

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.**

**"Access to Education"**



**Submission**

**to the**

Request for ACMA to produce an

Industry Standard on financial hardship

**from the**

**Federal Council**

**of the**

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.**

**ICPA (Aust)**

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to comment on the request for ACMA to produce an Industry Standard on financial hardship and to provide feedback related specifically to the communications needs of rural and remote education and geographically isolated students.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation, which advocates on behalf of our members for equity of access to an appropriate education for all geographically isolated children and students, from early childhood through to tertiary. Most member families of the Association reside in geographically isolated areas of Australia, and all share a common goal of achieving equitable access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Students whose family home is in rural and remote Australia, often live great distances from their nearest education institution and from services required to support the education of these students.

ICPA (Aust) advocacy extends to communications needs of rural and remote education and geographically isolated students. Often in rural and remote areas of Australia adequate communications underpin the ability for students to access their education programs and resources. The importance of ensuring high quality, reliable and **affordable** communications services is critical. For these students, communication is key. More so however, where delivery of equitable education hinges upon the availability of affordable communications services it is imperative that financial assistance is made available to ensure students have the access they require to receive an equitable education.

For students in rural and remote Australia who must study via distance education, provision of affordable communications services is imperative to their ability to access the increasingly online curriculum. ICPA (Aust) members have requested that internet be provided by government to ensure all students have access to equitable services. In some states, subsidies are provided to assist with communications access and this is a welcome source of financial support for families. Further, given many of our members rely on nbn Sky Muster satellite services, ICPA (Aust) continues to seek assurance that the government subsidy, which allows nbn Sky Muster satellite services to be installed at no cost to those living in geographic isolation, will continue unchanged.

ICPA (Aust) is also concerned for transient working families in remote locations who currently have limited to no internet connectivity, with recently developed transportable technology only available at excessive cost, which is out of reach for many. If cost effective technology and services are not available, these expensive solutions, which are only required by a small number of consumers, may be viewed as unviable and development and availability may be curtailed, therefore leaving these families with no access to essential digital technology. While ICPA (Aust) understands there are now more and less expensive alternatives available to some families, accessing these services it is still at the entire expense of families to access these services other than in those circumstances where a state government subsidy may be available for distance education students.

Adequate internet access commensurate to the educational needs of students is also essential in situations where students who may attend a mainstream school require access out of school hours for their education. As a move to more online educational activity continues, measures must be in place to ensure families are able to afford to provide this access. ICPA (Aust) welcomes the Federal Government's recent School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) for the provision of a free nbn connection for families with school students who do not currently have a nbn connection at home. With reliance on communications to access and enhance education across all formats and levels, programs such as this should be continued and expanded to ensure all students are able to access adequate and essential communications services to allow them to undertake their education unheeded.

Many of our families live in locations with limited or no mobile coverage. Mechanisms need to be in place that ensure mobile services to those who may not otherwise receive mobile services is prioritised. While

many ICPA (Aust) members have no access to mobile coverage, some have achieved connection to the network using equipment (aerials and boosters) which improve and enhance signal and connectivity, at their own, often extensive, cost. This is a unique situation for these remote locations and this and other distinctive situations for these consumers need to be taken into consideration when applying any new mechanisms. Safeguards are required to ensure rural and remote residents are not disadvantaged or incur extra costs to receive equitable communications services.

People living in rural and remote areas often go to great lengths and private expense to try to bridge the gap to access digital services, whether this is internet, telephony or television. These extra costs, covered by the consumers themselves should be taken into consideration. Each time technology changes, families living in rural and remote areas have additional costs, which are often significant, in order to update equipment and resources to try to remain connected in the quickly changing digital world. An example is the imminent change from 3G to 4G mobile service, where some rural and remote customers who live on the fringe of mobile coverage have purchased and installed at their own expense aerials, antennae, boosters and compatible handsets to connect to mobile services and now need to upgrade this equipment. 5G is approaching in the future and these same families may again be required to upgrade equipment to access a service that others living in metropolitan or larger regional centres can access without the need for extra purchases.

