

[REDACTED]

6 August 2021

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am writing this as a submission to the 2021 Regional Telecommunications Review.

My partner and I live in Melbourne about 50% of the time and in rural Victoria about 50% of the time. The rural property is South Purrumbete, about 200kms west of Melbourne.

Blackout period (22 & 23 July)

On Thursday 22 July and Friday 23 July, we were trying to work remotely from South Purrumbete during lockdown #5. My partner is employed by a State government agency in ICT.

I've been picking up contract work when possible since being made redundant from a senior and specialised role in late 2018. This has been exceptionally difficult during COVID. We work from South Purrumbete by hot-spotting off our phones. Our data contracts are with Vaya and there is no landline at the property.

Around 8:30am on Thursday 2 July, we lost all comms – all phone access, all wifi, all email, everything – leaving us with SOS access only. Late that morning I went into Camperdown, 23kms away to do grocery shopping. As I could access comms there, I learnt that Optus had sent a tech up Mt Porndon tower for a planned upgrade that was set to last two weeks (until 2 August).

The comms blackout was widespread and included Cobden, Simpson and Timboon, among other areas. Timboon is 30kms from our property. Many could attend their online classes and many businesses could not operate.

I reported this situation to Optus around midday on Thursday 22 July as an urgent issue. Comms were restored later that day when the tech home around 5pm, so I contacted Optus again, explaining about the complete blackout and the urgency.

The next morning, Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> July, I drove out to the tower and spoke to the tech, who advised he was a contractor sent out by Optus. He phoned his boss, who advised we ring Optus to request the work be suspended, at least until the lockdown was over.

For those two days, I could not earn any income. My partner could neither attend work meetings nor do any other type of work, as everything relied on having access to comms.

Over the weekend – when we did have comms – I contacted Optus multiple times begging to speak to someone more senior. I was repeatedly advised that the work was planned, they 'couldn't' stop it (no explanation as to why), and it would definitely last for two weeks.

Several Optus staff 'escalated' my reports, but to what end is anyone's guess because no-one treated the situation with any urgency at all.

At this point, we had no indication of how long the lockdown would last, we could not return to Melbourne, and had zero other options for comms. We could not go to a library or café, nor use other towers nor use a different SIM card.

### Post-blackout discussions

Monday 26<sup>th</sup> July to Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> were spent listening to my partner saying to colleagues 'I may or may not be in that meeting. If Optus go back up the comms tower.....we could be blacked out again. We just don't know.'

Finally, late on Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> July, we got confirmation that the work affecting our property had finished on the previous Friday. The only reason I got that information this 'early' was because I contacted David Healy, Optus VIC/TAS Manager, via LinkedIn.

David Healy took a very minimal interest in this issue: I got one response from him that ignored most of what I raised.

By around Monday 26<sup>th</sup>, July, I had already lost track of the number of times Optus staff advised that someone would definitely follow up with a phone call or an email the next day. (At this time, everyone involved thought the work was still going on.) Or they suggested that we just go with another company. Or that someone would mail me a dongle that would provide comms access in about 5 days. I could not make this stuff up.

I don't think a single person – and I spoke to about 16 different Optus staff – understood how rural areas actually work. These discussions always happened after I'd just finished explaining that we had absolutely no access to any communications except emergency services. I told a couple of staff that if they wanted to get in touch, they would need to send people to our property in person, or a carrier pigeon. They didn't understand that either.

### Dispute resolution & compensation

Around Friday 30<sup>th</sup> July, the Dispute Resolutions staff from Optus finally got around to contacting me, and yet again seemed to have no idea what had been reported. This was now about a week after the blackout had been raised about half a dozen times as a very urgent matter. I can't imagine how they deal with a non-urgent matter.

After having me explain the entire situation all over again for the eleventh time, they offered me \$50 compensation to cover (i) two days of lost income, (ii) around 16 hours of lost time dealing with Optus, and (iii) the stress caused by their refusal to take any action.

I requested \$2,000 as financial compensation. Truthfully, the \$2,000 was my third preference by a long chalk. My first preference was that someone at Optus thought twice about wiping out people's only access to comms in a rural area during a lockdown. My second choice would have been that they did something about it when they were advised of the impact just a few hours in. But Optus elected not to do either of these things.

