

INTRODUCTION

As more and more people are presenting to our organisation suffering from financial hardship, we have identified a need to provide information to our local community that might assist households to make better choices when entering contracts, credit or other financial commitments. We also recognise that when people do start to feel the burden and are unable to meet their financial commitments, they are generally unaware of where to go for help and advice.

This resource guide has been developed to respond to that need and hopefully link people to the right information and services to assist them. The worry of financial pressure can have various negative effects, in particular on health and relationships.

We hope you will find the information in this guide to be useful. There is a feedback sheet at the back if you would like to pass on comments or other information you may consider useful.

We thank Tatts Venues for their support in funding this project and providing us with the opportunity to respond to a real need in our local community and the other members of our team that developed and contributed to this project.

Susan Magee
Manager

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'Stay on Track'

Are You Experiencing Financial Stress?

If any of the following apply to you, read on.

Having difficulty paying bills?

Receiving threatening letters from creditors?

*Receiving harassing telephone calls from
debt collectors?*

Paying debts using your credit card?

Debts increasing faster than income?

*Unemployment, addiction or illness causing
money problems?*

**Casey North Community Information &
Support Service
Telephone 9705 6699
www.caseynorthciss.com.au**

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BUDGETING

The best way to understand your financial situation is to prepare a budget. This is a financial plan that allocates your income towards expenses, debt repayments and savings. It tells you how you are spending your income and clarifies your problems.

Here's how to prepare your budget:

Base it on your pay period (i.e. weekly, fortnightly or monthly)

List all your income for your pay period and add up the total.

List **ALL** your expense items for the same period. Items to include are:

rent or mortgage

rates

house insurance

house repairs and maintenance per year (estimate but not lower than \$250)

electricity

gas

water

home telephone

mobiles

shopping

public transport

petrol

car maintenance per year (not less than \$500)

car insurance

car registration

school fees

school excursions

school books

school clothes

medications

entertainment

etc etc etc

To change yearly expense items to weekly or fortnightly equivalent, divide by 52 or 26 respectively.

To change monthly expense items to weekly or fortnightly equivalent, multiply by 12 then divide by 52 or 26 respectively.

Add up all your expenses.

Check to see if your income is more than your expenses. If it isn't, you have a serious problem. Seek help from a financial counsellor – refer Financial Counselling section in "Where to go for Help".

WHAT IS INTEREST?

Interest is a fee that you pay when you borrow money.
The higher the rate of interest, the more you pay.

The more money you borrow and the longer you borrow it for,
the more interest you pay.

Interest rates vary enormously according to the type of credit.
From about 7% for home loans, it can go up to the legal limit
of 48%.

If you want to borrow **\$10,000** to be repaid over 5 years, the
table below shows fortnightly repayments and the total you
would repay over the life of the loan for different interest rates:

Interest Rate	Fortnightly Repayment \$	Total Repayments \$
8%	113	14,693
12%	136	17,623
16%	162	21,003
20%	191	24,883
26%	244	31,758

CREDIT RATING

To get a free copy of your credit rating

Veda Advantage 1300 762 207

Dunn & Bradstreet 13 23 33

WHAT IS A CREDIT CONTRACT?

A credit contract is a legal document that covers all loans including credit cards, rent to buy, gym membership, pawn shops and telephones. It sets out the terms and conditions of your agreement with another party.

Both you and the other party have the right to enforce the terms of the contract in court.

Before signing a contract, ALWAYS READ AND UNDERSTAND everything about it.

If you are not sure, get someone you trust to help you. Refer TIPS below for further sources of information on contracts. In particular make sure you understand –

How long does it run?

How do you terminate it and are there any penalties?

What are the fees, interest rates and total amount you must pay during the life of the contract?

Never sign a contract because of pressure by a sales person.

Do a budget (see Budgeting section) and then YOU decide if you can afford the payments under the contract.

If you have trouble later with making payments, read the contract again, check your options and check for any penalties.

If you think you are being charged higher fees or payments than those in the contract, or your finance company is not responding to your hardship situation, seek help from a financial counsellor – refer Financial Counselling section in “Where to go for Help”.

Before you are granted credit, the finance company generally checks your credit rating.

If you default on a credit contract, you may get a bad credit rating.

Any bad credit rating will make it difficult for you to borrow in future.

