



June 2017 Issue

EWOV Connect

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

"...we've recently introduced even more materials and methods to help customers understand what we do, and to make contacting us as painless as possible."

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and is available for download from
EWOV's website: ewov.com.au

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(03) 8672 4460 or
admin-assistance@ewov.com.au



Message from the Ombudsman

In this edition of Connect we're focusing on accessibility and our work to improve access to our services for Victorian energy and water customers, especially vulnerable customers. EWOV has always been a free service that's open to all Victorian energy and water customers, but we've recently introduced even more materials and methods to help customers understand what we do, and to make contacting us as painless as possible. So in this edition we unveil our [new translated materials, and our "call back" and text messaging functions](#).

We're pleased to report that we have met with over 100 organisations and more than 500 community workers since October 2016, as part of the EWOV Community Roadshow. But as the Roadshow winds down, you can still [keep in touch with us](#) and arrange your own visit from EWOV.

Find out about the important work we're doing to train our staff on [how best to handle cases involving family violence](#), as well as the policies we've produced to underpin the training.

We also talk about the [impact of a new baby](#) on a household's energy and water use, and unveil our new poster designed to help parents of new babies keep their usage front-of-mind.

And don't forget our [hardship contacts list](#). If you're helping a client with energy or water affordability issues, this list of contacts can help you bypass the call centre and go straight to the company's hardship team.

Cynthia Gebert
Energy and Water Ombudsman (Victoria)



EWOV's accessibility

EWOV operates in accordance with the [Benchmarks for Industry Based Customer Dispute Resolution Schemes](#) (March 2015). "Accessibility" is the first of the six benchmarks, and we meet this benchmark by promoting awareness of EWOV's services to customers and community organisations, by being easy to use, and by being free. In practice, we ensure our accessibility by:

- having a free call phone number
- having reverse charges for non-Telstra customers who contact EWOV on a restricted phone service
- letting customers know that using mobile phones may attract a fee from their provider, and offering to call them back
- providing access to a free telephone interpreting service where required, and using a translation service to translate correspondence when necessary
- having a website that is easy to use and has high standards of accessibility
- enabling customers to lodge a complaint online, via email, in writing, or on the phone
- making it easy for authorised representatives to act on behalf of a customer
- creating educational materials and reports, and making them readily available to the public
- visiting community organisations regularly.

We also have some new ways of communicating with customers that we have introduced to continue to improve our accessibility.

Call back is now live

We've recently switched on a new call back feature to better manage fluctuating call volumes while still providing a great customer experience.

This feature prevents customers waiting in the phone queue to speak to one of our staff during peak times. Currently, the third customer in the queue will be offered the choice of a call back (without losing their place in the queue). On average, it takes EWOV less than ten minutes to call these customers back.

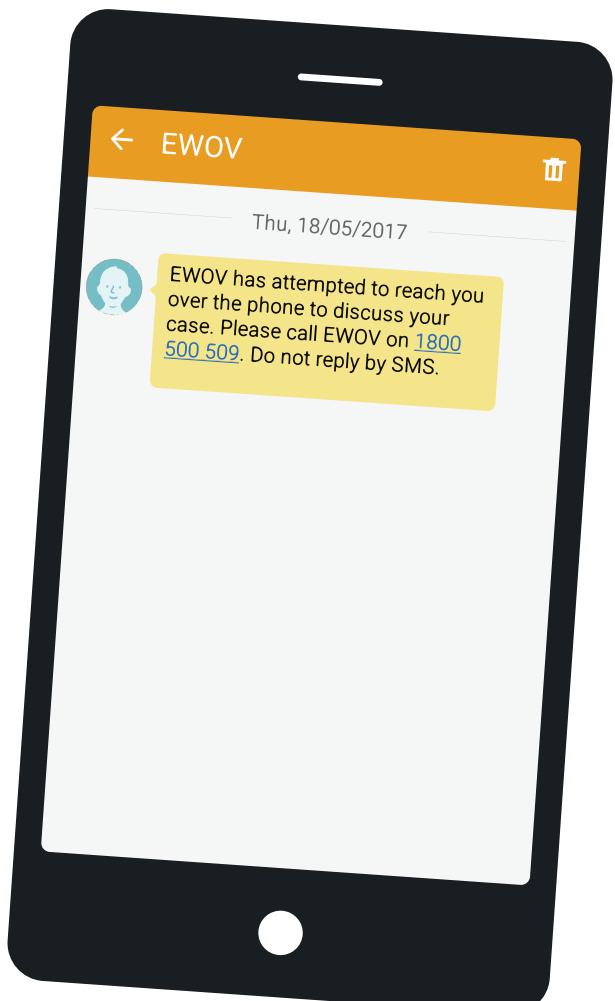
Since it started in March 2017, we've had more than 100 customers choose this option. EWOV can also tailor this call back function to meet call volume demands.

