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Calling all consumers: what can an Ombudsman do for you?

'Ombudsman' may be a Swedish term, but the concept of 'a fair go' is very Australian.

On **7 April 2005**, the heads of three key complaints handling bodies will hold a joint forum in Newcastle to tell consumers and community advocates how they can help to resolve disputes in energy and water, telecommunications, and banking and finance.

Colin Neave, Banking & Financial Services Ombudsman, **Victoria Marles**, Deputy Ombudsman Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman, and **Clare Petre**, Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW, will present the community information forum which will include a question time with the speakers.

"Consumers are often quite stressed and frustrated by the time they get to an Ombudsman. We are usually the last resort for consumers in trying to sort out disputes in essential service areas such as electricity and water, telephones, and banking," says Clare Petre, Energy & Water Ombudsman NSW (EWON).

Ms Petre decided to hold a forum in the Hunter after EWON statistics last year showed people in the region were four times more likely to contact her office for help regarding disconnection issues.

Over the past six months, billing and credit issues accounted for around 70% of the problems raised with EWON by customers in the Hunter. Most of the credit issues related to difficulty in paying accounts, impending disconnection of electricity and problems in paying off arrears.

"If consumers are having difficulty in paying their electricity bills, they may also be struggling with their phone bills and other financial matters, so we have found it very useful to have the key ombudsman schemes together to discuss common issues for consumers and ways of resolving problems," says Ms Petre.

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Forum details: Visit our website: http://www.ewon.com.au/news/4_4.html

Further information:

Consumers can also find helpful information on making a complaint at the Australian Consumers' Association website, www.choice.com.au. *Choice* tips include:

- Step 1: Know your rights! If you know what you're entitled to, you can ask for it with confidence.
- Step 2: Go to the source. Approach the retailer or organisation that provided the service and explain the problem as soon as possible.
- Step 3: Write a letter to the manager or the organisation's customer service department.
- Step 4: Lodge a complaint. Approach the government or industry body that deals with complaints in that area, such as the fair trading/consumer affairs department, health complaints body or industry ombudsman.
- Step 5: Lodge a claim with the small claims tribunal or equivalent if it's a fair trading issue.

SOURCE: <http://www.choice.com.au/viewArticle.aspx?id=101817&catId=100392&tid=100008&p=1>