



Submission

to the

Draft Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation (Standard Telephone Service – Requirements and Circumstances) Amendment Determination 2026

from the Federal Council

of

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

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Draft Telecommunications Universal Service Obligation (Standard Telephone Service – Requirements and Circumstances) Amendment Determination 2026 providing feedback from the perspective of geographically isolated families.

ICPA (Aust) considers the telecommunications Universal Service Obligations (USO) to be absolutely essential, given the continued reliance on fixed phones across so much of Australia, particularly in remote areas. Previous suggestions that the USO is no longer necessary due to the availability of mobile phones, advancing technologies and the nbn fail to recognise the significant technological gap still experienced by residents in geographically isolated areas. There should be no decline in the current voice services available to our members.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation advocating on behalf of our members representing rural, remote and geographically isolated families. ICPA (Aust) advocates to ensure that children, whether from the outback, regional towns, or distant communities, have equitable access to education from early childhood through to trade and tertiary years. For more than fifty years, ICPA (Aust) has worked to remove barriers that prevent rural, remote and geographically isolated students from accessing the same opportunities as their peers in larger centres.

Key concerns

1. Proposed changes that would allow a standard telephone service to be refused where a consumer cannot provide or maintain “adequate power” for the replacement technology

In rural and remote Australia, reliable mains power cannot be assumed. Extended power outages, severe weather events, generator failures and limited access to technical support are realities for many geographically isolated families and communities. The installation and ongoing maintenance of batteries, generators, solar systems and backup power solutions can impose significant financial burdens, often costing many thousands of dollars and remaining beyond the reach of many households.

ICPA (Aust) is concerned that, under these proposed changes, rural and remote consumers may lose access to essential voice services simply because they are unable to afford, maintain or manage the additional power requirements associated with newer telecommunications technologies. This represents a significant departure from the traditional Universal Service Obligation framework, under which services such as copper landlines and CAN Radio/HCRC systems continued to operate during power outages because they were powered through the telecommunications network itself.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the inclusion requiring the primary universal service provider to clearly outline:

- i) the steps the person must take to obtain such an electricity supply;

- ii) the technical or other requirements for that electricity supply, including any requirements that must be met by a licensed electrician; and
- iii) an indicative reasonable timeframe within which the person could obtain such an electricity supply.

However, ICPA (Aust) is deeply concerned that rural and remote consumers are increasingly being expected to absorb the costs, complexity and risks associated with telecommunications technology transitions without equivalent safeguards, reliability standards or consumer protections being implemented.

ICPA (Aust) further believes these changes raise serious equity concerns for rural, remote and vulnerable Australians, particularly where continued access to essential communications and emergency services may become dependent on a household's financial capacity to purchase, operate and maintain additional backup infrastructure and equipment.

Universal access is difficult to achieve in practice if services remain financially inaccessible.

Landline telephone services continue to play a significant role in providing voice services to accompany 'on air' lessons with teachers and classmates, as well as additional lessons and direct assistance from teachers at the distance education school centres. A large portion of geographically isolated distance education students live outside mobile coverage areas, making the maintenance of landline services and continuity paramount.

When internet services fail, landline phones ensure students can still maintain connectivity and continue participating in their lessons, even if the video or online component is unavailable. Until an equivalent or better alternative that provides appropriate and reliable voice technology is available, standard telephone services must remain in place to ensure rural and remote students can continue to access education.

At a minimum, the provisions allowing refusal of service based on power supply should not proceed unless effective safeguards, management plans for vulnerable cohorts and consumer protections are established.

2. Extension of an outdated framework

The Amendment Determination merely extends and adjusts an existing, outdated framework without broader reform of the Universal Service Obligation or adequate protections to ensure consumers are not left worse off following migration. Further consultation with affected rural and remote consumers should be undertaken before progressing these changes.

ICPA (Aust) thanks the Federal Government for the opportunity to contribute a submission to this Review.