TIPS:

If you want more information, check out the web at www.legalaid.vic.gov.au

Some other sources of information are listed under Legal section in “Where to go for Help”.

Don't throw the contract away after you sign it. Keep it for future reference.

PERSONAL LOANS

Personal loans are provided by banks, credit unions and major finance companies.

Before you get a loan, do a budget (see Budgeting section) to work out what you can afford.

DO NOT rely on the lender telling you what you can afford.

Don't assume you can afford a loan, just because they are prepared to give it to you.

Don't borrow more than you need.

Shop around for the best interest rate you can get.

The contract must state the total amount to be repaid over the life of the contract.

You will be locked into making repayments for the length of the contract.

Because of interest, your repayments will add up to a large amount of extra money compared to the amount you borrowed (refer to the table in section "What is Interest?").

If you repay early you will save money although there may be penalties.

Interest rates for personal loans are generally between 9% and 18%.

Note that those not working or with bad credit records may still get a loan but pay higher interest rates. Therefore interest rates can vary from market rates up to the legal maximum of 48%.

If you default on the loan, even though the loan is not secured, you can be taken to court and a judgement made against you to sell some of your assets or garnishee your wages to repay the loan.

TIP:

If you have a good credit record, try the banks, credit unions or other major financial companies with whom you are a regular customer. You should pay lower interest if you deal with major lending institutions.

SECURED LOANS - HOME

A home loan is usually the biggest expense for most people.

You can generally get a home loan if you are working and have a good credit record.

The home is security for the loan, which means that if you default on the loan, the lender can sell the home to get their money back.

Do your budget (See Budgeting section). Make sure you include loan repayments, the cost of moving in, rates, insurance and home maintenance. Then YOU decide if you can afford the loan.

If interest rates go up, your repayments will generally increase. Allow for this in your budget.

Get advice early from a financial counsellor if you can no longer afford the repayments. Refer Financial Counselling section in "Where to go for Help". There may be several options to save your house.

However, hanging on to a house with a mortgage you can't afford can make life miserable. You may be much better off selling and renting instead. You may even qualify for rental assistance if you receive Centrelink income support.

TIPS:

Buying your own home is the dream of most Australians. Make sure you can afford the payments comfortably. Otherwise it can turn your dream into a long term nightmare.

Before buying, build up a savings history over a year or two. It will help get the best deal and develop a proof of ability to pay the mortgage.

The more deposit you save for your home, the less you will need to repay.

Take time to check out the best finance.

COUNCIL RATES

Payment of council rates as one lump sum can be difficult.

Council also offers the option of paying in 4 installments, but you can ask to pay fortnightly instead especially if you are in arrears.

SECURED LOANS – CAR

If you take out a car loan, the car you buy is used as security.

Car Loans are available from most financial organisations such as banks and credit unions.

Car dealers often arrange finance or insurance for you. Do not accept these arrangements unless you have tried to arrange them yourself and can't do better.

Do not be pressured by car salesmen into buying what you can't afford.

Do a budget (see Budgeting section) including all the costs involved such as loan repayments, registration, fuel, insurance and car maintenance. Then YOU decide if you can afford the loan.

If you are 2 payments behind, in most cases the finance company can repossess and sell the car to pay back the loan. If the selling price is not enough to cover the loan, you are responsible to pay the difference as an unsecured debt.

Be particularly careful when you buy a new car. The moment you drive one out of the showroom, it is worth much less. If you cannot afford the repayments and the car is re-possessed, you may be left with a big debt and no car.

If you are in difficulty repaying your debt, you can ask the creditor for permission for you to sell the car privately. You may get more money this way but you will only be given limited time.

TIPS:

Save as much as you can before you buy. Bigger deposits mean smaller loans and repayments.

If you are eligible for an unsecured personal loan, check if it may be cheaper than a car loan.

If your car is not insured and you have an accident you may end up with a large debt. Insuring your car for at least 3rd Party, Fire and Theft can save you thousands in case of accident.

SECURED LOANS – OTHER

You can get secured loans for items such as furniture, computers, white goods, boats and caravans.

The terms and conditions are generally similar to those for car loans.

Do a budget (see Budgeting section) including all costs of ownership before you decide to take out the loan.

Some of these items, such as furniture and computers, depreciate even faster than cars. If you can't repay and the items are repossessed, you are left with a significant debt and nothing to show for it.

