



Spring **2015** Issue

# EWOV Connect

Quarterly newsletter linking the  
Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria) (EWOV)  
with community agencies



EWOV opened in May 1996. By 31 August 2015, we had closed 565,750 energy and water customer cases, most of them residential.



**Connect is an online publication...**

and is available for download from EWOV's website: [ewov.com.au](http://ewov.com.au)

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**Did this copy of EWOV Connect come second-hand?**

You can sign up for your own copy by contacting EWOV's Administration Team on (03) 8672 4460 or at: [Admin-Assistance@ewov.com.au](mailto:Admin-Assistance@ewov.com.au)



## Message from the Ombudsman



Lighter and longer days, flowers and birds and less need for that extra scarf – these are all great things about spring. Less welcome are the winter energy bills, often issued in the spring months when the memory of a bitterly cold winter is all but gone. It can be hard to reconcile high consumption

and high energy charges once those portable heaters have been packed back into storage, and EWOV sees a yearly influx of high bill complaints around this time. In this issue, we take an in-depth look at these complaints, their causes, and how they are resolved.

Spring is also an exciting time for EWOV as it sees the publication of our *Annual Report*. Due for release on 14 October, this year's *Annual Report* will also feature a short video snapshot.

Concessions and their criteria change from time to time, so keeping up to date is crucial. On [page 6](#) we review some of the available energy, water and sewage concessions, updated for 2015.

We hope you enjoyed the last issue of *Connect*, where we provided some energy efficiency advice and showed you a few ways to try and keep those winter bills down. We've had some great feedback about the "Ask the Ombudsman", where I answer your questions about EWOV's work. If you'd like to be a part of this, please get in touch by emailing [rct.ewov@ewov.com.au](mailto:rct.ewov@ewov.com.au).

Cynthia Gebert  
Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria)

**EWOV sees a yearly influx of high bill complaints around this time...**



## Real Time Resolution explained

In a previous [Connect](#), we explained how the Assisted Referral (AR) process works, and what happens to a complaint after a customer first makes contact with EWOV.

But what happens after that? In early 2012, EWOV introduced a new Real Time Resolution (RTR) Team in an attempt to bridge the sometimes wide gap between failed ARs and a full Investigation. When a case goes to RTR, an EWOV Conciliator makes a direct call to a designated, escalated contact person at the energy or water company in an attempt to try and resolve the complaint in 'real time'. This gives the company an opportunity to explain its view of why the AR was unsuccessful, and saves the customer from going through a full Investigation for an issue that may not require it.

Since the RTR Team started work, they've successfully resolved just over 15,000 failed ARs. Surveys of the RTR process have so far been largely positive, showing that customers prefer quick resolutions without the need to be dragged into a lengthy investigation.

### Why are some ARs unsuccessful?

An AR can fail for many reasons, including:

- the company didn't contact the customer at all within the AR timeframe
- the customer received initial contact, but no follow-up
- the customer wasn't happy with the customer service from the AR contact person
- the AR contact didn't investigate the customer's concerns before calling and didn't fully understand the complaint
- the company didn't recontact the customer when it said it would
- the customer had trouble getting in contact with their case manager, or had multiple case managers
- the customer wasn't kept informed of how and/or when their complaint would be resolved
- the resolution offered during the AR was not followed through.

### What kinds of cases are suitable for RTR?

The types of cases that are the most successfully handled through the RTR process are those that require the company to make a small billing adjustment, to change or correct personal details or concession information, or to provide general information. Sometimes customers haven't been able to get clear, consistent information from their energy or water company, and a simple phone call may be all that's needed. RTR does this efficiently while still offering the same level of quality case handling and producing sustainable resolutions for customers.

### Which cases aren't suitable for RTR?

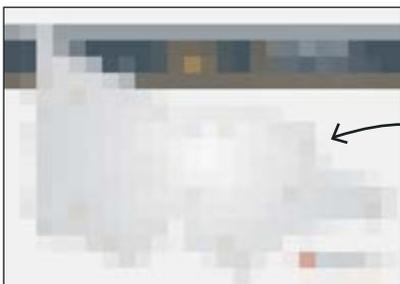
Although RTR is a flexible and quick resolution process for both customers and companies, there are some cases that are not suitable – such as complex hardship investigations, cases involving energy disconnection or water restriction, and complex energy and water distribution cases that need detailed investigation.

