

# VCOSS submission to the Banning Telemarketing Under the Victorian Energy Upgrades Program consultation

## Summary

The Victorian Council of Social Service makes this brief submission in the context of our role as Victoria's peak body for social and community services and the state's premier social advocacy body. We work towards a Victoria free from poverty and disadvantage, where all people and communities experience genuine wellbeing. In this capacity, we seek to elevate the voices of people experiencing poverty or inequality who would not otherwise have the time and resources to be heard in this consultation process. VCOSS consents to having this submission made public in full.

VCOSS supports the proposed ban on telemarketing under the Victorian Energy Upgrades (VEU) program. Such a ban would represent a strong consumer protection against misconduct by marketing agencies employed by accredited VEU providers, a problem that is increasing in frequency. This would also bring regulation of VEU-related marketing into line with regulation of the energy retail market.

As stated in the consultation paper by the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate (DEECA), reported instances of misconduct such as persistent unwanted calls, abuse and pressure tactics, and misleading and deceptive conduct have been increasing over the 2020-2023 period. There were 1,645 complaints in 2022 alone, and likely many more that went unreported.

To make matters worse, the Essential Services Commission and Australian Communications and Media Authority have reported that in these cases there are very few avenues for consumers to make a complaint and limited ability for regulators to enforce the VEU Code of Conduct or Australian Consumer Law. Consumers are not getting the proper protections that they are entitled to under the law.

Markets like that created by the VEU program can be complex for many consumers to navigate. These challenges are heightened for some groups including older Victorians, those from newly arrived communities and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, putting them at significant risk of predatory behaviour.

As the VEU program has been created by the Victorian Government and forms an important pillar of the state's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the government must ensure that consumers are able to participate fairly and safely in the program. We welcome and acknowledge the Victorian Government initiating this consultation as a key step in strengthening consumer protections.

VCOSS supports a ban on all telemarketing to customers of the VEU program.

We would also urge that the ban include doorknocking. We also call for the ban to include contacting previous customers of the VEU program by telemarketing and doorknocking.

Digital marketing (texts, emails, social media, websites) and direct marketing (stalls, leaflets, brochures, mailers) should be sufficient for accredited providers of the VEU program to advertise their products, as long as these forms of marketing follow the VEU Code of Conduct and conform to Australian Consumer Law.

VCOSS would prefer that this ban be put in place sooner rather than later, to ensure that customers are given greater protection from misconduct as soon as possible.

As noted in the DEECA consultation paper, previous bans of this kind have been put in place with a brief period of notice for providers, a three-month period for the Solar Homes program, and a six-month period for traditional energy retailers. We see no reason that a ban on telemarketing and doorknocking in the VEU program should be preceded by a notice period that exceeds three to six months, and our preference is three months.

VCOSS supports the suggestion in the consultation paper that the Victorian Government continue or expand its existing marketing of the VEU program, to ensure continued uptake of energy efficient appliances by Victorian consumers.

***Recommendations:***

- Ban telemarketing and doorknocking to all residential customers of the VEU program, including past customers.
- Put this ban in place sooner rather than later; three months being shown to be adequate for previous bans of this kind.



VCOSS is the peak body for Victoria's social and community sector, and the state's premier social advocacy body.

We work towards a Victoria free from poverty and disadvantage, where every person and community is supported to thrive. We work relentlessly to prioritise wellbeing and inclusive growth to create prosperity for all.

We achieve these goals through policy development, public and private advocacy, supporting and increasing the capabilities of the state's social service bodies, forging strong coalitions for change, and explaining the true causes and effects of disadvantage.

VCOSS's strength comes from its members and the people they serve. Our members include frontline service groups, peak bodies, advocacy organisations and individuals passionate about a fair, sustainable and inclusive Victoria.



#### Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country. We pay respect to Elders past and present, and to emerging leaders. Our business is conducted on sovereign, unceded Aboriginal land.

#### Lived experience statement

VCOSS thanks all those who shared with us their personal stories, experiences and insights. Every person is shaped by their history and environment. Many people have endured trauma or hardship. For some, this trauma and its effects continue today. By sharing your experiences and insights with VCOSS, you have enriched both our understanding of the issues and our recommendations for change. Thank you for your courage and generosity.

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VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide this input.

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