



## **Energy Information Fund (EIF) Launch**

**Presentation: Jo Benvenuti, Executive Officer, Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre**

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**Venue: Carers Victoria offices at 1/37 Albert St, Footscray VIC 3011**

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I would like to thank Minister Northe for supporting this important initiative.

There have been significant recent developments in the Victorian energy market. Competition through choice of retailer, the introduction of new technology and most recently flexible pricing offers. While this innovation is designed to benefit consumers – it is dependent on consumers being well informed and able to participate. Many consumers find the market complex but for disadvantaged consumers without access to the internet or with English as a second language or with poor literacy, the market can be impenetrable. CUAC's mandate includes that we monitor the needs of disadvantaged Victorian consumers.

So the genesis for this fund arose from a research project in which CUAC investigated the energy related information needs of community organisations and their clients. This research identified a need for specific efforts to educate disadvantaged or vulnerable consumers who may not be reached by generalist information or education campaigns. The research also found that trusted community organisations could play a central part in educating clients and the community about energy issues, for example, by delivering targeted written information and innovative resources and tools alongside face-to-face discussion and support.

Since then CUAC has worked with the DSDBI to help develop the Switch On website, the My Power Planner comparator tool and communications campaigns around flexible pricing. These are very important tools to support all Victorians and we commend the government for their development.

However we have been particularly pleased with the government's support of the EIF which is specifically targeted to ensure that disadvantaged consumers don't miss out. With funding support from the Department, CUAC developed a non-government agency network to provide advice on the development of the EIF and reached out to non-government agencies to promote the fund and application process.

CUAC designed a website, which is called energyinfohub, specifically designed for these agencies to access resources and as the program rolls out to then populate the hub with the resources and tools they develop under the fund. The concept here is that this material can then be shared and built on by the agencies, thereby maximising the value and distribution across communities. The search options allow agencies to find for example, resources specific to Aboriginal communities relating to concessions or assistance.

We have also developed basic guides for non-government agencies on understanding energy, smart meters, choice of retailer and flexible pricing. And have supported agencies with information and advice to help develop their ideas and applications to the fund. And we have undertaken research into the switching habits of older Victorians, which has informed the development of specific materials to assist agencies and older consumers to understand and choose market offers using the My Power Planner comparator site. These materials are available for you today.

CUAC has also begun a community outreach phase to identify any gaps and to specifically target rural and regional communities. In speaking through an interpreter to an older Cantonese community recently we were struck by the genuine level of interest in using friends and family and community supports to access the My Power Planner site and find a good offer or to use simple information about energy efficiency to save on their energy bills. CUAC now has a list of 28 community groups wanting these community presentations.

Today is very exciting. With the announcement of successful applicants to the fund we believe we will see some great innovative approaches. Our role in the program will be to provide support to the agencies, to help develop the approaches that work best and to assist with co-ordination to see that all disadvantaged groups can access this resource.

We congratulate the successful agencies and again thank the Minister for this great initiative to support disadvantaged Victorians.