

HUGS

Guide to the Hardship Utility Grant Scheme - HUGS

Western Australia

Hardship Utility Grant Scheme

The Hardship Utility Grant Scheme (HUGS) is operated by the Western Australia Government and assists Western Australian utility customers who are in financial hardship and are unable to pay their utility bills. The purpose of HUGS is to assist customers in financial hardship with their connection to essential services.

A key principle of HUGS is that customers and utility providers share responsibility for managing situations of initial payment difficulty and financial hardship. They must work together to develop manageable payment arrangements, to provide assistance to customers, with the expressed purpose of avoiding disconnection and preventing debt escalation.

Customers may be eligible for financial assistance through HUGS where payment arrangements and other hardship strategies have been exhausted. Financial assistance through HUGS will be targeted towards Western Australians most in need.

Eligibility

You may be eligible if your utility provider assesses you as being in the following situation:

- you contact your utility provider to discuss your outstanding debt and you are assessed by your utility provider as being in financial hardship and not in payment difficulty;
- you have exhausted all your options with the utility provider and enter into a payment arrangement for at least 90 days to address the outstanding debt; and
- after completion of the payment arrangement, if your outstanding bill is still more than \$300.

How much help can I apply for?

If you live south of the 26th parallel (south of Denham), you may be eligible for **up to \$640** per financial year.

If you live north of the 26th parallel (north of and including Denham), you may be eligible for **up to \$1,060** per financial year.

The amount of financial assistance through a HUGS grant must not exceed 85% of the amount outstanding on your utility account.

How to apply

Step 1: Utility Provider Assessment

All applications are initiated through your utility provider, so it is best to call them as soon as you are experiencing financial hardship to discuss your options.

As part of your application, your utility provider will need to work with you to achieve the following:

- assessing whether you are experiencing payment difficulties or in a state of financial hardship
- sign you up to the Utility's hardship program if applicable
- set up a payment arrangement of at least 90 days.

If you have complied with the payment arrangement after 90 days and have avoided a disconnection or restriction notice and/or disconnection, you may request your utility provider to commence the HUGS application process on your behalf.

Applications for review can be made by customers, utility providers or the HUGS Service Centre and should be lodged to:

Manager HUGS
Department of Communities
Locked Bag 3
Perth BC 6849

or via email to hugs@communities.wa.gov.au (link sends email).

What if I am currently disconnected?

If you are currently disconnected from your utility supply, contact your utility provider to discuss your options. You may still be eligible for HUGS under certain circumstances. If you meet the required eligibility for disconnected customers, in order for a HUGS application to proceed, you will be required to:

- pay the minimum amount required to reconnect your property; and
- enter into a future payment arrangement for the outstanding debt.

The HUGS grant may be used to assist you to pay the minimum upfront payment required from your utility provider.

Step 2: HUGS Service Centre Assessment



Following assessment by your utility provider, compliance with utility financial hardship policies and HUGS eligibility requirements, you will be referred to the HUGS Service Centre.

The HUGS Service Centre is an independent call centre service, responsible for making a recommendation about your eligibility for a HUGS grant.

The HUGS Service Centre staff will undertake a comprehensive assessment of your needs, offer additional supports and advise whether you will be recommended for a HUGS grant.

If you have received a HUGS grant in the previous three financial year periods, you will be required to meet additional eligibility requirements as part of your assessment with the HUGS Service Centre.

Step 3: Final Approval

The HUGS Service Centre submits a recommendation to the Department of Communities for all HUGS applications. Following a final assessment and review of your application, the Department of Communities will either approve or decline your HUGS application.

The outcome of your application will be emailed directly to the utility provider that initiated the application and the HUGS Service Centre. The HUGS Service Centre will contact you if your application is declined.

What happens if my HUGS application is declined?

If your HUGS application is declined, you will be notified by the HUGS Service Centre, and requested to contact your utility provider to manage your outstanding amount through the utility provider financial hardship policies.

If you would like to request a review of the decision to decline your application, it must be made in writing within four weeks from the date of the notification of that decision from the Department of Communities to the HUGS Service Centre and utility provider.