continued Provision of Assistance

Pacific Blue Retail will continue to provide assistance to a customer unless:

- a. after Pacific Blue Retail has contacted the customer in regards to a revised proposal following a missed payment, the *customer* refuses or fails to take reasonable action towards paying for their on-going energy use and repaying their arrears; or
- b. for customers with payment of arrears on hold, if the customer fails to make a payment towards the cost of their on-going energy use by the date on which is payable, and Pacific Blue Retail has contacted the customer to identify an implementation timeframe, the *customer* has refused or failed to take reasonable action towards making payments towards the cost of their on-going energy use; or
- c. the *customer* is not facing payment difficulties.

2.9 Identifying Appropriate Programs and Services for Customers

- a. Our Customer Assistance Team is trained in dealing with customers in an empathetic and respectful manner and has knowledge of appropriate government concession programs and financial counselling services for participants.
- b. Customers experiencing payment difficulties can be provided with information about a range of support services available, including financial counsellors and state government assistance and support services (concessions, grants, etc.).
- c. It may be beneficial for the customer to obtain budgeting advice to assist their understanding of their individual financial circumstances, Our Customer Assistance Team members can provide the customer with contact details of financial counsellors in their area who may assist them in preparing a budget if required. Pacific Blue Retail regards the preparation of a budget an important element in the customer's commitment to a sustainable solution however does not impose a budget as a requirement.
- d. These programs and concessions include (but are not limited to):

Jurisdiction	Program	Contact
Australia-wide	Utility Bill Payment Voucher	Anglicare 13 26 22

Jurisdiction	Program	Contact
		Salvation Army 13 72 58
Australia-wide	Advance Payment Utilities Allowance Essential Medical Equipment Payment	Centrelink (Services Australia) 13 62 40
Victoria	Utility Relief Grant Scheme Annual Electricity Concession Controlled load electricity concession Excess electricity concession Excess gas concession Winter gas concession Life Support Machine Electricity Concession Medical Cooling Concession Service to Property Charge Concession Electricity Transfer Fee Waiver	Victorian Department of Health and Human Services 1800 658 521

- e. Our Customer Assistance Team will discuss with a customer their eligibility against the guidelines set out for each program and identify which one or more may be appropriate. If there is any doubt about eligibility, our team will check with the relevant government agency. We can also help with the application process, if requested.
- f. Our customer assistance team may assist with flexible options for the supply of replacement electrical equipment designed for domestic use from a third party nominated by Pacific Blue Retail.
- g. Pacific Blue Retail will not offer a supply capacity control product to a residential customer for any credit management purpose.

2.10 Reviewing the Customer's Market Retail Contract

- a. Our Customer Assistance Team will review the appropriateness of the customer's market retail contract including the energy tariff, payment terms and method of payment. In determining the most appropriate energy tariff our team member will bear in mind:
 - (1) cost effectiveness;
 - (2) whether the participant has dedicated off-peak
 - (3) appliances; the participant's previous tariff;
 - (4) the participant's overall power usage;
 - (5) the participant's previous billing information; and
 - (6) any other relevant information provided by the participant.

- b. There is no charge to the customer for this review. We may propose the customer transfer to a new contract if this will result in reduced payments. If we do, we will not impose any fees for the termination of the original market retail contract.

2.11 Assisting Customers with Strategies to Improve their Energy

Efficiency

- a. State laws may establish programs under which we may be required to offer to assist customers with strategies to improve their energy efficiency.
- b. We train our Customer Assistance Team members in these energy efficiency programs and they will raise options under these programs with participants and, where necessary, endeavour to make sure a participant is eligible before referring a participant to an energy efficiency program.
- c. In any event we will provide energy efficiency information together with the welcome letter sent to all new participants in the Program. Furthermore, our team members will provide an opportunity for participants to discuss strategies for improving energy efficiency over the phone and to identify with them the strategies that are most appropriate for their circumstances.

2.12 Promoting and Publicising this Policy

- a. Pacific Blue Retail will include a copy of this policy and a summary, plain English version on our website: <http://pacificblue.com.au/hardship-policy>.
- b. Information about payment assistance will also be provided to all new customers and again to all customers in all bills, overdue notices and follow-up letters.
- c. Where it appears to us that non-payment of an energy bill is due to a residential customer experiencing payment difficulties, we will inform the customer as soon as possible of payment plan options available under our Program. We will provide a copy of this policy on request to any customer or appropriate welfare agency or program, at no expense.
- d. Customers can always call us on 1800 010 648 to ask about the Program.
- e. Pacific Blue Retail will send a copy of its hardship policy to a customer when requested.

3. Privacy

The financial and personal information disclosed by a customer will be managed in accordance with our Privacy Policy on our website: <http://pacificblue.com.au/privacy>.

4. Complaints

- a. We encourage customers to resolve complaints directly with our team on 133 669. Customers can also report problems, complaints and feedback relating to this policy through:
our website www.pacificblue.com.au
via email support@pacificblue.com.au
phone 133 669
or write to us at Pacific Blue Retail, PO Box 320, Geelong North VIC 3215
- b. Independent dispute resolution for our energy customers is also available through the Victorian Energy and Water Ombudsman:
1800 500 509 (free call)
ewovinfo@ewov.com.au
www.ewov.com.au -
- c. Further information on the management of customer complaints and disputes is available in our Complaints and Disputes Policy on our website; <http://pacificblue.com.au/complaints>.
- d. Pacific Blue Retail reviews this policy annually to ensure it remains appropriate and will, or is likely to; contribute to the identification of residential customers experiencing payment difficulties and to assist those customers to better manage their energy bills on an ongoing basis.