### How does RTR work?

1. The customer contacts EWOV, unhappy about the outcome of their Assisted Referral (AR). (Using the case number from their AR, the customer can call EWOV and be automatically transferred to a RTR Conciliator to discuss the case.)
2. The RTR Conciliator makes a quick assessment of the case to see if it might be suitable for the RTR process and if a sustainable outcome may be achieved.
3. The RTR Conciliator explains the process to the customer, and says that they will call back within 48 hours with the outcome of the assessment.
4. The RTR Conciliator contacts an assigned RTR liaison person at the energy or water company to discuss the outcome of the failed AR as well as possible resolutions for the complaint. The company has 24 hours to respond.
5. The RTR Conciliator contacts the customer with the outcome of the discussion with the company. If the customer is satisfied, the case is closed, and we send the customer a letter with details of the resolution. If the customer remains dissatisfied, the case will generally be escalated to an Investigation, with a new Conciliator assigned to the case for the remainder of the investigation.

## EWOV 2015 Annual Report

We're releasing our *2015 Annual Report* in October 2015. Download a copy online or contact [rct.ewov@ewov.com.au](mailto:rct.ewov@ewov.com.au) to request a hard copy.



You'll have to wait until 14 October 2015 to get your first look at it!

## Spotlight on high bill complaints

Despite a big drop in all cases over the last 12 months, high bills remain one of the top reasons customers contact EWOV. Each high bill case is assessed on its individual merits, and complaints can reflect a range of issues. Sometimes, customers aren't aware of just how much energy they really use, while at other times, high bills are the result of problems or mistakes. For example, a customer may be retrospectively billed for a period of time because of failed meter reads or blocked access to a meter, resulting in a higher than expected 'catch up' bill. Alternatively, a delay in sending a bill can allow build-up of debt that the customer has trouble paying. High bills can also be the result of errors – like the customer being billed for a neighbour's meter – or of previous under-estimations that have since been corrected. Bills can also be higher than expected when concessions aren't applied.



Each high bill case is assessed on its individual merits.



### What's involved in a high bill Investigation?

A high bill Investigation is largely a process of elimination. First, the Conciliator checks that the customer has been billed for the correct property and meter. We sometimes find that a high bill investigation is resolved simply because the customer has been billed for an incorrect meter or neighbouring property.

Next, we ask the company to provide copies of bills for the disputed period (and for comparison, for the year before) as well as meter readings and payment history information. We also ask the company for any information which might tell us about any previous conversations or attempts to resolve the issue. Once this information has been gathered and reviewed, the Conciliator discusses their findings with the customer. If our assessment suggests that the bill is accurate but the customer is still dissatisfied, we ask for more specifics of why they believe the bill is wrong.

The aim of a high bill investigation is to work out whether a customer has been billed correctly. If the bill is correct and the customer is using a lot of energy, we can arrange an audit to help identify possible energy-saving areas.

## Case studies

As these case studies show, high bill complaints can have very different outcomes.



### A customer's bill is correct

In July 2015, Mrs B received a \$178.18 bill for February 2015 to May 2015. Mrs B thought this was high, because her bill for the same period in the previous year had only been \$122.11 – and what's more, she'd been away from home for one month of the new billing period. She contacted her energy company to dispute the bill, but it told her that the bill was correct and had to be paid in full by the due date.

Mrs B contacted EWOV with her concerns. We asked the company to contact her to discuss the issue, but she returned to EWOV when this didn't happen, and we opened an Investigation. The Investigation found that Mrs B's most recent bill was based on an actual meter read taken at the property. She had, in fact, increased her daily consumption by 1.87 kWh since the previous year, possibly because of new appliances she'd bought. Although Mrs B had been away for a month, her mains power was still on and power was still being used in the home – for example, by her fridge and by other appliances on "standby".

