

NECA MEMBER COVID-19 UPDATE

LATEST FEDERAL ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. NATIONAL STIMULUS PACKAGE:

The Federal Government has released the 'Safety Net Package' which offers more funding and assistance to support our communities during the global health crisis. The new 'Safety Net Package' measures include:

Medicare support at home – whole of population telehealth

\$669 million to expand Medicare-subsidised telehealth services. Australians will be able to access support in their own home using their telephone, or video conferencing features to connect with various medical services. These arrangements will be in place until 30 September 2020.

Domestic violence support

\$150 million will be provided to support Australians experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence due to the fallout from coronavirus. The funding will boost programs under the National Plan to reduce violence against women and their children.

Mental health support

- \$74 million will be provided to support the mental health and wellbeing of all Australians.
- \$10 million to create a dedicated coronavirus wellbeing support line, delivered by Beyond Blue.
- \$14 million will bolster the capacity of mental health support providers who have experienced an unprecedented surge in calls with funding increasing their capacity.
- Frontline health workers will get dedicated mental health support through digital platforms developed to provide advice, social support, assistance in managing stress and anxiety, and more in-depth treatment without having to attend in-person sessions.
- \$10 million will be provided to the Community Visitors Scheme. The funding will mean extra staff to train volunteer visitors, who will connect with older people in aged care and assist older Australians keep in touch with the community and loved ones.
- To help younger Australians stay on track in their education and training and prepare them for the workforce, \$6.75 million will be provided to deliver the headspace digital work and study service and eheadspace.
- For Indigenous Australians, Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Australia will develop culturally appropriate mental health and wellbeing resources.
- \$28.3 million will be utilised to continue to deliver psychosocial support to Commonwealth community mental health clients for a further 12 months.

Relief services for vulnerable Australians

\$200 million will be provided to support charities and other community organisations which provide emergency and food relief as demand surges as a result of coronavirus. There are several new assistance measures under the 'Community Support Package' concerning emergency relief, food relief, national debt helpline, short-term financial counselling and loans.

2. CORONAVIRUS NATIONAL CABINET - UPDATE

The National Cabinet met on 27 and 29 March 2020, the Government is forecasting that we will be living with the virus for at least 6 months. The requirements introduced by Government include:

- Public gatherings, excluding household members, have been reduced to a maximum of two people. Exceptions to this limit include:
 - People of the same household going out together;
 - Funerals - a maximum of 10 people;
 - Wedding - a maximum of 5 people;
 - Family units.

Individual States and Territories may choose to mandate and/or enforce this requirement.

- Short-term intervention is needed for commercial tenancies. Work on this has begun, but there is more to do, including for residential tenancies. National Cabinet agreed to a moratorium on evictions over the next six months for commercial and residential tenancies in financial distress who are unable to meet their commitments due to the impact of coronavirus.

National Cabinet agreed to a common set of principles, endorsed by Treasurers, to underpin and govern intervention to aid commercial tenancies as follows:

- a short term, temporary moratorium on eviction for non-payment of rent to be applied across commercial tenancies impacted by severe rental distress due to coronavirus;
 - tenants and landlords are encouraged to agree on rent relief or temporary amendments to the lease;
 - the reduction or waiver of rental payment for a defined period for impacted tenants;
 - the ability for tenants to terminate leases and/or seek mediation or conciliation on the grounds of financial distress;
 - commercial property owners should ensure that any benefits received in respect of their properties should also benefit their tenants in proportion to the economic impact caused by coronavirus;
 - landlords and tenants not significantly affected by coronavirus are expected to honour their lease and rental agreements; and
 - cost-sharing or deferral of losses between landlords and tenants, with Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, local government and financial institutions to consider mechanisms to provide assistance.
- Everyone should stay home unless you are: shopping for essentials, receiving medical care, exercising or travelling to work or education.
 - People aged over 70, aged over 60 with pre-existing conditions, or Indigenous people aged over 50 should stay home wherever possible for their own protection.
 - If you are in self-isolation because you are confirmed or suspected to have Coronavirus (COVID-19), or have been in close contact with a confirmed case,
 - All travellers returning from overseas will be quarantined in a hotel or designated facility for 14 days.

Pubs, licensed clubs and hotels (excluding accommodation), gyms, skateparks, indoor sporting venues, cinemas, beauty salons, play centres and outside playgrounds, places of worship and other public places must be closed. There are restrictions on attendance at weddings, funerals and outdoor fitness classes. Supermarkets and pharmacies remain open. National Cabinet agreed that playgrounds, skate parks and outside gyms in public places will be closed. Bootcamps will be reduced to two persons, including the trainer.

For more information: <https://www.australia.gov.au/>

Statement on Schools

The education system is in a transition phase until the end of term as schools prepare for a new mode of operation following the school holidays. Some States and Territories have moved to pupil-free days, and each State and Territory will come to their own transition arrangements with their workforce for the rest of this term.

While the medical advice remains that it is safe for children to go to school, the Government asks that only children of workers for whom no suitable care arrangements are available at home to support their learning, physically attend school. The Government will continue to meet with education

stakeholders to understand the challenges for our communities. That will include the National Cabinet's consideration of the measures needed for early childhood settings and TAFE.

Partnering with private hospitals

State and Territory Governments committed to urgently finalise arrangements with private hospitals under the COVID-19 National Partnership Agreement by 29 March 2020, to ensure sufficient and viable capacity exists within the private hospital sector.

