



2023

CISVic's Energy Hardship Partnership

Summary evaluation of delivering the Power Saving Bonus Community Outreach Program



Community Information
& Support Victoria

The Community Information and Support (CIS) Sector provides essential services to those hit hardest by the increasing cost of living. Through holistic wrap-around practical and emotional support, CIS agencies work to alleviate the impacts of financial hardship.

Addressing energy hardship is critical to this work, as the rising costs of utilities disproportionately impact vulnerable people, who often have less capacity to engage in energy affordability mechanisms.

To support our sector's work in this area, CISVic secured funding from the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) to deliver the Power Saving Bonus (PSB) Community Outreach Program.

This summary evaluation details the findings and recommendations from the partnership's delivery of the program.

CISVic acknowledges the true custodians of Country and pays respect to Elders past and present.

Introduction

Thirty-two CIS agencies joined the CISVic Energy Hardship Partnership to deliver cost-of-living relief, via the Victorian Government's \$250 PSB payment, and energy affordability support to vulnerable consumers.

Through one-on-one, face-to-face conversations, agency staff, including trained volunteers, engaged vulnerable consumers in a review of their electricity bill to access:

- The PSB payment; and
- Energy affordability information, support and advocacy, including comparisons of energy plans, retailer's best offer, navigating Victoria's Payment Difficulty Framework, concessions and utility relief, energy literacy and conservation advice.

Program Outcomes



\$1,318,250 worth of cost-of-living relief provided to vulnerable Victorians



5,542 Victorian households supported to access the program



13,408 different occurrences of light affordability information and advice provided



1,955 episodes of advocacy provided to access different energy affordability supports



559 households referred to the Energy Assistance Program for in-depth agency assistance and advocacy

Generating awareness of the Power Saving Bonus

The CISVic Energy Hardship Partnership carried out various community engagement activities to generate awareness of the PSB.

Activities delivered:

Word or mouth

Conversations with clients accessing CIS agencies, flyers in food parcels and promotion through agencies' other programs/services.

Social Media

Promotion through agencies' online social pages, or linking with other local community pages (e.g., Facebook community groups, local Members of Parliament).

Other community services

Promotion through local community services, public services (e.g., libraries, schools) and similar organisations with high-traffic areas.

Outreach activities

Visits, pop-ups, stalls or co-locating at libraries, schools, retirement villages, caravan parks retail stores, local schools, community programs, churches, shopping centres, community events, housing estates, other community services and in-agency bill days.

Other activities

Collaborating with community channels and stakeholders known to CIS agencies to distribute program promotion. Mainstream media promotion through articles, news stories and advertisements. Contact with existing CIS agency clients.

*Names and some details have been changed to protect the identity of participants.

Key findings from community engagement:



The most reliable and consistent method to generate awareness of the program was through word of mouth via agencies' intake, services and programs. Relying on social media and existing links with other community services was also important.



To engage those with access issues, outreach activities were critical. However, this was often labour-intensive for agencies with limited staffing or a heavy reliance on volunteers.



Funding that came with providing the PSB allowed partner agencies to carry out promotion and advocacy activities that helped increase their profiles within local communities and with people who would not usually access their service but needed forms of support.

When attending a local shopping centre, Silvia*, a senior single woman, spoke with agency staff at their pop-up desk. Silvia was surprised to learn that she was eligible for the PSB and that concessions should appear on her bill. When the concessions were processed and backdated for 12 months, and with the PSB, Lauren found herself paying less, and the small debt she owed cleared.

"I didn't think I would get the bonus as I didn't have concessions. I then found out I should have been accessing concessions and other bonuses all along. This friendly volunteer called on my behalf to have my concessions applied. This has been very helpful as I have been struggling with the cost of everything. How wonderful!"

Program participant

Supporting vulnerable and hard-to-reach households

Many participants supported through the CISVic Energy Hardship Partnership were vulnerable or from hard-to-reach households. From working with these households the partnership found:



Vulnerable people (e.g., those with chronic mental health issues, disabilities, language or digital limitations, or other significant vulnerabilities) found it challenging to access the PSB, even with support. Identified challenges included limited energy literacy or limited ongoing contact with energy providers.

Encouragement and support from a trusted source can facilitate better access to relief, like the PSB and other energy support. However, this requires experienced staff trained to work with vulnerable people to navigate difficulties that arise, including lack of access to required information, frustration and unpredictable behaviour.



Vulnerable people face increased barriers when engaging in the energy market. These include the perceived complicated nature of energy (e.g., complicated bill layouts and language used to describe energy), feelings of anxiousness or urgency when energy is linked to debt or overall hardship and inability for those living in embedded networks to seek better offers or access mainstream energy supports.

The PSB payment was an important incentive to engage vulnerable people in a conversation that seeks to understand the underlying reasons they are experiencing energy hardship. Through a holistic approach that considers co-existing needs and circumstances, individuals can be supported and empowered to engage with the market to access savings or relief while other concerns that hinder their ability to engage with the market are also addressed.

Factors hindering uptake of light energy affordability support :

- Reluctance to consider other offers driven by misunderstanding, misguided loyalty or lack of brand recognition.
- The complexity of the energy market and the VEC comparison tool.
- The environment where the support was delivered (e.g. shopping centre hindering the sharing of personal information)
- Time constraints.

Factors influencing uptake

- Length of interaction and the support and expertise of the worker to step people through information and process.
- Face-to-face conversations where information and processes are shown, shared and demonstrated.
- Use of the incentive (e.g. supporting people at first presentation), as no-shows for follow-up appointments were frequent.
- Information delivered from a trusted source.