ADVERTISED INTEREST-FREE LOANS

You may hear of companies that advertise loans with no interest. They are quite common for car loans in particular. Be very wary of taking one of those loans. The company providing the loan is not being specially generous towards you and still has to make a profit. The way they do this is usually by charging a much higher price for the car or other goods supplied. You may pay double the market price or even more. You will usually be much better off to get a normal loan to purchase the goods at the best possible price and pay interest.

TIPS:

If you are considering one of those interest-free loans, do your homework first.

Check the price being charged for the goods, then find out the true market value of the goods.

See if you can buy something similar for a much lower price with a normal loan, then compare the total payments you make for both options.

NILS® LOANS

The No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS®) provides interest-free loans for individuals or families on low income.

NILS is generally for the purchase of white goods, electrical goods, household furniture, health aids and education expenses.

NILS is NOT for emergency relief, bond or rent money, living expenses or debt repayment.

You can only apply if you have a health care card or pension card and be of genuinely low income.

If you are not able to show that you can afford the loan repayments, your application may not be approved.

You can usually borrow up to about \$800.

The repayment period is usually around 12 to 18 months via centrepay.

The program is run by local community groups such as welfare centres. This includes Casey North Community Information and Support Service – refer Community Services section in “Where to go for help”.

OTHER LOANS AVAILABLE AT LOW INTEREST RATES

STEP UP LOAN - low interest personal loan product developed by NAB and Good Shepherd. Available to health care and pension card holders or family tax benefit A recipients

Loans range from \$800 - \$3,000 with interest fixed for the term of the loan. Flexible repayments, no fees or charges, NOT to be used for cash, bills, holidays or debt consolidation.

Contact 9791 8344 (Dandenong) for further information.

THE PROGRESS LOAN - ANZ has partnered with The Brotherhood of St Laurence to offer an affordable loan for pensioner concession and health care card holders.

Loans between \$500 = \$3,000 (but up to \$5,000 for car purchases). With fortnightly repayments, choice of loan period of 1-5 years, and one off approval fee of \$40.

Contact 8781 5928 (Frankston) for further information.
or 1300 576 799

SCAMS

Have you had offers that seem too good to be true!

We are all targets of fantastic offers by telephone, sms, internet, email, letters, or other advertising. They tell you that you have been especially selected for some prize. Or they offer you amazing income or benefits.

They generally ask you for personal information such as bank details or for you to pay a sum of money to some account before you get the prize, service or other offer.

These are generally scams and they are costing Australians billions of dollars each year.

Once you have given money to a bogus offer, the money is LOST.

If you get an offer that looks just too good, be on your guard. In most cases they are scams.

TIPS:

If you are not sure about the offers made to you, it might be best to ignore them.

Hang up on suspicious calls or press "STOP" to unwanted messages.

Delete unsolicited emails and do NOT respond to them.

Protect yourself by not sending any money based on amazing promises. Do not give away your personal details such as PINs and passwords in response to unsolicited emails or phone calls.

Destroy papers that contain personal information such as bank statements.

Keep your computer protection software up to date.

Register your phone at www.donotcall.com.au to stop unsolicited calls from advertisers.

Stick a "DO NOT KNOCK" sticker to your front door to stop door knock selling. They are available from Casey North Community Information & Support Service or maybe your local MP or other community service.

To report scams call 1300 795 995 or visit www.scamwatch.gov.au

CREDIT CARD

A credit card gives you easy access to credit to buy something now and pay for it later.

The cost of having a credit card is the total of the interest and fees you pay.

Interest rates can vary from around 11% to as high as 35%.

Fees can also vary enormously. There are fixed regular service fees and penalty fees.

If you have a bad credit rating, you may only be eligible for high interest cards.

You will probably pay high fees or interest on cards with special benefits such as frequent flyer points.

If you repay the full amount on the statement by the deadline, you incur no interest charge.

If you pay only the minimum amount, you get charged interest on the balance.

If you miss repaying the minimum amount by the deadline, you incur interest plus additional penalties.

Beware of a credit card advertised as: "Low rate for 1st year". What are the penalties? When you are in debt after the first year, what will be the interest rate?

Another catch is: "No annual fees". What other fees such as monthly charges or membership fees will you have to pay?

If you are offered a credit limit increase on your card, do not accept automatically. Do you really need the extra credit? Can you afford additional repayments? Acceptance of such offers has started many people on the road to unmanageable debt.