3. EXTRAORDINARY G20 LEADERS SUMMIT

An extraordinary G20 Leaders Summit took place on 26 March 2020 in a unified bid to both save lives and ease the economic impact of the pandemic. The countries are working together to speed up research and the discovery of a vaccine and anti-viral medications.

G20 leaders are believed to have injected \$8 trillion into the global economy to fight the coronavirus and its associated impacts. Australia has already announced economic measures worth nearly 10% of the nation's GDP.

4. COAG EDUCATION COUNCIL

Education Ministers held a Teleconference on 27 March 2020 concerning COVID-19.

Early education and care sector

Education Council agreed that supporting ongoing access to early childhood education and care services for vulnerable children and the children of essential workers is a priority. Ministers agreed the importance of maintaining safe, high quality early childhood education and care services, adhering to public health advice, and to be flexible and responsive to community needs. Ministers noted that Governments have enacted a range of stimulus measures and are developing further safety net measures to support the economy including the early education and care sector.

Ministers have established a small working group, chaired by the Australian Government, which will provide urgent advice back to Education Council by early next week on regulatory, funding and viability measures.

Senior secondary assessments and university admissions

Education Council received an update from the Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA) regarding a national approach for Senior Secondary assessments. Ministers agreed that it is important that no senior secondary student is disadvantaged. Future decisions will ensure equitable outcomes for all senior secondary students as they complete their schooling.

Options discussed by Ministers included changes to the way that the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) may be calculated and presented, and how student assessments may be undertaken. Adjustments to university admission processes were also discussed.

A special purpose Education Council meeting will be held in April to consider advice from ACACA to be able to provide certainty to students, families and teachers as soon as possible.

5. FAIRWORK COMMISSION BENCH VARIES CLERKS AWARD TO ADDRESS COVID-19

The Fair Work Commission made a decision on 27 March 2020 to vary the Clerks Private Sector Award to insert a Schedule of special conditions to assist employees adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. The decision allows those special conditions to operate until 30 June 2020.

The special conditions provide flexibilities around hours of work and annual leave to facilitate businesses and their employees being in the best position possible to adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic, while retaining the rates of pay for work performed.

Key elements of the special conditions include:

- Flexibility around the range of duties that employees can perform;

- Minimum shift and working hours flexibilities for employees that are working from home;
- Temporary reductions in working hours where agreed by 75% of the affected employees, with consideration to be given by employers to secondary employment and personal development sought by employees;
- Facilitating representation and advice for employees' consideration of proposals to reduce working hours;
- The capacity to take longer periods of leave at proportionally reduced rates of pay;
- The capacity for employers to close down operations while employees are on leave, or direct employees to take leave having regard to their personal circumstances.

Importantly, employees will continue to accrue their entitlements on the usual basis if their working hours are reduced, and any unpaid leave taken during a close down will count as service.

6. HEALTH FUNDS POSTPONE 1 APRIL 2020 PREMIUM INCREASE

Private Healthcare Australia announced on 29 March 2020 that member health funds will postpone 1 April premium increases for at least 6 months. In addition, health funds are targeting financial relief to those most in need, people who have lost their jobs, are underemployed or have contracted the virus. Other measures include:

- All hospital policies – from Basic to Gold – will include full hospital coverage for people affected by COVID-19
- People experiencing financial hardship as a result of the crisis will be able to access relief from premium costs – members are urged to contact their health fund directly
- Health funds are covering telehealth services from psychologists from 30 March
- Health funds will cover telehealth services from other allied health professions where practical and clinically appropriate. Funding for tele-physiotherapy services has already been announced, with more announcements concerning additional professions to be made in the coming days
- Health funds will continue to provide access to and reimburse emergency dental services and will direct members needing access appropriately
- Arrangements to allow more hospital in the home services and more remote access services for our members at particular risk, this is subject to Government approval

7. GOVERNMENT RELEASES NEW 'WHATSAPP' MESSAGING SERVICE.

The Federal government has announced new ways to receive official information and advice on COVID-19. The first is a WhatsApp messaging service which can be accessed by visiting australia.gov.au/whatsapp on your smartphone. The second service is an official coronavirus app available on the app store known as 'Coronavirus Australia'

8. ENERGY SUPPLIERS PLEDGE TO DEFER BILLS/DISCONNECTIONS

- AGL announced the 'COVID-19 Customer Support Program' which will fast-track access to a program that defers payments and suspends disconnections until July 31 for customers who may be under financial stress as a result of the pandemic.
- Origin Energy has pledged new measures that include:
 - no disconnections for any residential and small business customers in financial stress until at least 31 July 2020;
 - no default listing for any customer who is having trouble paying;
 - pause to all late payment fees effective immediately.

9. ADVOCACY UPDATE

Measures to help protect businesses and jobs

- NECA has called on the Federal and State Governments to consider a number of measures in an open letter to the Federal Treasurer, the Honourable Josh Frydenberg MP. These measures will help to protect businesses and jobs, and support the Australian economy as it rebuilds following the COVID-19 crisis.

[Link to media release and letter](#)

Liquidated damages arising from delays and stoppages

- NECA is seeking urgent clarification from the Federal Government in relation to Liquidated Damages that may be imposed as a result of delays or stoppages arising from the COVID emergency. NECA is seeking protection for sub-contractors caught up in this scenario. Once we have clarification we will advise members.

Essential Services Tasmania

- NECA Tasmania members will be aware that the “Essential Services” classification in Tasmania is a discretionary measure applied by the Director of Public Health. Members seeking an exemption are encouraged to contact NECA for assistance.

LATEST STATE AND TERRITORY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Contact your local NECA Chapter website for regular updates.