



Spike in calls to Hotline: trapped in lockdown with low literacy

July 2020

Calls to the Reading Writing Hotline have soared by 30% since the first Covid-19 lockdown, exposing the thousands of Australians with low literacy, from newly unemployed workers and business owners to parents and the elderly, who are being left behind in an online world.

The surge in callers from April to June includes parents with reading difficulties struggling to teach children at home, workers unable to complete Centrelink forms for income support, and older people needing digital literacy to stay in contact with family and support services.

Reading Writing Hotline Manager Vanessa Iles says the increased calls for help during the pandemic has starkly highlighted the need to reach out to an invisible group of Australians with low literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

"This pandemic has exposed a whole group of Australians whose need for literacy support had been invisible and unaddressed," says Ms Iles. "Our world has moved online, but those with low literacy have been left utterly isolated.

"Often, people who have difficulty reading, writing or using technology manage to get by in daily life. But now their usual coping mechanisms and supports have been ripped away.

"Hotline staff have been spending more time effectively counselling anxious and fearful callers who have found overnight their low literacy is now a barrier to working, accessing income support and simply connecting with their loved ones."

While the pandemic has exposed an urgent and immediate need, some workers and business owners have also contacted the Hotline seeking to improve their foundational skills in preparation for returning to work.

"The good news is many people have seized lockdown as an opportunity to learn," says Ms Iles. "However, face-to-face classes are no longer an option. We can provide digital materials and physical workbooks, but those with the lowest level of literacy need personal support.

"Australia can seize this as an opportunity to plan for the future and diversify how we address adult literacy. Developing new video teaching materials, expanding literacy programs and rethinking ways of providing direct support for those accessing government services like Centrelink would prove life-changing for many.

"Covid-19 has exposed many serious inequities in our society. Adult literacy is no exception, but we must invest in finding new ways to help those being left behind during this crisis and beyond."

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