If you are already in trouble repaying your debts, you will be worse off using additional credit limits.

Use the convenience of credit cards but don't use them to buy what you can't afford.

If you are not sure you can afford the monthly repayments, do not use a credit card.

Do not use credit cards to repay debts. They are one of the most expensive options.

TIPS:

If you are disciplined and good at budgeting, a credit card can be very useful. They are convenient and by making use of interest free periods and paying the full amount on the statement by the deadline every time, you actually save money.

On the other hand, misusing credit cards can contribute to an enormous waste of money leading to hardship.

Limit yourself to one credit card only.

Keep your monthly statements. Check if your balance is creeping up. If so, it's a danger signal.

If you want the convenience of credit card payments but don't want debts, get a debit card instead.

If you are having trouble managing your credit card debts, talk to a financial counsellor – refer Financial Counselling section in "Where to go for Help".

BUY NOW PAY LATER

When you “BUY NOW AND PAY NOTHING FOR ... YEARS” you create a debt with strict repayment schedules and heavy penalties if you don’t make the repayments on time.

Do you clearly understand your repayment obligations?

Do a budget (See Budgeting section). Then YOU decide if you can afford the repayments when they become due.

IF YOU MISS ANY OF THE REPAYMENTS, you will most likely have to pay expensive charges.

You may also have to pay interest for the whole period if you have not paid the full amount by the end of the non-payment period.

The interest rates for these schemes are usually very high.

For example, if you buy a TV for \$1000 and have not repaid anything after 2 years, interest at 26% will be \$587. Your \$1,000 TV is now costing you \$1,587.

If you receive a credit card in the mail from the finance company as part of the deal, make sure you can afford additional debts before using the card. Cut it up otherwise.

TIPS:

Don’t reject the option of buying now and paying later. Use it to your advantage. But if you have not repaid half the amount at the half way mark, don’t kid yourself – you are heading for trouble.

The monthly repayments shown in the statements are often less than what you must pay to clear the debt by the end of the interest free period. Avoid this trap by calculating what you must pay each month to clear the debt on time.

If no payments are required for 1 or 2 years, set yourself a repayment schedule. Don’t expect to pay it all in one sum at the end of the 1 or 2 years.

PAYDAY LENDING

Payday lending offers borrowers small loans of \$100 to \$1,000 for short term.

Payday loans mostly require you to repay by direct debit due on your payday. This leaves you with even less money to live on for the next pay period.

Payday loans carry very expensive fees and charges that can equate to interest rates of up to 1300% per year if you do not repay them in full by the due dates.

A typical payday loan of \$200 over 2 weeks, with a fee of \$40.00, translates to an annual percentage rate of 522%. This is 31 times more expensive than a cash advance on a credit card at 17%.

If you default, you may also have to pay bank "dishonour" fees.

If you cannot repay and you keep rolling over the loan, and incur a fee each time, you end up paying many times more than the original loan.

If you provide your furniture or car as security, and you cannot repay and the debts mount up, you can end up losing your furniture or car.

TIP:

Avoid payday loans. There should be better options. If you are considering a payday loan, it indicates that you are in financial difficulty. Seek help from a financial counsellor. Refer Financial Counselling section in "Where to go for Help".

PAWN SHOPS

(Shops that convert your goods to cash)

You can convert your possessions into cash at pawn shops by leaving one or more of your possessions with them as security.

Do you know exactly what fees you will need to pay and when you must repay the loan? Make sure you understand your obligations before borrowing.

The effective interest rates are very high, like payday loans.

Do you know how you will find the money to repay?

If you do not repay the amount by the required date you may be able to get an extension.

But, each extension will cost you additional fees.

If you have arranged for a direct debit and you do not have money in the account, you may be charged "dishonour" fees by your bank.

If you keep extending and not repaying, you will lose your possessions.

If the value of your possessions is less than your outstanding loan, you will be left with a debt.

TIP:

If you are considering using your possessions to borrow money, DON'T. Seek help from a financial counsellor as you are almost certainly in financial trouble. There should be better options. Refer Financial Counselling section in "Where to go for Help".

RENT TO BUY

This service allows you to own the goods after you have rented them for an agreed time and made all payments.

Fees, interest, insurance and any other rental costs are added to the purchase price of the goods and a fortnightly payment calculated.

This is usually a very expensive way to buy. Avoid it unless you are certain you need the item and have no other option.

