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SENATOR THE HON MITCH FIFIELD

MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS
MINISTER FOR THE ARTS
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Dr Dennis Jensen MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA   ACT   2600

0 4 JAN 2016

Petition 1117/1618 – Mobile coverage in the Hinkler electorate

Dear Dr Jensen   Dennis

Thank you for your letter of 2 December 2015 about a petition submitted to the Standing Committee on Petitions regarding mobile coverage in the electorate of Hinkler, Queensland.

I understand the concerns of the residents of Doolbi, Horton, Abington, Goodwood, North Isis and Redridge regarding mobile phone coverage. While mobile carriers claim to provide coverage to 99 per cent of Australia's population, there are still large areas that have no coverage, particularly in regional and remote locations. Expanding mobile coverage has clear economic and social benefits, as well as public safety benefits for people living, working and travelling in regional and remote areas of Australia.

Mobile Black Spot Programme - Round 1 outcomes

The Australian Government committed $100 million through round 1 of the Mobile Black Spot Programme to invest in telecommunications infrastructure to address mobile black spots along major regional transport routes, in small communities and in locations prone to experiencing natural disasters.

On 25 June 2015, the Government announced that under Round 1, 499 new or upgraded mobile base stations will be deployed across regional and remote Australia – 429 Telstra base stations and 70 Vodafone base stations. The number of base stations funded nationally is well in excess of expectations.

Nationally, the funded base stations will provide new and upgraded handheld coverage to 68 600 square kilometres and new external antenna coverage to over 150 000 square kilometres of regional and remote Australia. In addition, over 5 700 kilometres of major regional transport routes will receive new handheld or external antenna coverage.

The programme has been highly successful in maximising co-contributions from third parties, including state and local governments and local communities. The collective total being invested in the 499 base stations under round 1 of the programme is $385 million.

How the funded base stations were selected

The Government undertook an extensive public consultation process to inform the development of the programme. As part of this consultation process, members of the public were asked to nominate locations across regional Australia where they believed mobile coverage was either poor or non-existent. Over 6 000 locations reported by the public were added to the Government's database of reported locations.

In addition, the Government consulted extensively with Telstra, Optus, Vodafone and other industry participants in relation to the design and delivery of the programme. In December 2014, the Programme Guidelines were released and the competitive selection process commenced, with funding proposals due from mobile network operators and infrastructure providers in April 2015.

The operators were asked to come forward with proposals to build new or upgraded mobile base stations to deliver improved mobile coverage to one or more of the locations on the database which had been reported by members of the public. Applications for funding were received from Optus, Telstra and Vodafone.

All proposed base stations included in the applications submitted by the operators were assessed and ranked according to the assessment criteria outlined in the Programme Guidelines. The assessment criteria included the expected benefits that each base station would deliver, such as the amount of square kilometres, the number of premises, and the length of major transport routes to receive new mobile coverage.

Consideration was also given to the total cost of the base station, the amount of Commonwealth funding being sought, the amount of funding the operator was proposing to co-contribute, and the amount of co-contribution, if any, it had secured from a third party such as a state or local government.

Regrettably, the predictive coverage maps indicate that Doolbi, Horton, Abington, Goodwood, North Isis and Redridge will not receive improved mobile coverage from base stations funded under round 1 of the programme.

Round 2

Naturally, the primary concern of the residents of Doolbi, Horton, Abington, Goodwood, North Isis and Redridge will be whether there is an opportunity for them to receive improved mobile coverage in the future.

The Government has announced that it will commit $60 million for round 2 of the programme, with funding to be made available over two years from July 2016. Round 2 is expected to operate under similar guidelines as the first round. The Government will again seek to leverage additional funding from the mobile network operators and other levels of government, with a view to maximising the number of new or upgraded base stations which can be delivered.

The Government will also again seek to leverage existing infrastructure in the form of in-kind contributions as well as utilising NBN Co's Fixed Wireless network to provide coverage in a location more cheaply than would otherwise be the case.

Round 2 will continue to utilise the database of mobile black spot locations nominated by members of the public. I am advised that Goodwood and Redridge have previously been reported as regional mobile black spots and have been added to the database. Following receipt of your correspondence, I have requested that Doolbi, Horton, Abington and North Isis be added to the database to be used for round 2.

The competitive selection process for round 2 is expected to commence in early 2016, after allowing time for further locations to be reported and added to the database. The locations to be funded under round 2 are expected to be announced by the end of 2016.

I encourage the residents of Doolbi, Horton, Abington, Goodwood, North Isis and Redridge to highlight to the mobile network operators their interest in obtaining improved mobile coverage in their area.

Further information about the Mobile Black Spot Programme is available on the Department's website at **www.communications.gov.au/mobile_coverage**

Triple Zero

I also note the concern of the residents of Doolbi, Horton, Abington, Goodwood, North Isis and Redridge about access arrangements to the Triple Zero (000) service and adequacy of current contact methods for the Triple Zero service, particularly for elderly.

My Department has recently completed a review of the national Triple Zero operator to ensure the service can take full advantage of new and emerging technologies, respond to changing community expectations, and provide improved services into the future. As communications technology continues to advance, the Australian Government considers new opportunities to improve the existing Triple Zero service and assist Australians during an emergency should be examined. The review also examined the effectiveness of the Triple Zero service in large scale emergency events where network congestion and large emergency call volumes where experienced by the national Triple Zero operator.

In conducting the review, my Department released a public discussion paper to seek the views of key stakeholders against eight specific questions and the terms of reference for the review more generally. In parallel, my Department also undertook some consumer research activity, which included an online survey as well as targeted focus groups. Although submissions to the discussion paper have now closed, the submissions received by my Department are publicly available on the Department's website at **www.communications.gov.au**

There were a number of consistent themes and messages throughout the submissions. Importantly, these include the issues regarding the potential use of new or different technologies that offer enhancement functionality, or which may be a more suitable communication option for consumers across different demographic groupings, including the elderly.

