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Record EWOV complaints highlight billing system issues

Complaints to the Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria) (EWOV) have reached new record levels. EWOV received 15,952 cases in the first half of 2008 — 69% more cases than in the second half of 2007.

14,759 of the 15,952 cases were complaints — 81% more complaints than in the second half of 2007 — mostly due to increases in energy retail complaints. Billing made up 50% of all case issues (up from 44%).

Commenting on the increases, Ombudsman, Fiona McLeod, observed that information technology issues came sharply into focus in the first half of 2008 — as customer interface problems experienced by some companies delivered a range of flow-on effects.

“Essentially, problems implementing new billing systems and large-scale customer integrations affected large numbers of two energy retailers’ customers. The volumes of customers trying to phone the retailers about these problems caused call centre congestion, customer confusion, and a surge in complaints to the retailers and to us.

“The effect on EWOV caseloads was substantial. Among other things, we found it necessary to continue an interim case receipt process — to help us manage the continued increase in complaints. Had we not done this, our complaints for investigation would have increased 107%, rather than 65%.

Resolution 26 reports that EWOV had an 80% overall increase in energy retail cases (up to 13,602 cases). Electricity retail cases increased 86% to 9,756; natural gas retail cases increased 68% to 3,617; and dual fuel retail cases increased 40% to 229.

Some cases were indicative of systemic issues. *Resolution 26* includes a report on some of the systemic issues EWOV raised, or finalised, with the Essential Services Commission in the first half of 2008.

Resolution 26, and *Resolution Bulletin 11*, a two-page summary of it, are both available on EWOV's website — www.ewov.com.au (under *Publications*).

For more information:

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To arrange an interview with the Ombudsman:

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The Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria) (EWOV) is an industry-based customer dispute resolution scheme. It has dealt with electricity cases since 1996, natural gas cases since 1999, water cases since 2001 and LPG cases since July 2005. The Ombudsman has the power to investigate and resolve disputes between customers and their energy and water companies — fairly and independently. At 31 August 2008, EWOV had handled over 146,000 Victorian electricity, gas and water cases, mostly residential.

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