Do a budget (see Budgeting section) including all the costs involved with using the goods. Then YOU decide if you can afford the repayments for the whole period.

If you stop paying rent, the goods are taken back and even if you have paid for most of the agreed rental period, you won't get any money back.

If you have paid less than the minimum amount in your contract, you may be left with a debt for the difference.

If the repossessed goods are damaged beyond wear and tear, you may have to pay for repairs.

Usually you will pay all ongoing costs for the item, such as registration, even though you don't own the item.

TIPS:

Check out if you are eligible for a No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS®) before you rent to buy essential household items. Refer NILS Loans section.

Even a personal loan may be a better option than rent to buy. See Personal Loans section. Find out what sort of loan you can get and compare the two options.

See section "Other loans available at low interest rates".

RENTAL

Houses, cars, furniture, computers and many other items may be rented for short or long term periods.

Rental is typically paid monthly in advance for longer term contracts, and in full for very short term ones. A security bond is also usually paid up front.

Do a budget (see Budgeting section) including all the costs involved with the item. Then decide if you can afford the payments for the contract period.

If you default on payments, you will be evicted from the rented property or the rented item taken away.

You will lose all or part of your bond if you cause any damage other than normal wear and tear.

Your bond can also be used to pay any arrears and penalties.

If the bond is not enough to pay for arrears, penalties and repairs, you may be left with a debt for the difference.

If you cause any wilful damage, the owner or their insurance company may sue you for the cost of repairs or replacement.

For house rental, if you default or cause damage, you may get a black mark in estate agent databases that makes it difficult to rent in future.

If you believe that you are being treated unfairly by the rental provider, check the terms and conditions of your contract. Seek help if you don't get a fair hearing. Refer Rental or Financial Counselling sections in "Where to go for Help".

TIP:

Renting is very expensive for consumer goods such as TV and washing machines. As for renting a house, it can often be cheaper than buying. Do a budget for your circumstances before you decide.

BANKING

Banks have a range of accounts with different options and charges to suit your situation.

If you are a senior, have a disability or are on Centrelink benefits, most banks have concession accounts that do not charge service fees and don't charge for transactions.

If all you want from your account is to receive your income and pay your bills, look for an account that gives you enough free transactions for your needs.

Some banks even have free bill payment facilities with selected accounts.

If you want the convenience of a credit card but don't want to get into debt, choose a Visa or MasterCard debit card that draws money from your deposit account when you make a purchase.

If you are a saver, \$1,000 in a transaction account will still be \$1,000 after a year. But in a high-interest online account you can earn around 6% interest and end up with an extra \$60 after a year.

Whatever transaction account you have, if you take out more money than you have in the account, you will pay high overdraft interest plus expensive penalties.

TIP:

Not all banks are the same. Shop around and compare their products and services before choosing one that suits your needs.

TELEPHONES

Home Phone

When you have a landline telephone in the home, you enter into an agreement to pay rent for the phone and a fee for every call you make.

Local calls are the cheapest, long distance calls are more expensive and international calls are the most expensive.

Are you paying too much? Work out how many local, long distance and international calls you make each month. Then shop around for a service that suits you at a price you can afford.

If you don't pay your telephone bill, your service may be cut off.

You may qualify for only incoming calls if you cannot afford a normal telephone service. You don't need to pay reconnection fee for normal telephone service when your debt is down to your average monthly charges.

With an incoming calls only service you are allowed to make outgoing calls to emergency services.

TIPS:

Do not enable diversion of home calls to your mobile because you will end up paying mobile charges every time someone calls you when you are not home.

If you are calling overseas often, it may be cheaper to buy phone cards for these calls.

You can block expensive options on your phone to stop anyone using them.

Check out if a prepaid home phone is easier for you to manage.

If you need directory assistance, call 1223, which is free from most home landline phones. However you will be charged if you choose to be connected to the number.

Avoid using information services (e.g. 1900 ...) that either charge a high fee or charge for every minute you use them. They can be very expensive.

Mobile

Mobile phones are very convenient but can be very expensive if not used properly.

Do a budget (see Budgeting section) then decide what monthly payments you can afford.

Work out how many calls you NEED to make on your mobile each month. Then shop around for a contract that suits you.

Most new mobile phones include access to internet and many information applications which can be very expensive to use. Make sure that you don't agree to options you don't need or can't afford.