### EXAMPLES OF RURAL AND REMOTE FAMILIES' ADDITIONAL EXPENDITURE IN STRIVING TO MEET THEIR TELECOMMUNICATION NEEDS

#### Example 1 - NSW Family

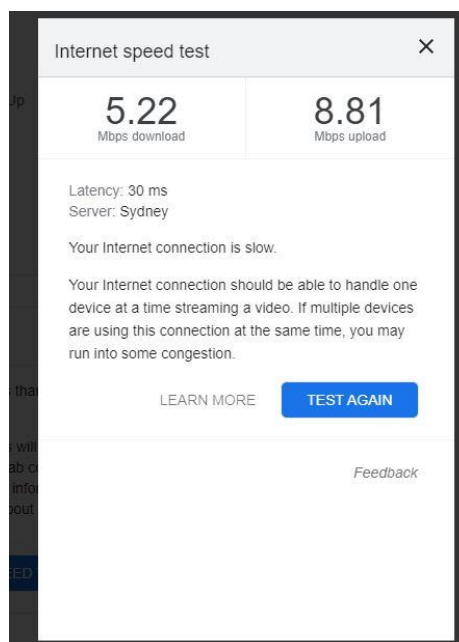
**Old System** - Very inadequate NGWL service

#### **New System** -

Wireless NBN with unlimited data allowance COST \$108.90 per month.

Installation (modem and dish for roof) \$2000.00

- This service is from a local provider (Just ISP or Field Solutions Group). The cotton growers put a lot of money into attracting this service to the area. It has certainly been worth it as our NGWL was inadequate. Current service is good; however some Zooms and Teams meetings freeze or drop out. I am never sure if it is my end or the other end. It is very reliable and the speed is good. Result of a recent speed test:



### Example 2 - Central Qld Family

#### **Current System-**

- **\$10,000 (four years ago) to install a booster and directional antenna** around sheds to provide better service to staff cottages and main sheds.
- Installed a satellite NBN service to the cottage to replace Telstra wireless systems that kept burning out even with booster set-ups and chewing randomly through data, costing a small fortune. Fortuitously we happened to do this at the start of 2020 and in March converted the single staff quarters into “schoolrooms” so we all had enough data to keep operating (the business uses a separate satellite service) and learning.
- It is normal for us to have at least one student here doing practical placement. They need to communicate with supervisors, and complete two projects which involves lots of online research and needs to be submitted online.
- Other staff often choose to upskill while on the job via online learning (usually at night or on weekends).
- We currently have a family here with a primary school-aged child. It is essential for us to be able to provide a good standard of internet services to them and to our children when they have work to complete over holidays (everything seems to be online now!)
- When we have heavily overcast days or rain, our satellite services suffer and landlines tend to go down (Wireless Local Loop - operates on a solar-small battery system) so some days we have limited or no communication means for hours or days at a time.

#### **New System-**

- With ongoing difficulty, separate satellite and landline systems to every residence (7) separate satellite services at several monitoring stations (3), constant changes in coverage and oversubscription of the local wireless antenna (Cracow) we have decided to install a WiFi network to cover our property and part of my sister’s second block with absolutely no communication service or coverage.
- This is through a group called “in2it”, will cost us **\$25,000** and I think will involve 2-3 towers. (I feel the need to add that while this is a big cost, hopefully will in the next 5 years allow us to do away with some of our satellite and landline connections)
- Due to border closures, we have not been able to have this system installed and set up another mobile network system (through a group called Southcloud) to be able to utilise Auctions Plus for our sale. This was an additional cost of over **\$3,000**. While obviously not education related, this mobile system will probably be relocated to near another residence on the edge of the property once the big WiFi install is complete.

### Example 3 - NT Family

Have spent approx. \$8,000 on 3 Cel-Fi Go, a base station and 3 mobile units.

### Example 4 - NW Queensland Family

Several rural and remote grazing properties, with three students currently doing secondary school via Distance Education at one property, and other properties with Distance Education students at times. Some of our staff are young people on gap years or are studying and require communications to continue these courses, as well as relying on communication for interviews/assessments for university placements. 5 students in this position this year and it seems to be becoming more prevalent with the COVID-19 situation with more students studying away from university campuses. Properties are all outside of mobile coverage range and all but one has HCRC phone systems, with the other being a copper landline which is out regularly, particularly when it rains.

**Old System-** satellite internet system in each main accommodation building and HCRC phones (1 copper line set up). One schoolroom with Sky Muster Education Service on one port.

**New System-** Sky Muster internet set up in all accommodation buildings, houses. Sky Muster Plus for all main residences, two school rooms and staff quarters. “Go” mobile units in most vehicles, 9 “Go” Boosters and Yagi antennae set ups, three “Hygain” antennae.

