

New arrangements for priority assistance to telephone customers with life-threatening medical conditions

Telephone customers with a life-threatening medical condition will benefit from a new priority assistance arrangements in an industry code registered by ACMA. The priority assistance code supports the principle that a customer who receives priority assistance will receive the highest level of service practicably available from the telephone service provider at that point in time. Registration of the new code by ACMA makes it enforceable.

The code establishes consistent, industry-wide arrangements for the provision of priority services for a residential customer (or an individual in their household) who has a diagnosed life-threatening medical condition.

The new code was developed by Communications Alliance after revision of a previous version to ensure industry-wide consistency, provide revised timelines for priority assistance customers in 'connect outstanding' situations and address the offering of priority assistance using new technologies.

The revised code extends the period for a priority assistance customer's reconfirmation of eligibility for the service from one year to three, clarifies the use of mobile phones as an interim service and requires providers to give priority assistance customers access to an alternative service until their fixed service is restored, regardless of access technology used. The code also requires providers that do not offer priority assistance to inform their customers accordingly.

The new priority assistance code also sets minimum standards for inter-provider arrangements. This is to ensure equitable levels of priority

assistance across the industry for both resale and directly-connected customers.

Priority assistance is a service designed to help persons with diagnosed life-threatening medical conditions who depend on a reliable, home telephone service to be able to call for assistance when needed. Customers receiving such a service are referred to as 'priority assistance customers'. This means priority assistance customers are entitled to faster connection and fault repair of their telephone service and a greater level of reliability.

Telstra is required to offer priority assistance to its residential retail customers under its carrier licence conditions. There are no regulatory obligations on other providers that require the offering of priority assistance to customers. Primus and AAPT are understood to offer priority assistance in accordance with the priority assistance code.

Telstra's priority assistance service was reviewed in 2004. The review examined Telstra's procedures and practices to ensure they were effectively delivering priority assistance to customers in a manner consistent with the government's priority assistance objectives. The



code was revised as a result of the review, extending requirements currently applying to Telstra to all providers that choose to offer priority assistance.

The main changes to the code are:

- a customer's eligibility for priority assistance must now be confirmed every three years, instead of every 12 months, in line with Telstra's revised Priority Assistance for Individuals Policy
- a new rule requiring a provider to ask the priority assistance customer if the customer has access to and agrees to use an alternative service—if not, the provider must offer an interim service to that customer
- where a priority assistance service is unworkable due to a fault on an unconditioned local loop service (ULLS), the new code requires providers and underlying carriers to supply an interim service to priority assistance customers (and provisional priority assistance customers) until the fault is rectified

- ULLS providers are now required to comply with the ULLS reliability standards in *ACIF G572:2001 Unconditioned Local Loop Service Fault Management Industry Guideline* and

- where a voice over internet protocol service provider offers a standard telephone service, it is required to offer a priority assistance service or advise its customers that it does not do so. The new code also clarifies the enquiries a provider should make to determine whether a priority assistance customer's existing service is suitable to be used as an alternative service and the provisions relating to interim and alternative services.

The industry code, *Priority Assistance for Life Threatening Medical Conditions (ACIF C609:2007)*, is on the Communications Alliance website at www.commsalliance.com.au.