If you do make more calls than the allowance in your contract, extra calls can be very expensive.

Calls on your mobile phone generally cost much more than on home phones so limit your mobile calls to those when you are away from home.

TIPS:

If you are an occasional mobile phone user or have difficulty with budgeting, try using a pre-paid phone instead.

For children, pre-paid phones are much easier to control than paying unlimited monthly bills.

Use SMS instead of calling.

If you regularly don't use most of your "free calls", change to a cheaper contract with less free calls.

Avoid telephoning call centres as long wait times are expensive.

Make social calls in the off-peak or free time.

FINES

A fine is money that you have to pay as penalty for committing an offence against the law including non-payment of road toll fees.

Fines don't go away. You must treat them seriously.

If you believe that you did not commit the offence, you can appeal. Read the instructions sent to you with the fines to find out how. Seek help from a financial counsellor. Refer Financial Counselling section in "Where to go for Help".

If you are fined and you do not have the money to pay, you can apply for hardship. A financial counsellor is able to help you with this.

You can ask for more time to pay.

Or you can ask to pay by installment.

The court may issue a Warrant of Execution to force you to pay a fine. The warrant allows the Sheriff to enter any place where you own goods (other than allowable household and personal goods), to seize and sell them to pay the fines.

If the fines are still not fully paid, you can be asked to do a specified number of hours of Community Corrections activities. You can also ask for the fine to be converted to community work.

But if your fines are converted to community work this will be recorded as a criminal record.

If you get a community based order, make sure you comply with the conditions. Otherwise you will be charged for breaching the order and the court may give you a harsher penalty. A jail sentence could even be imposed.

If fines are not paid or the ordered community work not done, you can be imprisoned.

You should treat an infringement notice in the same way as a fine. If you don't pay, you can be taken to Court and end up with a higher penalty.

If you repeatedly default on your fines, you could have your vehicle wheels clamped or driver licence or motor vehicle registration suspended.

If you get a criminal record from doing community work instead of paying fines or going to prison, you may have more difficulty with things like getting a job or a visa for overseas travel.

Insurance could also be harder to get or more expensive.

Bankruptcy does not get rid of fines.

GAMBLING AND OTHER ADDICTIONS

Entertainment or Addiction?

When gambling is no longer just for fun, you end up with debts and other personal problems.

Do you gamble because you think it will make you rich? If so, you are kidding yourself because you won't win in the long term.

If you are gambling or drinking to get away from other personal problems, you need to tackle those problems instead.

If you cannot make ends meet and you gamble or have other addictions, you and those around you are paying a high cost for your abuses.

If you are stealing or involved in criminal activities to finance your addiction, you are in serious trouble.

Debts caused by addiction

Debts resulting directly from gambling and other addictions can make the rest of your life very miserable.

If you have assets like a house or car, you may end up losing them to pay back the debts.

You can't petition for bankruptcy if your financial difficulties are caused directly by gambling in the last two years.

Seek help from a financial counsellor - refer to Financial Counselling in section "Where to go for Help". That section also lists some specialised support services under "Gambling and Addictions".

GETTING OUT OF TROUBLE

You are in financial trouble if you cannot pay your bills or repay your debts from your income. You need to act quickly and seek help from a financial counsellor.

If you have difficulties making ends meet, do a budget (see Budgeting section) to see if you can change your spending priorities to meet your obligations.

If you have difficulty saving to pay large recurring bills, a payment arrangement with your creditor allows you to pay a regular amount each week, fortnight or month.

Are you getting all the income you are entitled to from Centrelink and others?

If your mortgage is killing you, selling the home and renting may restore your peace of mind.

Utility companies have hardship plans if you cannot pay your bills. Ring your gas/electricity/water company and ask to pay fortnightly including the arrears if any. Also ask if you qualify for a Utility Relief Grant.

If you are in temporary financial hardship, you may be able to arrange a debt repayment moratorium of up to 3 months with your creditor until you sort out your troubles.

If you cannot repay your loan according to your contract, call or write to your creditor and apply for hardship. It could reduce your repayments.

If you have assets, a good credit record and earn regular income, check if a bank or reputable finance company can re-finance your debts to reduce interest, fees and repayments.

If you are attracted by offers of debt arrangements, make sure you understand the terms and conditions including costs and repayment commitments. If not, you may end up worse off than before.

