

## FAMILY VIOLENCE

East Gippsland Water recognises that family violence is a serious issue that poses substantial risk to the health and wellbeing within our communities. We are committed to recognising and responding appropriately to customers and employees experiencing family violence.

East Gippsland Water is committed to continuous improvement and will actively engage with key stakeholders to improve mutual understanding of the complex issues of family violence.

### PURPOSE

East Gippsland Water understands the significant impact family violence has on our customers, employees and the community we serve. We are committed to ensuring customers and employees experiencing family violence have access to support when they need it and in a way that best meets their individual circumstances.

East Gippsland Water's family violence policy outlines our approach to supporting customers and employees experiencing family violence. East Gippsland Water recognises the many barriers to disclosure and to prevent unnecessary angst repeating their story multiple times, we take people at their word and commit to providing support and protections for those experiencing family violence, regardless of whether they have disclosed their circumstances to us. Our Family Violence policy is available on our website and a copy is also available upon customer or employee request.

East Gippsland Water seeks to create a safe and supportive environment by treating those experiencing family violence with dignity, respect and compassion; and ensures their details are managed with a high degree of privacy and sensitivity. We are dedicated to providing prompt assistance and working with those affected (or their nominated support person) to ensure their safety and wellbeing is our utmost focus.

### OUR COMMITMENT

East Gippsland Water supports customers and employees experiencing family violence, by:

- Ensuring customers and employees are aware of and can easily access support through East Gippsland Water;
- Protecting the privacy, safety and confidentiality of customer and employee information;
- Providing sensitive and tailored support in consultation with our customers and employees to achieve positive outcomes;
- Providing support to manage financial impacts associated with family violence.
- Referring customers and employees to expert support services via referral agencies;
- Increasing the awareness of family violence and the impacts on customers, employees and our community;
- Continuing to build internal capacity to support customers and employees, via training specifically designed to assist in the identification and response to issues associated with family violence and to protect the privacy and safety of those affected by family violence.

## DEFINITIONS

**Family violence** – is defined under the Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic) as:

- a. behaviour by a person towards a family member of that person that is;
  - i. is physically or sexually abusive; or
  - ii. is emotionally or psychologically abusive; or
  - iii. is economically abusive; or
  - iv. is threatening; or
  - v. is coercive; or
  - vi. in any way controls or dominates the family member and causes that family member to feel fear for the safety or wellbeing of that family member or another person; or
- b. behaviour by a person that causes a child to hear or witness, or otherwise be exposed to the effects of behaviour referred to in paragraph (a).

**Customer experiencing hardship** – a residential or non-residential customer who is identified either by themselves, East Gippsland Water, or an independent accredited financial councillor as having the intention but not the capacity to make the required payments within the timeframes set out in East Gippsland Water's payment terms.

**Vulnerable** – a residential or non-residential customer who needs special care, support or protection.

**Customer support** – a Customer Support policy that outlines the process and procedures to fulfil commitments and responsibilities that East Gippsland Water provides its customers to ensure a fair and consistent approach when managing customers in need of assistance and a framework to support customers on a case-by-case basis who are affected by family violence and/or are experiencing difficulty in paying their accounts.

## CUSTOMER SUPPORT

### Accessing support at East Gippsland Water

East Gippsland Water has a specialist Customer Care Coordinator dedicated to supporting our customers experiencing family violence, vulnerability and financial difficulties. All customers will be offered the opportunity to have their account managed under our Customer Support program. Our Customer team members work with customers to tailor the support options that best meet their circumstances.

East Gippsland Water staff aim to minimise repeat disclosures of family violence and provide continuity of service. We understand that customers who are affected by family violence may experience difficulties and trauma in repeating their story multiple times, we also understand that due to the complexity of these circumstances, they may not be able to always safely disclose this information.

### **Direct Line – Customer Care Coordinator**

Customers experiencing family violence can contact our Customer Care Coordinator directly on 1800 671 841, option 1. This will provide a process that avoids customers having to repeat disclose of their family violence, and provides continuity of service, whilst providing a means for referring customers who may be affected by family violence to specialist family violence services. East Gippsland Water works closely with a number of local support agencies including Anglicare, Orbost Regional Health, etc, and has a program for direct referrals.

### **Protecting your privacy, safety and confidentiality**

East Gippsland Water recognises that family violence is a complex and sensitive issue for customers to discuss with their water service provider. In order to prioritise customer safety and privacy, East Gippsland Water does not require customers to provide evidence of family violence.

All personal information concerning family violence will be kept confidential in line with East Gippsland Water's policies, procedures and relevant legislation. We acknowledge the importance of customers having confidence that information they share with East Gippsland Water about their family violence situation, is not disclosed to others, including perpetrators and is only accessible by authorised specialist staff members.

