

Media Release, Thursday 31 March 2016

Family violence Royal Commission findings a ‘major step forward’ for abuse survivors

The Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre (CUAC) has hailed key recommendations of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence as ‘a major step forward’ for abuse survivors dealing with utilities in the aftermath of domestic violence.

CUAC Chair, Ronda Held said the Royal Commission had made several crucial recommendations aimed at improving the way utilities, banks and telecommunications providers deal with family violence victims facing difficulties with payments.

Ms Held said these included recommendations to overhaul of the National Credit Code; the Telecommunications Consumer Protections Code; the Energy Retail Code and the Customer Service Code for Urban Water Businesses to include family violence as a specific means of accessing hardship provisions.

“The Commission noted the concerns raised in our submission that while many energy and water retailers use broad language to define eligibility for accessing hardship programs, family violence is rarely explicitly listed,” she said.

“The Commission’s recommendations would make it easier for family violence victims to access hardship provisions which is incredibly important because they are often solely pursued for utility debts incurred by their abusive partner during and after the relationship.

“We’re also encouraged by the recommendation that energy and water retailers should be required to provide comprehensive and ongoing training of customer service staff.

“This will help them identify customers experiencing family violence and financial hardship.

“How a case is managed by a utility provider can make all the difference between contributing to the economic stress that causes a woman to return to her abusive partner, or enabling the woman to re-establish herself independently as a paying utility customer.

“A similar recommendation requiring the Victorian Energy and Water Ombudsman, the Commonwealth Financial Services Ombudsman and the Telecommunications Ombudsman to publicise their dispute resolution processes would also go a long way towards helping victims of family violence resolve disputes with service providers over debts incurred in the context of family violence.”

Contact for media enquiries: Luisa Saccotelli 0400 149 901