Sahnar* was in a very difficult place. While escaping family violence, she was trying to juggle debts, rent and utility costs that she could not manage. She could not work, provide for her children or get back on her feet. The agency saw Sahnar and helped her. They used the conversation as a starting place to hear Sahnar's story and begin building a support network of other services. Utilising interpreting services, the agency also helped Sahnar access the PSB and submit claims for Utility Relief Grants. Referrals to other supports and information were also provided. The outcome of this, in Sahnar's words, "I can pay my rent arrears now". Following the support, Sahnar was able to say, "This has made a difference", "This is wonderful. I didn't know I could have this", and "I am so grateful".

Program participant

Types of energy affordability support provided:

By type:	Participants provided information	Participants provided advocacy
Concessions	1537	136
Best Offers	2056	163
Victorian Default Offer	1097	71
Utility Relief Grant	1680	218
Victorian Energy Compare	1949	897
Payment Difficulty Framework	921	104
Centrepay	733	35
EWOV* & Dispute Resolution	691	15
Energy Literacy Advice	1206	163
At-Home Energy Cost Savings Information	1239	138
Other (Includes billing issues, financial counselling, embedded networks)	299	15

Lessons learned

The CISVic Energy Hardship Partnership identified the following enablers, barriers and unanticipated factors that impacted program delivery.

Key enablers:

- Funding to deliver the program
- The program portal, including its ease of use and tracking of applications
- Support and communications from the partnership lead, CISVic, and DEECA. Including the resources provided for participants.
- Multipronged advertising of the program, including statewide from DEECA and grassroots from agencies.
- The partnership's trained and knowledgeable workforce with skills to support vulnerable people and knowledge to navigate current energy supports. Additionally, the workforce could use their knowledge and experience to provide critical support outside the program scope (e.g. family violence, insecure housing, etc.)
- Community spaces, for example, CIS agencies which are accessible to a variety of people across many locations and provide a confidential and supportive environment.

Key Barriers

- Confusion about the different bonuses resulted in duplicate applications, participant frustration, and additional work for staff.
- Issues arising from complicated bill layouts and access.
- Complicated program consent form.
- Eligibility restrictions that excluded those in rooming houses and shared accommodation, etc.
- Long retailer hold times, limiting the time of support or number of people supported through advocacy.
- The program's heavy reliance on digital access (e.g., email addresses) limits some participants' access. For example, rural because of poor or lack of internet and phone services or the costs of transport to access support.
- Limited ability to prioritise the provision of PSB against other emergency relief services for people experiencing crisis.

Unanticipated Factors

- Additional time and support that is required when supporting vulnerable participants to access the required information and documentation to submit an application. Including chasing up hard-to-reach participants to obtain further documentation when required.
- When applications were slowed to be paid, participants became anxious. Resulting in repeated calling and inquiring with CIS agencies that required additional time and support. This was exacerbated by little, and at times, no communication or notifications updating participants on the progress of their applications.
- Demands on retailers increased because of the PSB program, adding to wait times and time on calls for program staff.
- Additional information or limiting processes from participants in embedded networks.

Other insights

To improve the project delivery, CIS agencies suggested some changes. Including:

- A longer lead time when implementing the program to better prepare agencies and staff.
- Small changes in the portal to increase functionality, e.g. reduce options for participants in embedded networks, make it easier to correct mistakes, ensure the portal is more responsive and combine the PSB and EAP portals.
- Leaving the program to run longer.

Recommendations

- 1. A dedicated communication channel or callback process for agencies to contact retailers.**
- 2. PSB and other energy assistance should be provided from a holistic approach, as energy hardship does not happen in isolation from other financial issues or hardships.**
- 3. More work is needed on a policy, implementation and enforcement level to ensure vulnerable people don't miss out on available support and stay engaged with the energy market.**

- 4. Ongoing work with retailers to implement/enforce the following changes:**
 - **Make contact with consumers when concessions are about to expire,**
 - **Honour the offers listed on the VEC website**
 - **Provide information in plain English, including bills,**
 - **Ensure all retail staff are trained to assist with the PDF and respond quickly to requests,**
 - **Increase communications between retailers when consumers are changing providers; and**
 - **Make applying for URGs easier.**

Unexpected Outcomes

CIS agencies, when supporting vulnerable people, often have limited resources or opportunities to make a significant impact through one or two visits. However, the PSB provided an opportunity to assist immediately and materially. The byproduct of this on staff, mainly volunteers, was morale-building and energising. In what is often a challenging and selfless role in supporting people with financial or personal hardship, this was a chance to put a smile on their participants' faces and for them to feel the benefits of making this difference.

Along with the immediate material support, agencies noted that access to advocacy through the program could save vulnerable participants significant amounts on their annual electricity accounts. For example, having concessions applied, including, at times, negotiating these to be backdated and accessing other supports (e.g., comparisons and best offers, Utility Relief Grants) can save thousands of dollars.

Another unexpected outcome was the ability to empower participants, often our most vulnerable and financially insecure community members, to take control of their energy bills, for example, instructing them on accessing and understanding their energy usage/costs or re-engaging with their retailers.

Additionally, the PSB program delivered by CIS agencies provided seamless access to other in-agency supports to address general financial hardship or cost of living pressures, like financial counsellors, no-interest loans, emergency relief funds for medication and food, etc.



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