I am currently assessing the findings and recommendations of the review for the consideration of the Australian Government.

Priority assistance

Telstra is required as a condition of its licence to have an effective policy for offering priority services to anyone with a life-threatening medical condition. Telstra's arrangements for priority assistance are set out in its Priority Assistance for Individuals policy.

Telstra's Priority Assistance for Individuals Policy provides Telstra residential customers who have a diagnosed life threatening medical condition (as described more fully in Section 3 of the Priority Assistance for Individuals Policy) with the highest level of service practicably available at the time on:
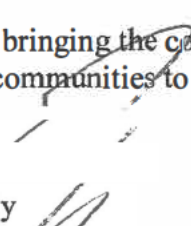
- the supply of a first standard telephone service (where no other standard telephone service exists, whether provided by Telstra or another provider); and
- the fault repair of an existing standard telephone service (where all other standard telephone services at the place of residence are inoperative, whether provided by Telstra or another provider).

Generally this means Telstra will effect supply and/or repair faults for eligible priority assistance customers within 24 to 48 hours as prescribed in its Priority Assistance for Individuals Policy.

Other carriage service providers and carriers may provide priority assistance services to their customers. Part 6 in Schedule 2 of the *Telecommunications ACT 1997* requires carriage service providers and carriers to either offer a priority assistance service or inform customers of the names of carriage service providers and carriers which do.

I have attached an ACMA factsheet about Priority Assistance and an application form to this letter.

Thank you for bringing the concerns of the Doolbi, Horton, Abington, Goodwood, North Isis and Redridge communities to my attention. I trust this information will be of assistance.

Yours sincerely

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2/3/16

Encl.

FACTsheet

Priority assistance – rapid telephone repair and connection service

What is priority assistance?

Priority assistance is an enhanced telephone connection and repair service for people with a diagnosed life-threatening medical condition who are at risk of suffering a rapid, life-threatening deterioration in their condition. The service is offered by Telstra to ensure access to a reliable, fully operational home telephone service to call for assistance.

To be eligible, someone living in a customer's household must have such a diagnosed life-threatening medical condition, where access to a telephone could assist in a life-threatening situation. Some examples of life-threatening medical conditions are provided below.

Priority assistance entitlements

Priority assistance customers are entitled to faster connection and fault repair of their fixed-line telephone service, thus reducing the time that customers will be without access to a phone service. For a priority assistance customer, a service must be connected or a fault repaired within 24 hours in urban and rural areas (an area with a population of more than 200 people) or 48 hours in remote areas (an area with a population of less than 200 people.)

In addition, Telstra undertakes to provide priority assistance customers with enhanced service reliability, so that if a priority assistance customer experiences two or more faults in a three-month period, the phone service must be tested.

Who offers priority assistance?

Telstra is the only service provider required to provide priority assistance services to its customers as a condition of its licence. Under the licence condition, Telstra must have an effective policy for offering priority assistance services to people who have a life-threatening medical condition.

Other service providers voluntarily offer priority assistance services in line with the requirements of the Communications Alliance Ltd industry code (*ACIF C609:2003 Priority Assistance for Life Threatening Medical Conditions*). The code was designed to establish consistent, industry wide arrangements for providing assistance to residential customers with life-threatening medical conditions.

The code also specifies the minimum standards for the information that must be provided to customers for service providers not offering priority assistance. You should check with your service provider to see if it offers this service.

Telstra's policy for priority assistance arrangements are set out in its Priority Assistance for Individuals Policy. The policy and information about Telstra Priority Assistance is on the Telstra website at by calling Telstra on 13 22 00.

How to apply

To be eligible for priority assistance, either you or someone living at your home must have a diagnosed life-threatening medical condition. If you are unsure whether you are eligible, consult your doctor.

You must complete an application form.

You must either obtain a certificate from a medical practitioner or, if you have difficulty in obtaining a certificate, you must complete a statutory declaration about your condition. The statutory declaration must be signed by you in the presence of a witness.

Send the application form to Telstra

If Telstra has provisionally offered you priority assistance, you must send a completed form back to Telstra within 28 days. Telstra does not charge eligible customers for registering and receiving priority assistance, nor does it affect connection fees. Priority assistance is designed for customers in genuine need. However, if a customer is found to be ineligible for priority assistance, for example, the customer is granted provisional priority assistance status and does not return the completed application form, a fee may be charged.

Things you should know about priority assistance:

- priority assistance only applies to standard telephone services

- customers must let their service provider know of any changed circumstances that may affect their eligibility for priority assistance

- customers need to advise their service provider when moving residence, moving from one service

provider to another or where there is a change to the customer/lessee name for a service and

- priority assistance services are governed by strict privacy protection principles.

These arrangements are in place to ensure that, as a priority assistance customer, you get the highest level of service available. Despite these safeguards, it is not always possible to guarantee continuity of service for customers in medical emergencies. Other communication services

You should consider having a contingency plan in case you find yourself without access to a telephone. For example, in some situations, a mobile phone or other communications products, such as medical alert buttons and home security monitoring systems can be used to provide back-up access to emergency services. While some of these products still require an operational telephone service, they may assist in reducing your reliance on a telephone handset for contacting emergency services.

More information

For more information about priority assistance services, please refer to the ACMA website.

For more information about Telstra's obligations to provide priority assistance, contact ACMA's Industry Monitoring Section on (03) 9963 6800 or email priorityassistance@acma.gov.au.

Please note: this document is intended as a guide only and should not be relied on as legal advice or regarded as a substitute for legal advice in individual cases.