

Using regulation to support Victorians affected by family violence

21 August 2019

Electricity and gas

Speech by Commissioner and Acting Chairperson Kate Symons, delivered on 20 August 2019 at our 'better practice workshop' in Melbourne.

It's been nearly three and a half years since the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence made its recommendations and the Essential Services Commission first began its work on family violence. In that time we've worked closely with the water and energy sectors to consider how we can promote the safety and wellbeing of Victorian consumers affected by family violence.

It's also been almost three years since I started as a commissioner at the Essential Services Commission. One of the first pieces of work to come across my desk was the proposed changes to the water customer service codes to provide assistance to customers affected by family violence. At the time, I remember wondering how an economic regulator could possibly help people experiencing family violence. Three years and a great deal of work later, we are beginning to see the answers to that question.

We are releasing two pieces of work today:

- firstly, research on customer experiences of changes to the water customer service codes
- second, the commission's better practice guide in responding to family violence.

Research on customer experiences

The research on customer experiences of changes to the water customer service codes provides insights into what these changes have meant for customers and the community service providers working with them. As you'll see the results have been overwhelmingly positive, and while it's early days the research gives an indication of what is working well for customers and where there is room for improvement.

In the research we heard from financial counsellors and other services about their clients' experiences after the changes to the water customer service codes. I'd like to read two quotes from counsellors about their clients' experiences:

'I rang the water company and the first question [they asked] was: "Is your client safe?". And I think my client just said: "What? They want to know if I'm safe?" She was surprised.

Water businesses have become more aware of what clients are going through and what they're experiencing. They're very mindful of their state of mind when clients call so they're very empathetic when you contact them.'

‘So I feel that...there is a better understanding across the board [that] family violence isn’t the same as just general financial hardship. There are different issues to look at, including safety, and I think that’s a big issue that any industry has to come to terms with.’

Better practice guide

As you know through the codes we’ve set minimum requirements that energy retailers and water businesses must meet to provide assistance to customers affected by family violence. These minimum requirements were developed in collaboration with each industry as well as family violence experts and survivor advocates. But the work doesn’t end there.

Responding to customers affected by family violence is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ exercise. Family violence is a complex issue that impacts on customers’ safety and financial security. It’s the type of violence where systems, including those used by essential services, can be manipulated by perpetrators to control and cause harm. Businesses need to be cognisant and vigilant of these risks, and consider how to best support their customers and build up their trust.

This is why we’ve developed the better practice guide and are holding these workshops. We know this is an evolving area of work for businesses and the commission is committed to supporting better practice as it continues. We hope to foster continued innovation beyond the minimum standards and to inspire business practice across both sectors.

This iteration of the better practice guide is the result of extensive collaboration with energy and water businesses, the community sector, and other related organisations. We are grateful for the cooperative, empathetic and enthusiastic approach of all our contributors regardless of the sector they represent. The guide is not a compliance guide, but an exploration of the broad initiatives already taken by energy and water companies, and across other sectors, to assist customers affected by family violence. The guide will be a living document so there will be opportunities to continue to share examples of better practice and have them published.

Giving victim-survivors the latitude to manage their own personal and financial security requires a sustained effort by the whole community. We each have an ongoing responsibility to continue to do whatever we can to influence improved outcomes for people affected by family violence. With this next stage of the commission's work on family violence we hope to build on the momentum of the last three years and encourage businesses to find inspiration to continue their work supporting those who are most in need of safe and flexible assistance.

Thank you for attending today.

For general enquiries

Phone: [\(+61 3\) 9032 1300](tel:+61390321300) or [1300 664 969](tel:1300664969)

Email: reception@esc.vic.gov.au

You can also find us on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

For VEU enquiries

Phone: [\(+61 3\) 9032 1310](tel:+61390321310) or submit a [contact form](#).

For media enquiries

If you have a media enquiry, please contact:

Michelle Bryne

michelle.bryne@esc.vic.gov.au

0437 677 385

(03) 9032 1324

Clayton Bennett

clayton.bennett@esc.vic.gov.au

0447 933 140

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[Water code outcomes review 2019: family violence changes](#)

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