

Connect - Autumn 2020

March 2020

Message from the Ombudsman

I'd like to welcome you to the March 2020 edition of Connect, our report tailored for the community sector. Read on to learn more about our outreach and engagement activities, as well as find out about a case identified as part of our outreach and how it was resolved.

For now, I'd like to tell you about some important developments at EWOV.

Firstly, we've revised our policies, processes and practices, and trained our staff in response to industry changes around family violence. As of 1 January 2020, in response to changes to the Energy Retail Code, energy retailers must now have a family violence policy and meet minimum standards of conduct. Our staff have received training on the code changes and have received revised training on how to assist customers presenting with family violence issues and consider their circumstances when resolving complaints.

The bushfires in Victoria have widespread impacts on the community and our thoughts are with all those affected. We know that many of you are working hard to support these communities and will be doing so during the current crisis and beyond. Read on for more about how we hope to work with you to help resolve energy and water issues now and in the future.

And, lastly, take a look at our recent [ResOnline](#), for real stories from our cases and more data about emerging trends, including cases relating to tariffs and price increases.

We are always looking at ways to improve Connect. If you have any story ideas or your organisation would like to be featured in the next edition, please [let us know](#).



Cynthia Gebert
Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria)

EWOV in the community

We're committed to outreach and engagement. In the period between July and December 2019, we participated in 44 events across Victoria including: Ballarat; Bass Coast; Brimbank; Casey; Dandenong; East Gippsland; Hume; Latrobe; Melbourne; Melton; Shepparton; Wyndham; City of Yarra; and the Yarra Ranges.

We attend events across our local government priority areas, as well as those events identified by local agencies in areas of particular vulnerability. We always aim to raise awareness of the support we can provide, as well as offer a face-to-face outreach service for those experiencing issues with their energy or water company.

Our outreach and engagement work gives us access to stories from the community that help us change our processes for the better and raise awareness of issues with the energy and water companies and stakeholders we deal with.

In November, we held a roundtable in Morwell in partnership with Latrobe Community Health Services. Through discussions with community agency representatives, we identified local trends, many of which were similar to those identified in our previous roundtables in Wyndham and Mildura. These included:

- the impact on tenants not being able to make public housing properties energy efficient
- the impact on local services as more people move from Melbourne to regional areas for a lower cost of living, which in turn drives up housing costs and increases the number of job seekers and users of local services
- the increasing number of financially vulnerable consumers who are accessing material relief (e.g. food) while they prioritise payment for energy and water
- consumers accessing 'payday loans' to reconnect services.

On the same day, we also ran a community outreach event that allowed community members to speak with EWOV and other agencies.

In 2020, we will also run pilots in additional priority areas including the local government areas of Hume, Whittlesea, Dandenong and Casey.

Ruth Harley, Senior Community Outreach and Engagement Officer, is available to discuss outreach and engagement opportunities on 03 8672 4280 or via email ruth.harley@ewov.com.au. Her focus will be on activities that occur within pilot areas.



Latrobe, Wellington and East Gippsland

Case Studies

Vulnerable consumer sells jewellery to pay energy bills

Case study: 2019/22160 + 2019/22161

Ayishah attended one of our community outreach events. She accesses emergency relief to feed her family and speaks English as a second language.

She stated that her retailer had disconnected her electricity due to a \$900 account in arrears and that the same retailer was threatening to disconnect her gas. She said she had to travel overseas due to a family death and that Centrelink had stopped her payments. Ayishah said her retailer told her she had to pay \$500 and agree to a fortnightly payment to have her electricity reconnected. She stated that she sold jewellery to pay the \$500 and was without electricity for three days, with children in the household.

EWOV took the case as an investigation. Through our process, the retailer applied credits of \$650 to both electricity and gas accounts in recognition of not sending Ayishah the Utility Relief Grant form. It applied pay-on-time discounts to the accounts and one-off credits, and it also waived the electricity reconnection fee. Total credits applied were \$970.73 for electricity and \$1,075.24 for gas, putting both accounts in credit. The retailer advised that the customer could contact it about a payment arrangement after she receives her next gas or electricity bill.

We're currently reviewing whether or not the retailer followed the law before disconnecting supply and if a Wrongful Disconnection Payment applies. This case highlights the importance of our relationship with community groups and our outreach work.

* Names have been changed in this case study

Our bushfire response

We've made some operational changes to support vulnerable customers affected by the recent bushfires in Victoria.

- Contact us via our priority line (**03 8672 4477**) to talk about your clients' energy and water issues.
- We'll assess the customer's situation and may escalate the matter as a **discretionary investigation**, with the aim to increase the speed and effectiveness of resolutions.
- We've also added a feature to our case software to identify impacted customers, with their permission, to help us identify any trends and issues for these customers when we analyse our data.

Energy and water companies have also released information about their commitment to support their customers during this difficult time, and we'll work with them to support your clients.

We'll also be available to provide targeted outreach to affected communities when appropriate.