Bankruptcy is a last resort process that gives you a fresh start. At the end of bankruptcy, usually after three years, most unsecured debts that were part of the bankruptcy cease to exist.

TIPS:

A financial counsellor may be able to help you sort out your financial difficulties. If you feel you are getting into difficulties, the sooner you seek help, the quicker you may be able to regain control of your finances. Refer Financial Counselling section in "Where to go for Help".

If you need help with Centrelink problems, contact Welfare Rights. It is listed under Community Services in the section: "Where to go for Help".

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

Financial Counselling

Financial counsellors are qualified professionals who provide free and confidential financial counselling services to those who are experiencing financial hardship.

They give information and options to overcome your financial situation.

They provide support to enable you implement the strategy that you choose.

They can advocate on your behalf to your creditors and other private or government organisations.

They can negotiate payment arrangements that you can afford.

If you have received letters of demand or court orders, financial counsellors can explain the debt recovery process and your options.

If you cannot pay your bills, they can explore and explain options and rights that you have.

They can help with budgeting so that you have better control of your expenditures.

They can explain your rights and responsibilities regarding home mortgages and rental.

They can help you to appeal any decisions that you disagree with regarding Centrelink and other government bodies.

They can give you information on bankruptcy and help with applying for bankruptcy.

If you believe that you have been discriminated against and that this affected you financially, they can help you lodge a complaint.

They can refer you to other services that you may need.

Please note that financial counsellors do not provide information on how to invest your money. For that you will need to see a financial planner or advisor. If you do not know where your nearest Counsellor is call 1 800 007 007 and they will tell you.

In the Casey region, financial counselling services are available at the following locations:

Credit Helpline - Victoria

Telephone: 9602 3800

Access by telephone only for advice and referral.

Cardinia – Casey Community Health Service

28 Parkhill Drive

Berwick 3806

Telephone: 8768 5100 to make appointment for financial counselling.

140-154 Sladen Street

Cranbourne 3977

Telephone: 5990 6789

Casey Cardinia Community Legal Service

42 Claredale Road

Dandenong 3175

Telephone: 9793 1993

Fax: 9794 9521

Email: caseyclc@vicnet.net.au

Appointments are necessary and can be made by calling the service between 10am and 4pm Monday to Friday.

Casey North Community Information & Support Service

Suite S1006 Overland Drive

Fountain Gate 3805

(Next to Centrelink)

Phone: 9705 6699

Fax: 9705 6794

www.caseynorthciss.com.au

Email: cnciss@caseynorthciss.com.au

Cranbourne Information & Support Service

156A Sladen St

Cranbourne 3977

Phone: 5996 3333

Fax: 5996 7626

Email: ciss@vicnet.net.au

Salvation Army Support Service - Doveton

Phone: 9793 3933

Gambling and Addictions

Alcoholics Anonymous

Cranbourne
Berwick

Telephone (Head Office): 9429 1833

www.aavictoria.org.au

Aims to provide support to alcoholics in a group setting. Regular self help groups are held for alcoholics and problem drinkers who want to overcome their problem.

To arrange a meeting with a group, you would need to contact the Head Office number above.

Gamblers Help Southern

Cranbourne Integrated Care Centre
140-150 Sladen Street
Cranbourne 3977

Telephone: 9575 5353
1800 156 789 - no charge

www.ghsouthern.org.au

24 hour telephone counselling service for gamblers and their families. Counselling can be on a one to one basis, with a friend or partner, or in a group.

Gamblers Anonymous

P.O. Box 369
Richmond 3121

Telephone: 9696 6108

www.gansw.org.au

Provides group therapy sessions for people experiencing problems with gambling. Social functions are also held on an irregular basis. There are 37 meeting places in Victoria, call to find out where the nearest venue to you is. This service is free of charge.

Narcotics Anonymous

Telephone: 9525 2833 (24 hour helpline)

www.naoz.org.au

Self help organisation, providing members with support to abstain from the use of drugs.

South East Alcohol & Drug Service

229 Thomas Street

Dandenong 3175

Telephone: 8792 2330

Fax: 8792 2331

www.southernhealth.org.au/seads

Provides a wide range of services aimed at reducing the harm associated with alcohol and other drugs.

Counselling

Support groups

Drink driver restoration program

Youth outreach and peer support

Residential withdrawal unit

Aboriginal outreach worker

Mobile overdose response service

Rental

WAYSS

58 Webb Street
Narre Warren 3805

Telephone: 9703 0044

Fax: 9703 0066

Housing related information including general housing information; information on a range of accommodation options; public housing; private rental.