Text messages

The call back function isn't the only way we are trying to better engage with our customers – EWOV is also using text messaging (SMS).

Once our staff have tried to contact a customer by phone, we may send an SMS to let the customer know that we have tried to call about:

- a response to their complaint
- service order numbers and instructions for reconnection
- reminders about a site visit, energy audit or financial assessment
- some information about their Wrongful Disconnection Payment (WDP) Investigation.





Translated fact sheets

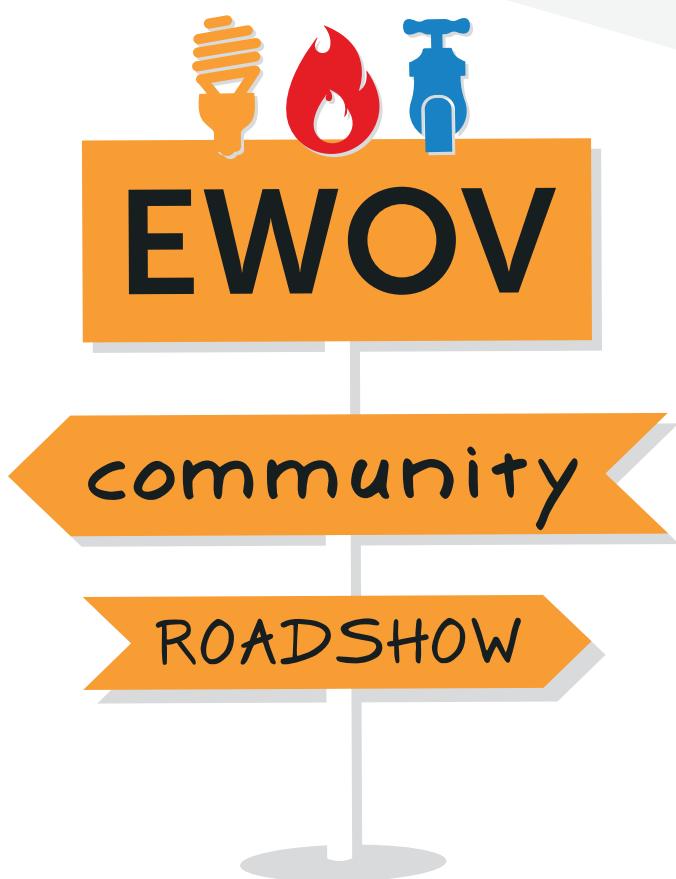
In addition to EWOV's existing range of [translated materials](#), we recently had the following factsheets translated into Arabic, Chinese (simplified), Dinka, Farsi and Vietnamese:

- Fact sheet 1 - High Electricity and Gas Bills
 - Fact sheet 3 - Estimated Bills and Meter Access
 - Fact sheet 4 - Backbilling
 - Fact sheet 7 - Energy and Water Payment Difficulties
 - Fact sheet 8 - Disconnection and Restriction for Debt
 - Fact sheet 29 - Credit Default Listings and Debt Collection

When considering what languages our fact sheets should be translated into, we looked at the languages most commonly requested for phone translation services at EWOV, and informally surveyed many community organisations on their clients' most common language needs.

You can [download and print](#) these new translated fact sheets from our website, or complete our [resources request form](#) to have them printed and shipped to you.





EWOV Community Roadshow

In the last edition of [Connect](#), we talked about the launch of the EWOV Community Roadshow to spread the word about our services and let community organisations know how we can help. It's been a busy few months, and with the project coming to an end in June 2017, here's a run-down of how it all unfolded.

What was the EWOV Community Roadshow?

Running from October 2016 until June 2017, we organised visits to metropolitan, regional and rural areas of Victoria in an effort to raise awareness about EWOV within the community. In particular, we wanted to reach vulnerable and disadvantaged communities to showcase our information resources and materials — designed to help community workers assist their clients, who are struggling with energy and water issues.

During the meetings we talked about:

- our complaint process
- common energy and water issues including: billing, payment difficulties, debt collection, marketing, disconnection and choosing the best energy deal
- how community groups can easily access our services
- our useful materials including [website](#), [fact sheets](#), [online videos](#) and [hot topics](#).

Where did EWOV visit?

We met with over 110 community organisations from 10 regional and rural council shires, and 8 metropolitan council shires. We spoke with over 600 people and had a further 200 subscriptions to *Connect*.

What did we learn?

Based on the feedback, the community organisations found our visits informative and useful. But we also learnt that there is still more work to do about raising our profile within the community, to ensure those that need our services know we are here to help.

We were often told that communities across Victoria are facing difficulties paying their energy and water bills, responding to unsolicited marketing from energy retailers and understanding how to get a better energy deal and/or read their energy or water bills.

