

Services affected by a natural disaster

Anyone can talk to a lawyer for free at Tasmania Legal Aid.

To get free legal information call 1300 366 611, drop into our Hobart or Launceston office (no appointment necessary) or use the Legal Talk chat function on our website. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

A lawyer can listen to your story and help identify the next steps you can take.

When a natural disaster has affected services to where you live such as water, electricity, gas, phone and internet, below is what you need to do and how you can get some help.

What if I am having trouble with my gas, electricity and/or water connection and supply?

If you are having trouble with your connection and supply, contact your retailer. Your retailer is the company that looks after connections, billing and customer service.

If you have moved because of the disaster, you need to contact your retailer to be connected at the new property. The connection should be made on a date you agree or within 10 business days.

If you are changing retailers, your new connection must be made within one to two business days.

Your electricity supply cannot be disconnected on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday, a public holiday or the day before a public holiday or before 8:00am or after 3:00pm on any other day.

What if I'm having trouble paying bills?

If you are having trouble paying your bills because of the disaster, e.g. you lost your job or are finding it hard to get by, tell your retailer.

Your retailer should be able to help you set up a payment plan and you might be able to get help under a 'hardship policy'. You cannot be discontinued from services in this situation.

The law says that each retailer must have a hardship policy that can:

- agree to fair and reasonable payment, e.g. instalment plans;
- stop disconnection or any debt collections activity;
- tell you about concessions and government assistance, e.g. grants, and how to get these.

For more information on how to avoid disconnection when you are having trouble paying your bills, contact the Energy Ombudsman Tasmania on 1800 001 170 or visit www.energyombudsman.tas.gov.au.

If you have received a disconnection notice, call your supplier immediately to discuss payment options such as:

- Payment plans – you agree to pay a nominated amount regularly towards your bill;
- [Centrepay](#) – Centrelink customers can nominate an amount that is automatically deducted from their pension or benefit payment every fortnight, and paid into their energy account;

- Financial hardship programs such as the YES program found below from Aurora Energy.
- Financial hardship payments may be sought from welfare agencies.

You should also consider seeing a free financial counsellor, who can help you work out a budget to manage your bill payments.

To find a financial counsellor, contact Financial Counselling Australia 1800 007 007 or visit www.financialcounsellingaustralia.org.au.

Who pays for damage due to a power failure?

If you have experienced damage due to a power surge or from power failure, e.g. damage to appliances or food, you should lodge a claim with your electricity retailer.

What if my utilities problem has not been sorted out?

If you have tried to sort out a problem with your gas, electricity or water provider and it has not been resolved, contact the [Energy Ombudsman Tasmania](#) on 1800 001 170 within 12 months of when the problem first happened.

This is an independent, free service that can legally force the supplier to deal with your complaint. The ombudsman contacts the provider and will ask them to try again to resolve your problem.

If you have tried to sort out the problem with your provider more than once, the Energy Ombudsman can investigate your matter. This means they will look at your situation, consider the law and try to help you reach an agreement with your utility provider.

What if I am having trouble with my phone & internet connection and service?

If you are having trouble with your connection and service, contact your telephone service provider about your damaged telephone line.

However, if you have more than one telephone socket in your home, you will need to contact a registered cabler to fix any other telephone sockets. The telephone service provider is only responsible for repairing the first socket.

If your broadband service has been affected, you should contact your service provider to see what they are doing about repairing or restoring the service.

If your broadband service was supplied under the federal government's Australian Broadband Guarantee (or one of the previous funding programs such as Broadband connect or the Higher Bandwidth Incentive Scheme) and you are having trouble contacting your provider, contact the Australian Broadband Guarantee consumer support helpline on 1800 883 488.

If you did not have a broadband service and want to find out if you can get an Australian Broadband Guarantee service, contact the helpline. The 'guarantee service' means that if you live out of the city, you can still get a reliable broadband service at a similar price to what you would pay in the city.

What if I am having trouble paying my phone/internet bills?

If you are having trouble paying your bills, contact your provider and tell them you live in a disaster affected area and are having problems paying your bill. They may have special arrangements in place to help affected people.

See if your provider can place a hold on your bill while you work out a way to pay off your debt. You may also want to see if you can pay your bill over a longer period.

If you do not contact your provider, your service may be disconnected, or your credit record may be affected. However, your provider must not take debt collection action against you while you are discussing a payment arrangement or paying your bill in instalments.

If you disagree about a bill amount, ask the provider to investigate your bill and try to sort it out with them. You should also consider seeing a free financial counsellor, who can help you to work out a budget to manage your bill payments.

To find a financial counsellor, contact Financial Counselling Australia 1800 007 007 or visit www.financialcounsellingaustralia.org.au.

What if my telephone or internet problem has not been sorted out?

If you have tried to sort out a problem with your telephone or internet service provider and it has not been resolved, contact the [Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman](#) ("TIO") on 1800 062 058 or fill out an online form to make a complaint within 12 months of when the problem first happened.

This is an independent, free service to help sort out disagreements between customers and utility providers. The TIO will contact your provider and ask them to try and resolve the problem. The TIO will give your provider 10 days to do this. If the problem is not resolved within 10 days, the TIO will investigate further and make a binding decision.

The TIO may then investigate the situation, work out the issues and try to help reach an agreement with your provider.

The law says telephone and internet providers must obey the decisions made by the TIO. For more information about the TIO and the laws that apply, visit www.tio.com.au.

Where can I get more information?

Energy Ombudsman Tasmania

www.energyombudsman.tas.gov.au

Phone 1800 001 170

Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman

www.tio.com.au

Phone 1800 062 058

Financial Counselling Australia

www.financialcounsellingaustralia.org.au

Phone 1800 007 007

This is written for people who live in or who are affected by the laws of Tasmania, Australia. The law changes all the time – this information is not legal advice. If you have a legal problem, you should talk to a lawyer before making a decision about what to do.