Approx. Hardware costs –

– 15 “Go” units (both Cel-Fi and Telstra) @\$800-900 each, up to \$1200 installed	\$18,000
– 9 Go Boosters and Yagi Antennae set ups @ \$1500 each	\$13,500
– 3 Hy-Gain Aerial set ups @\$5000 each	\$15,000
– 6 UPS units @\$250 each	\$ 1,500
– Water monitoring units 10 @ \$1200	\$12,000

These figures don’t include data or phone plan costs, which are available through a search for various providers. We also have 4 satellite phones and one sat sleeve.

Having the extra communications resources allows more consistent communications. If one service is down, there is usually an alternate way to access some service. As Sky Muster does not have a “pre-paid” service available, having mobile service available for staff, visitors and families on the properties is extremely helpful as each person/family can access additional data and be in charge of their own plans to meet their needs if what the station provides is not enough. We anticipate the amount we invest in communications to increase over the coming years as we continue to try to implement services which will provide our family, business, children and those who work with us reliable communications for work, study, health and safety.

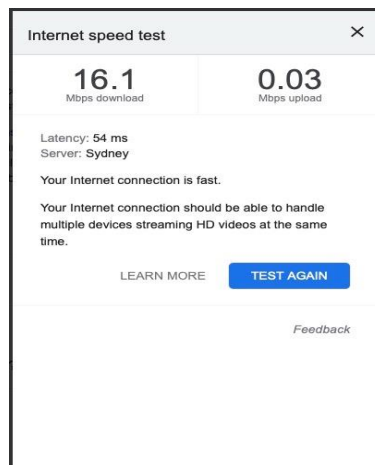
#### Example 5 - NW Queensland Family

**Old System** – Telstra Fixed Wireless Next G 20GB plus various shared data dongles in an attempt to maximise available data COST approx. \$330 p/month when not exceeding data allowance.

**New System** –

Fixed Wireless internet offering unlimited data, 20mbps download/upload COST \$165 p/month plus \$330 installation fee (modem and dish).

- Company is Wi Sky, who have built own towers. We are serviced by a tower approx. 20km NE of our property. This tower provides fixed wireless to a number of surrounding properties in our area.
- Cel-fi booster in home \$1000.00 which will need to be upgraded once 3G network is moved over the 4G/5G. Fortunately did not need to purchase external aerial as signal was sufficient just with booster.



*Fixed Wireless Internet speed*

Example 6 – Nyngan NSW

Using Telstra wireless 200gb costing \$91/month, and Activ8 (nbn) is \$34.95 per month for peak and off peak. 15GB is available at 7AM to midnight on peak and off peak has 75 GB available from 1 AM to 7 AM.

Example 7 – Primrose Valley NSW

Satellite service with Skymesh costing \$74.95. There are occasional dropouts and limited coverage area, only within the house area and verandah. Download and upload speeds are: 44.63mbps and .48mbps upload. This family have multiple users on at any one time and generally do not experience many issues except for need to position workspaces in a cluster area.

Example 8 - Balranald NSW

On Skymuster plus 300gb for \$195/month which is 150gb off peak and 150gb on peak, and they never use the off peak.

Children home learning due to school closures in Victoria. They have Skymuster installed in a worker's cottage and pay \$95 per month. A total of \$290 per month.

They have recently tried to install a Cel-fi booster to try and get a mobile service, but the Cel-fi would not pick up a signal. If it had been success, it would have cost them \$2500 to install.

Example 9 – Central Queensland

- In 2016, with three students studying ekindy/primary school via distance education, with daily online lessons, along with running our business from home, we had a total of 20G of data using the ISS at \$55 per month, always using this data well before the end of the month, meaning our children were unable to attend lessons once the data was used.
- Had Sky Muster installed in 2016 and until earlier this year had two separate plans – one for business/personal use \$74.95 per month for a 70/140 plan and one for the ed port \$50 per month (\$59.95 per month until 2019 when there were still two children in the schoolroom). Now have Sky Muster Plus and do not use ed port at a cost of \$74.95 per month 50/50 plan (plus unmetered data). We also use it for WiFi calling. Only works adequately in the house yard.
- installed a Cel-Fi and Yagi Antenna at a cost of \$1465, giving limited intermittent 3G service in the house. This allows access to messages however it is not sufficient to load videos or complete education lessons. It also has a very limited coverage footprint in the house.
- Installed a Cel-Fi Go in one vehicle, costing \$1254. This still does not provide any mobile coverage anywhere else on the property, however, has been useful at times to give access when travelling on rural roads to be able to access online school lessons.
- Telephone is a HCRC system.
- There is no mobile/satellite or other service over the remainder of the property. Two-way radios are utilised for communications away from the house.