The outreach continues

While the Roadshow may have officially come to an end, that doesn't mean we've stopped our community outreach. So if you'd like EWOV to visit your organisation, please get in touch:

- (03) 8672 4460
- RCT.EWOV@aewov.com.au.



Family violence

We recognise that we have a critical role to play in assisting customers whose family violence circumstances are revealed through our casework. This role was strongly articulated in the March 2016 Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence and earlier in *Helping Not Hindering: Uncovering Domestic Violence & Utility Debt*, an August 2014 research report by the Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre (CUAC). In each case, utility debt was identified as a key contributor to the accumulation of household debt and financial insecurity for people (most often women) experiencing family violence.

So how is EWOV working to assist energy and water customers experiencing family violence?

Staff Training

All EWOV staff have completed family violence training, run through [Domestic Violence Victoria](#), to help improve their awareness of:

- the many forms of family violence
- the prevalence of family violence in the Victorian and wider Australian community
- how to identify if family violence may be an issue the customer is facing
- how to assist someone who is experiencing family violence in a respectful and meaningful way.

EWOV Position Statement

EWOV has a total of seven position statements that are publicly available. These are documents that detail our general approach to reaching resolutions between customers and companies across common complaint issues.

To assist companies, community organisations and customers to understand our approach to cases that involve family violence, we've recently published [Position Statement 7 – Family Violence](#).

This Position Statement covers the definition and effects of family violence and explains EWOV's approach to family violence as a 'special customer circumstance'. It provides common family violence scenarios relevant to the energy and water industries, and broadly outlines EWOV's approach to the key issues that can arise. Specifically, we consider issues of liability and consent, joint accounts, affordability and hardship assistance, debt collection/default listing, loss of supply, and privacy and safety.

All EWOV [Position Statements](#) are published on our website.

EWOV cases involving family violence

We've also had a look at the trends in cases where family violence issues were a known factor in the complaint found that:

- We received 67 cases from January 2016 to March 2017, 27 of which were lodged in 2017. These are cases in which customers have self-identified as experiencing family violence.
- Customers often complained to EWOV about:
 - **Payment difficulties** – having unpaid arrears, needing a payment plan and or hardship assistance, having collection activity for unpaid arrears and/or being default listed.
 - **Disconnection** – either being warned of imminent disconnection or had been disconnected due to unpaid arrears.
 - **Breaches of Privacy** – concern that their details had been provided to ex-partners which may pose a threat to their safety.

Contacting EWOV

If you contact EWOV on behalf of a client who is experiencing family violence, let our staff know that this may be a contributing factor to the complaint, so that we can ensure that we provide a tailored and sensitive approach.



A bundle of changes

As part of our role to raise awareness about our services and potential energy and water issues, we've identified that new families are often at risk of receiving unexpectedly high energy and water bills. This can be due to a change in their circumstances – being at home during the week and using more heating or cooling, washing clothes and dishes and so on.

So, we've created a new poster called [A bundle of changes](#) to both let them know about our services if they need help, and to explain why their energy and water bills may seem high. We also released a [Hot Topic](#) online in May to promote this poster and give some targeted energy and water efficiency tips.

Remember, if you would like us to send you prints of the poster for your organisation, simply make a request using our [online form](#).

BUNDLE
of changes

Have you considered
how a newborn might affect
your utility bills?

- It's likely you'll be home more – which can have a **big impact** on your energy and water use.
- There'll be a lot of sterilising and dishes to do.
- You may do more cooking than usual.
- Lots of bath times!
- All those baby clothes to wash and dry!
- The air conditioner or heater will get used more.
- If you're not careful, the result will be **higher utility bills**, all while you're likely to be living on a **reduced income** if you're on paid or unpaid parental leave.

EWOV is a free and independent service

We help with problems between Victorian customers and their electricity, gas and water companies.

1800 500 509
ewov.com.au  

 ENERGY AND WATER
OMBUDSMAN
Victoria Listen Assist Resolve



Company hardship program contacts

This is not an exhaustive list as many companies have not provided direct hardship contact details to EWOV.

Company	Program name /Department	Phone
Energy companies		
AGL	Staying Connected	1300 659 925
Click Energy	-	1800 775 929
Lumo Energy	Hardship Department	1800 989 321
Momentum Energy	Keeping Momentum	1300 415 375
Origin Energy	Power on Program	13 24 61
Red Energy	Customer Care Team	1800 723 749
Simply Energy	Bill Assist	1800 094 121
Water companies		
Central Highlands Water	-	(03) 5320 3111
City West Water	-	131 691
North East Water	-	(02) 6022 0518
Wannon Water	-	1300 926 666
Yarra Valley Water	-	1800 637 316