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16 April 2015

SUBMISSION TO THE ESSENTIAL SERVICES COMMISSION INQUIRY
INTO THE FINANCIAL HARDSHIP PROGRAMS OF ENERGY RETAILERS

I hereby bring to the attention of the Inquiry the following matters –

That a certain amount of financial hardship is actually created by the energy retailers themselves through their practice of “ESTIMATED READINGS” versus one annual “ACTUAL READING” of both Gas and Electricity meters, and

That these “Estimations” are not based on the individual customer’s last “actual/accurate reading” but rather, based on “usage history in the area” [AGL information supplied to me on 14 April 2015], and

That this system of billing is a distortion of the individual’s “Estimates” and is **creating hardship through significant Underestimation** over an approximate year between “Actuals”.

It is thereby creating a rolling accumulation of debt.

The consumer, when aware of this Underestimating system, has to guess an extra amount of payment in order to try to stave off accumulated debt.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I have personal experience of this creation of financial hardship as the meter reader persistently does not turn up to read the meter on the day/s arranged and/or advised by the gas retailer or by the electricity supplier’s meter reader and/or the electricity billing company liaising with the supplier.

I cannot be expected to leave my gates open from eg

“Your account was estimated due to a locked gate. This bill and your previous bill(s) were based on an estimated meter reads. Your distributor will require access to read your meter between **3 Jul 15 and 9 Jul 15**, and we will make any necessary adjustments to your account based on your actual usage.”

I telephone the retailer or meter reading company prior to the time period advised on the reverse of the previous account.

During such phone calls, as the result of persistent requests, I have received “definitive” information as to the exact day and approximate time of the arrival of the meter reader (both gas and electricity).

I lock the dogs away and I leave my automatic gates open from 7am until 7pm to facilitate the arranged access to the meter/s. I usually remain on the property, throughout that time, often at some inconvenience.

I only discover when I receive yet another “Estimated” account that the meter reader/s have not turned up – no card or other means of advice is left near the meter or at the front door to indicate whether or not they have read it.

I was advised that because a meter reader reads for so many different companies it would be “impossible to carry that weight of different company cards”.

I suggested a small generic card or temporary tiny sticker that only needs to state: “Meter Read Today”.

This non-arrival of the meter reader/s could be described now as “habitual”, and I am beginning to query if the meter readers are, in reality, allocated only one annual visit to this area, and that any additional reads are only by arrangement.

I have also been informed that requests for reads outside of the deemed period on the previous bill “may incur a charge”.

Over the past year, following the receipt of each “Estimated” account, I have persisted with contacting both the gas supplier-meter reading company (AGL) and the electricity billing (AGL)-meter reading supply company (SP Ausnet) about this unreasonable system.

I have been paying extra amounts on each account since last September when I began to suspect that the estimates were based on peculiar information.

I had always presumed my last accurate reading would be the benchmark for future estimations.

I have spoken with the billing company’s “resolutions” departments and each time I am offered an “*easy repayment method*” that can be arranged for when I [eventually] get an accurate meter reading.

I do not want to be placed in the position of having to consider a repayment method.

This rolling accumulation of debt is the result of the power retailers and their inadequate systems in place.

I strongly believe that, by their inability to send out a meter reader on the day they advise, their shoddy and irrelevant method of calculating the individual

consumer's estimated account, and their rather hasty offers of "easy repayment", the energy retailers are demonstrating a sheer disregard for the individual customer.

Telephone advice to me varies considerably, eg "he will definitely be there probably mid or late morning"/ "he is Always in Ferny Creek on a Tuesday afternoon" – when he did not turn up, the next advice was "always Wednesdays", and he did not arrive.

I have been recently informed by the electricity billing company that, as soon as the meter reader does arrive and ascertains an accurate reading, I will be allowed to notify the electricity meter billing company of the monthly figure on the electricity meter, even though they are not the supplier-meter readers.

I was given conflicting information regarding the gas meter reading. I was informed that I could take a photograph each time of the due meter reading and forward this to the billing company, but that it would still not be regarded as an "actual" reading. My personal meter reading involvement can only commence when I [eventually] obtain an accurate reading by a certified meter reader.

I am now expecting to experience a certain amount of hardship in being able to meet the payments incurred when I eventually get billed for these long-awaited "accurate" meter readings.

In this digital technological era, such an *unnecessary complexity of obstacles* to the customer's expectations of being billed with accurate usage readings for each and every account received from both gas and electricity retailers, is not only annoying, time-consuming and unnecessary, but it is creating anxiety and unnecessary hardship.

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