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MEDIA RELEASE

EWOV Annual Report shows cost-of-living pressures led to an increase in High Bill complaints.

While overall case numbers were down in 2022-23 (15,262), the Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria) (EWOV) Annual Report confirms that high bills remain the most prominent issue Victorians are experiencing, accounting for nearly 50% of all cases.

EWOV is already seeing significant increases on last year's case numbers, and this trend is expected to continue as Victorian consumers try to manage higher costs from mortgage rates and petrol prices and potential increased cooling costs ahead of a hot summer.

- Billing cases were up 5% from last year, with 7,685 complaints.
- \$803,990 went to customers in the form of billing adjustments, service payments and debt waivers through EWOV Investigations.

"We are seeing credit and billing cases remaining at a steady high", Ombudsman Catherine Wolthuizen said, "and this is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Consumers are trying to manage the complexities of the market and meet their increasing living expenses. However, there are options available when seeking support, including approaching the provider for help. If consumers can't resolve the issue, they can contact us at EWOV."

Alarming, Privacy complaints rose by 27% compared to last financial year. EWOV received 98 Privacy cases in 2022-23, with 70% relating to electricity – mainly about private information obtained without consent or involving potential identity theft.

In 2022-23, Victorian consumers expressed worries about disconnection of their utilities. EWOV reported receiving over 190 complaints regarding actual disconnections, while approximately 320 cases were closed due to the imminent threat of disconnection.

Ombudsman Catherine Wolthuizen said, "We are watching these issues closely as we know consumers and businesses are concerned about bills and payment difficulties and don't want to be disconnected. Disconnection should always be a last resort."

"It's really concerning," said Ms Wolthuizen. "Although case numbers have dropped, we're seeing an increase in the types of complaints we're receiving – such as High Bills and Customer Service, because people don't understand why their bills are so high. It's a real leading indicator of the coming year – it's possible we will see more cases relating to entitlements and payment difficulty. As consumers accumulate more debt, there is a potential for an increase in disconnection cases in the upcoming months."

The 2023 EWOV Annual Report also highlights systemic issues that impact vulnerable individuals who experience family violence or homelessness.

"Some of our case studies really show the need for clear, safe and strong policies and practices for energy and water companies when it comes to issues such as family violence and protecting consumer information. The way companies can assist victim-survivors can have significant effects on their lives," Ms Wolthuizen said.



As we look ahead to the roll-out of Commonwealth Energy Bill Relief, we may see a rise in the number of cases relating to consumer entitlements and concessions, arising from confusion about eligibility, whether their concession is valid or applied to a bill, or whether they have actually received the payment.

The online version of EWOV's 2023 Annual Report — with links to the full report, cases and complaint trends for individual energy and water companies and embedded network entities, and case studies around common issues — will be available at ewov.com.au on **Thursday 26 October 2023**.

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For more information or to arrange an interview with the Ombudsman, contact:

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EWOV is an industry-based, customer dispute resolution scheme. It has dealt with electricity cases since 1996, extending to natural gas cases in 1999, water in 2001, LPG in 2005 and embedded networks in 2018. The Ombudsman has the power to investigate and resolve disputes between customers and their energy and water companies, fairly and independently.

