



7.9 Financial Hardship

Scope

This policy outlines St George Community Housing's (SGCH) approach to assisting tenants and applicants who are experiencing financial hardship.

Definition

Financial Hardship

Financial hardship refers to a situation where a person is unable, reasonably, because of illness, unemployment or other reasonable cause, to pay for their rent, debts and other living expenses in full when they become due. Financial hardship may be short term or long term.

Guiding Principles

- Tenants experiencing financial hardship will be treated with sensitivity.
- Each situation will be dealt with on a case by case basis.
- SGCH will assist tenants who are experiencing financial hardship to make alternative payment arrangements for their rent, water or other debts.
- SGCH will be proactive in providing information on and referrals to available services to tenants who are currently experiencing or may in the future experience financial hardship.
- SGCH will promote awareness of this policy to tenants and stakeholders, including support partners.
- SGCH will facilitate access to training on financial hardship to all employees that deal directly with tenants and applicants.

Identification

The following indicators should be considered when determining if a tenant is experiencing financial hardship:

- The tenant requests alternative payment arrangements for rent, water or debt.
- The tenant's payment history indicates that they have had past difficulty paying their rent or other accounts.
- The tenant, through self assessment, has identified that they are having trouble paying their rent and other accounts.
- The tenant has had a change in circumstances that has adversely affected their finances, for example health problems/increased medical expenses, death in the family, loss of employment/income etc.
- A financial counsellor has advised that the tenant is experiencing financial hardship.

SGCH responses to tenants experiencing financial hardship

SGCH will utilise a number of approaches to assist tenants who are experiencing financial hardship. These include flexible repayment options for rents and debts, referrals to financial counselling/credit and debt services, information on government

rebates and incentives, water and energy vouchers and low interest or interest free loan schemes.

Flexible payment options

SGCH will work with tenants who are experiencing financial hardship to make suitable, flexible payment arrangements for rent and tenant debt. Tenants should speak to their Housing Manager if they are having difficulties paying their rent or tenant debt.

Essential Loans Scheme

SGCH offers interest free loans for essential household items and unexpected medical bills and expenses. If tenants are having difficulties purchasing household items or paying for unexpected medical bills/equipment and applications for the Essential Loans Scheme are open, SGCH will advise tenants about the loan scheme and how they can apply for a loan.

Financial Counselling

Financial counselling is a free community service provided by counsellors working in non-profit organisations that assist consumers who are experiencing financial problems. Financial counsellors can provide a full assessment of a person's financial situation, information on entitlements to government assistance, assistance with negotiations with credit providers and other businesses and information on credit laws, debt recovery processes and other areas. SGCH will refer tenants to local financial counselling services where this could be of benefit.

The Credit and Debt Hotline

The Credit and Debt Hotline is a financial counselling information, advice and referral service available to individual consumers in NSW on credit, debt and banking issues. They provide detailed information and strategies for dealing with financial difficulties, detailed information and strategies for negotiating with creditors, legal advice and assistance and referrals to face-to-face financial counselling services. SGCH will refer tenants to the Credit and Debt Hotline where this could be of benefit.

Government rebates and incentives

The State and Federal Governments fund rebates and allowances that can assist customers to pay their utilities bills. SGCH will provide tenants with information about government rebates and allowances.

Government funded programs and products

From time to time, the State and Federal Governments may fund programs and products that can assist customers to lower their utility bills. SGCH will provide tenants with information about government programs and products as and when they are available.

Water and energy vouchers

Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA) vouchers and Water Assistance Payment Scheme (PAS) vouchers are distributed by a range of community welfare organisations and may be able to assist tenants who are having difficulties paying their water or energy bills and have been unable to make payment arrangements

with their supplier. Community welfare organisations that distribute EAPA and PAS vouchers include St Vincent de Paul Society, The Salvation Army, Anglicare, The Smith Family and some community neighbourhood or migrant resource centres.

Low interest loan schemes

NILS® loans are available for items that will improve the health and wellbeing for tenants and their families such as white goods, computer, furniture, medical equipment and essential repairs. Loans are available for up to \$1200 - with a cheque drawn to the supplier. There are no fees, interest or charges.

If tenants are experiencing hardship and a loan might be of assistance, SGCH may refer tenants to an organisation to discuss no interest or low interest loan options.

Training

SGCH will train all frontline employees in how they can assist tenants who are experiencing financial hardship, including resources and services that are available along with rebates and allowances that tenants may be entitled to.