

Media Release

Tuesday 2 September 2014

The Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre (CUAC) is calling on utility providers, regulators and government to improve policies and practices that are detrimental to domestic violence victims who seek to manage their utility debts and move on from a violent situation.

A CUAC report *Helping Not Hindering: Uncovering Domestic Violence and Utility Debt* revealed that changes to law and improvements to policies and practices are necessary in order to respond to victims of domestic violence who are at a point of crisis.

“Domestic violence is the whole community’s problem and utility providers should do their part,” said CUAC’s Executive Officer Jo Benvenuti. “Given the high rates of domestic violence in Victoria, this is an issue which cannot be avoided in their customer base.”

Recent figures released by Victoria Police indicated that in 2013/14 there has been an increase in family violence with 65,000 family violence incidents being recorded. The CUAC report focuses on women as a group that is particularly vulnerable to family violence and economic abuse.

“Case workers we spoke to as part of our research said it was common for the abusive spouse to put the utility bills in the partner’s name even without her knowledge,” said Ms Benvenuti.

A key finding in relation to the practices of energy retailers included that in cases where the woman is not originally listed on the bill, some retailers will attempt to unlawfully transfer the past utility debts of the abusive spouse to the woman.

“Some energy retailers will pursue a victim of domestic violence over their abusive partner because it’s the easiest route for debt recovery,” Ms Benvenuti said. “CUAC is calling on energy retailers to take action to prevent these unlawful practices from occurring and modify company practices.”

The CUAC report identifies clear areas for improvement to provide greater access to financial hardship assistance for those experiencing payment difficulties.

“We are pleased Minister Northe recently instructed the Essential Services Commission to conduct a review of hardship,” said Ms Benvenuti. “Our report is timely because we have identified a number of areas for regulatory reform to help women move on from a violent situation.”

The CUAC report provides targeted recommendations for achievable reform that are directed at government, regulators, utility providers and community service providers to better assist women who are at a point of crisis.

Media contact: Loren Days (03) 9639 7600
Jo Benvenuti