When we explained the information uncovered in the Investigation, Mrs B was satisfied that the bill was correct and paid it in full.



Sometimes, a high bill investigation is an opportunity to provide some education to a customer on what their energy consumption actually looks like.



### A customer's bill is adjusted

Mr S received a higher than expected electricity bill for \$787. Because he had been overseas for three months, he thought this was high. Nevertheless, Mr S paid the bill.

EWOV reviewed the case after Mr S contacted us, and found that he had been billed based on several estimated meter reads. We contacted the electricity distributor responsible for obtaining the meter reads and asked it to provide an actual meter read to reconcile his usage.

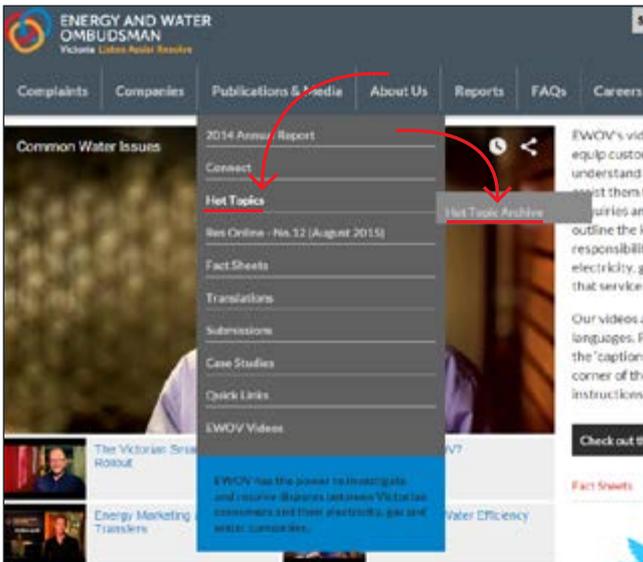
Mr S's bills were re-issued based on his actual consumption. Because his consumption had been overestimated, the correction put his account in credit. The energy company also applied an additional financial credit to the customer's account in recognition of the time and effort it had taken him to resolve this billing error over several months.

Mr S had been billed based on several estimated meter reads.

## Stay on top of the issues with EWOV Hot Topics

[Hot Topics](#), on the EWOV website, offer easy-to-absorb insight into a new energy and water industry topic each month. They're a great way to learn about what can sometimes feel like an overwhelming and confusing industry.

Over the last few months we've taken a look at: [embedded networks](#), [solar installers](#), [seasonality and utility bills](#) and [unauthorised electricity voltage variations](#). Check them out!



## Concessions update

Clients who have a current and valid Centrelink Health Care, Pensioner or Veteran's Affairs Card may be eligible to receive concession discounts off electricity, gas and water bills. These are a few of the concessions available of Victorian energy and water consumers:

### Annual Electricity Concession

This concession offers a discount of 17.5% off electricity bills. This is calculated after any retailer discount is removed (for example, a Pay on Time discount or solar credits). This discount is available all year round, but energy companies will only apply it if they have correct concession card details on file – so make sure you encourage clients to keep their details up-to-date with their company.

Most households with an annual electricity cost over \$2,882 need to apply for the Excess Electricity Concession to continue to receive the 17.5% discount. However, recipients of the Life Support Concession or Medical Cooling Concession don't need to apply for the Excess Electricity Concession.



Visit the Department of Human Services website for more details.



## Winter Gas Concession

This concession offers a discount of 17.5% off mains winter gas bills each year. Like the Annual Electricity Concession, this concession is applied to the remaining charges after any retailer discount is applied.

## Service to Property Charge Concession

This provides a discount on electricity service to property charges (a daily rate charged to customers for having an available electricity supply at a property) for households with very low electricity usage. The usage charge must be less than the service charge in order for the customer to be eligible for this concession. The concession is available all year.

## Non-mains energy concession

Non-mains concessions provide a rebate on the purchase of non-mains utilities for eligible concession cardholders who are not connected to mains supply. This concession is available to cardholders who use LPG or heating oil, run generators or who receive electricity from an embedded network.