Referrals and advocacy to government and community agencies and services; tenancy advice services and a range of support services.

Peninsula Community Legal Centre

Tenancy and Consumer support program
Chatsworth House 4 / 431 Nepean Highway
Frankston 3199

Telephone: 9783 3600 Frankston

5955 3722 Cranbourne

Email: pclc@pclc.org.au

Tenant information and support service, including telephone advice.

Tenants Union of Victoria

55 Johnston Street
FITZROY VIC 3065

PO Box 234
FITZROY VIC 3065

Telephone:

Advice: 9416 2577

Administration: 9411 1444

Fax: 03 9416 0513

www.tuv.org.au

Provides advice, assistance and advocacy for tenants of private and public residential properties and residents of rooming houses and caravan parks in Victoria.

Legal

Casey Cardinia Community Legal Service

42 Claredale Road
Dandenong 3175

Telephone: 9793 1993

Fax: 9794 9521

Email: caseyclc@vicnet.net.au

Free legal advice service for most matters and also provide financial counselling. A visiting service comes to Campbell Page Suite 1003 Office Centre Overland Dve Fountain Gate (next to Centrelink). Appointments are necessary, call between 10am and 4pm Monday to Friday.

Consumer Action Law Centre

Level 7, 459 Lt Collins Street
MELBOURNE VIC 3000

Telephone numbers:

Switchboard: 03 9670 5088

Legal Advice line: 1300 881 020

Legal advice line: 03 9629 6300

Fax: 03 9629 6898

Email: info@consumeraction.org.au

www.consumeraction.org.au

Consumer Action provides free legal advice and representation to vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers across Victoria.

Consumer Affairs Victoria

121 Exhibition Street

Melbourne 3000

Consumer Affairs Helpline: 1300 558 181

Interpreter Service: 131 450

12 Wheeler St

Berwick 3806

Telephone: 8762 5222

www.consumer.vic.gov.au

Protects and promotes the interests of consumers.

Legal Aid Victoria

Level 1, 9-15 Pultney St
Dandenong VIC 3175

Telephone: (03) 9767 7111
1800 677 402 Free Call Legal Information
www.legalaid.vic.gov.au

Legal Aid provides a wide range of legal services and cost is dependent on the client's income. Its focus is on the socially and economically disadvantaged. There is a multilingual telephone information service.

Peninsula Community Legal Centre Inc

Suite 12 33-39 High Street
Bella Centre CRANBOURNE 3977

BH Telephone: 5995 3722
www.communitylaw.org.au/peninsula

PCLC is a free legal service and provides initial legal advice and information on most legal matters. Ongoing casework assistance, including court representation, is provided in line with the Centre's Advice and Casework Guidelines.

Community Services

Casey North Community Information & Support Service

Suite S1006 Overland Drive
Fountain Gate 3805
(Next to Centrelink)

Telephone: 9705 6699
Fax: 9705 6794

Email: cnciss@caseynorthciss.com.au
www.caseynorthciss.com.au

Provides a wide range of information and support services to the local community including financial counselling.

Cranbourne Information & Support Service

156A Sladen Street Cranbourne 3977
PO Box 5263
Cranbourne 3977

Telephone: 5996 3333
Fax: 5996 7626

Email: ciss@vicnet.net.au
www.vicnet.net.au/~ciss

Provides a wide range of community and information support.

Welfare Rights

155 Easey Street
Collingwood 3066

Telephone: 9416 1111 Advice and 1800 094 164
Fax: 9419 3552

www.welfarerights.org.au

They have a number of services, including a telephone advice service that provides free independent advice about any Centrelink matter.

FEEDBACK AND UPDATE FORM

Whenever we reprint this guide we want to make sure that information is accurate and up to date.

If you want to submit new information that may be useful or details of a new listing or you want to update the details of your organisation, please complete this form and return to:

Casey North Community Information & Support Service
Suite S1006 Overland Drive
Fountain Gate 3805

Alternatively information can be emailed to
cnciss@caseynorthciss.com.au
or faxed to 9705 6794.

Name of Organisation:

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Name of contact person:

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Contact phone number:

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Address:

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Brief description of organisation or any other information for
guide

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Other comments:

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**Produced by
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