Optus also advised that the offer of \$50 was 'fair and reasonable' given that our data is purchased from Vaya. Of course, Vaya had zero control over Optus actions here. I have advised Vaya of the situation and Optus's suggestion that Vaya carry the can.

I have not and will not accept \$50 as compensation for the complete mess that Optus has caused here. Partly because it doesn't even begin to cover the actual losses. Also because the acceptance would likely confirm Optus's own view that their conduct has been 'fair and reasonable' and everything is all better. It's really not.

Optus also advise at this point that their actions are in line with TIO expectations. I've not heard this from the TIO as yet, but if this is true, it's fairly horrifying.

### Observations about Optus

The blackout was part of the stress here, but having to deal with Optus staff added another quite component to the damage. I'm 48, but have never, ever experienced people who listen so little or are so lacking in basic empathy in my life. Everything is simply jammed into Optus's own frameworks and machinery.

The Optus format for communication with the public is basically:

1. offering empty apologies (while persisting with the problem behaviours)
2. claiming to understand (while demonstrating very clearly that you don't), then
3. focusing on Optus's own position & ignoring everything else that has been said.

Optus' own policy and/or position comes in a few forms. Examples included:

- We can't do anything about our own company actions and cannot (or will not) connect you to anyone who can.
- We are mainly thinking of customers when we undertake planned work on the only tower in a rural area during a lockdown (and refuse to listen to anyone affected).
- We have no way to stop planned upgrade work that Optus commissioned and are entirely in charge of (and will not say why).
- We do not recognise that many people's livelihoods &/or education may completely depend on access to the internet, but regard it as a luxury so avoid the fallout.
- If you ask questions that have a clear, factual answer that does not paint Optus in a positive light, we will ignore them completely and attempt to divert the topic.
- We will ask every one of our customers the exact same questions over and over, rather than taking notes or referring to online chat logs.
- We will brand ourselves as 'Here for you' in relation to lockdowns while knowingly doing damage to the very people most significantly affected.
- We don't recognise basic principles of justice and so will ask others – with no control over a situation - to suffer the consequences of Optus actions.
- We will deal with every situation in our stock standard manner (e.g. send out a SIM card, call you etc), no matter what you've just told us not 60 seconds ago.
- We do not recognise that there may be a massively disproportionate impact on customers in rural areas and/or customers living in yet another lockdown.

- We do not recognise that Optus & Telstra have established a duopoly control over the communications infrastructure in Australia, or that \*everyone\* relies in these two companies for service.

Optus staff are in desperate need of training in (i) actually listening to people, (ii) taking proper notes, (iii) what living in a rural area actually entails and how much is not at all like the city. They might also recognise that some of are now in lockdown #6. I have literally been in lockdown for around 6 full months.

I'd also suggest Optus staff avoid trotting out the stock company lines while Optus is actively and knowingly causing damaging to people's lives. It's truly offensive.

I've worked for over 25 years in a range of public and private sector organisations. Optus is highly compartmentalised so that frontline staff can truthfully say they can't do anything other than 'escalate' a situation to no avail whatsoever. I imagine they see this as process-driven efficiency. It's actually creating massive inefficiency for Optus as well as everyone else, when there is no effective way to resolve anything.

Optus staff could not or would not offer me a single contact – or refer my enquiry to anyone directly. I did better by looking up LinkedIn.

#### Final remarks

Optus is in desperate need of more robust regulation and/or penalties to ensure it does not continue to completely disregard the disproportionate impact it can have on rural communities. Particularly communities that are already suffering. A fairly significant cultural shift is needed.

In a professional capacity as a compliance and risk specialist, a heavy-handed approach is normally far from my first preference. But I've never seen a corporate attitude that is this self-absorbed and this willing to discard everything that is inconvenient to Optus' preferred reality.

There is currently no end in sight to COVID lockdowns, and rural communities should not be expected to bear the brunt of this attitude and treatment any further.

Yours sincerely,



#### Attached:

1. Correspondence with Richard Riordan MP & Optus
2. Correspondence with Optus Dispute 'Resolution' Team