Every year the rebate amounts available are reviewed. The rebate amounts for 2015 are:

- \$46 for spending from \$100 to \$260.99
- \$137 for spending from \$261 to \$785.99
- \$229 for spending from \$786 to \$1,307.99
- \$327 for spending from \$1308 to \$1,866.99
- \$418 for spending from \$1867 to \$2,388.99
- \$508 for spending of \$2,389 or more.

## Non-Mains Water Concession

The Non-Mains Water Concession is available to concession cardholders who are not customers of a water corporation and instead pay another provider for their domestic water costs. Rural residents who purchase tank water for their homes or who pay fees to a water co-operative for their water are eligible, as well as some residents of retirement villages and apartment buildings who pay the accommodation manager for their water.

The concession is given as a rebate and eligible cardholders can receive up to three rebates in a financial year, depending on their domestic water costs.

The rebate amounts for 2015–16 are:

- \$111 for spending from \$156 to \$446.99
- \$222 for spending from \$447 to \$894.99
- \$333 for spending of \$895 or more.

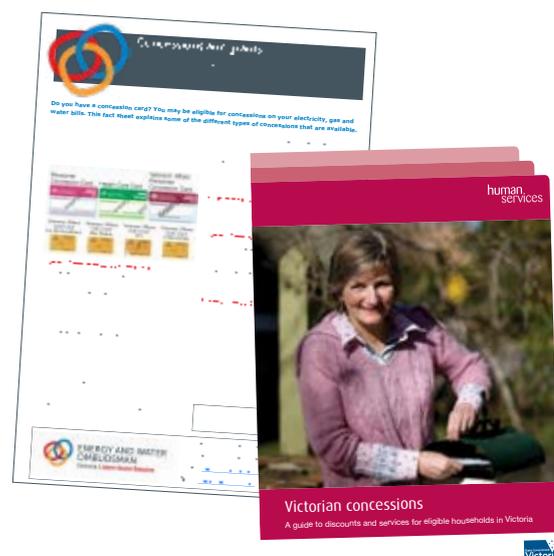
## Water and Sewerage Concession

The Water and Sewerage Concession helps with the cost of mains water bills for eligible cardholders, by providing a 50% discount on water and sewerage charges up to an annual maximum amount.

The 2014–15 maximum is \$298.00 – this is indexed every year. Customers who are billed for a single service (for example, water only) will receive 50% off charges up to a maximum of \$149.



We've just updated our [Concessions and Grants fact sheet](#), now available on the EWOV website. You can contact DHS directly on [concessions@dhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:concessions@dhs.vic.gov.au) or 1800 658 521 to request a handy copy of the Victorian Concessions discount booklet containing updated information for customer and clients.





## EWOV events

### Open Day at EWOV

Keen to learn more about our scheme and how we provide support to Victorian energy and water consumers? We hold regular Open Day sessions for community and volunteer agencies. Attendees get a chance to meet with our Ombudsman, Cynthia Gebert, listen to calls, have morning or afternoon tea and participate in Q&A session with senior case handlers. The sessions are free and are suitable for up to 12 participants. Please contact [steph.booth@ewov.com.au](mailto:steph.booth@ewov.com.au) if you'd like us to put together one of these great events for your organisation.

### Bring your Bills Days

Bring Your Bills Days remain a favourite in EWOV's community calendar of events, and this year we have been participating in a wide range of session hosted by Kildonan UnitingCare, Anglicare and the Western Community Legal Centre. In 2015/16 we're also going to be experimenting with some Bring Your Bills Days in schools, since these are real hubs for local communities.

We include upcoming events in our [online calendar](#) so you can see when we're in your area. Come down to have a chat face-to-face with some of our case handlers.

### Morning Tea with the Ombudsman at the Victorian Seniors Festival

The Victorian Seniors Festival is here again with the ever-popular Morning Tea with the Ombudsman on Thursday 8 October 2015 from 10:00am to 12:00pm. Come along for a Q&A, meet and greet and of course, morning tea with Energy and Water Ombudsman, Cynthia Gebert. Bookings are essential so contact [toni.warren@ewov.com.au](mailto:toni.warren@ewov.com.au) or call 03 8672 4221 to reserve a spot.