### **Immediate Safety Risk**

If there is an immediate safety risk or concern for a customer or their child/children we will contact local Police immediately or contact triple zero (000) for assistance. The employee will alert their manager and put processes in place to ensure the safety and privacy of the customer prior to any further correspondence.

### **Application of a Security Flag**

Once an account has been identified as affected by family violence, the account is secured. This restricts access to a limited number of specialist staff within the Customer team and moves the file into an encrypted database which clears all screens of customer data, notes on file, etc for those unable to access. A person who has had their data secured cannot be searched in the person browser. Any users not in the secure users table cannot view secure information under any internal search.

### **Additional identification checks**

We understand that for joint accounts, perpetrators can have access to personal information that allows them to pass routine verification and identification checks. With this in mind, an additional identification check process in the form of a password can be activated on your account to ensure your information and safety is protected.

### **Sensitive and tailored support options**

East Gippsland Water recognises the complex nature of family violence situations and that customers may benefit from a variety of support options. We will work with you to understand your needs and challenges and tailor a support plan that best suits your individual circumstances.

Whilst our Customer team is unable to provide professional counselling support, they can:

- Actively **listen** with empathy and without judgement
- **Acknowledge** your disclosure and check that you are not in immediate harm
- Apply **extra account protections** to further protect your privacy, safety and confidentiality
- Assist by working with you to develop a **suitable support plan**
- Refer you to other **external support agencies** for further assistance

### Debt Management

We understand that family violence can include financial abuse with perpetrators often avoiding responsibility for debt, leaving their current or former partners with significant financial liabilities. This is especially problematic for debts attached to accounts held jointly with the perpetrator.

If you identify that you are affected by family violence, we will register your account within our Customer Support program which will immediately pause all debt collection activity on your account (including no additional debt collection costs, charging of interest and/or payment dishonour fees) and we will ensure that your water supply is not restricted because of the debt.

Our team will work with you to understand your needs and challenges and tailor an approach to managing your debt that considers your specific circumstances and capacity to pay.

Debt assistance options may include:

- Affordable and flexible payment plans
- Inclusion in our payment incentive program
- Facilitating access to government grants and assistance programs (like the Utility Relief Grant Scheme) through referrals and application assistance
- Referrals to external support services including financial counselling at no cost to the customer
- Debt relief

### Debt Relief

Additional support options are available to customers experiencing family violence to manage debt owed to East Gippsland Water. Once a customer identifies as being impacted by family violence, East Gippsland Water may waive or suspend all or part of your debt on a case by case basis, taking into consideration a number of factors, including:

- The amount of the debt
- The circumstances in which the debt was incurred (including if it was incurred as a result of financial abuse)
- Whether the debt should have been raised
- What payment assistance options have been (or could be) effective
- The customer's personal circumstances and capacity to pay the debt

## Joint Accounts

We understand that customers on joint accounts may face additional barriers to accessing debt assistance, particularly if the other person on the account is the perpetrator. This may include not having access to financial information, being unaware of a debt and being apprehensive about the prospect of coming into contact with the perpetrator.

Even if only one account holder is affected by family violence, we will immediately pause all collection activity on joint accounts (including no additional debt collection costs, interest or payment dishonour fees) and ensure that your water supply is not restricted because of the debt.

To remove barriers and ensure that customers on joint accounts are able to conveniently access the same debt assistance pathways as other customers affected by family violence our Customer Care team will:

- Take steps to ensure your confidentiality is protected from other persons on the account
- Ensure that you can access support without having any contact with the perpetrator
- Take the same tailored approach to managing joint debts as it does for individual accounts

## Payment Support

We recognise that family violence can cause payment difficulty. If you are affected by family violence you are eligible for payment support under East Gippsland Water's Customer Support Policy, which describes the full range of payment assistance options available to customers experiencing payment difficulty.

Our Customer team will work with you to adopt an approach to managing payments that suits your circumstances and your capacity to pay. The following payment support options are available to customers affected by family violence:

- Ensuring you receive any concession discounts you're entitled to
- Setting up an affordable and flexible payment plan you can manage
- Helping you apply for any government grants you may be entitled to, such as the Utility Relief Grant
- Providing our own payment matching, grants and other financial incentives
- Providing advice on how to save water and reduce the cost of your bills, including addition to the Water Efficiency Program and/or Community Rebate Program
- Recommending financial counsellors and community services support where needed
- Checking in with you regularly to see if the support we're providing is right

## EMPLOYEE SUPPORT

### Accessing Support

We understand that employees may find it difficult to disclose their experience with family violence to their colleagues. For this reason, we provide a range of avenues for employees to seek support.

An employee experiencing family violence can elect to contact

- a. Their immediate supervisor or manager; or
- b. A member of the People and Culture Team; or
- c. Union delegate; or
- d. A health and safety representative; or
- e. A mental health first aid representative; or
- f. East Gippsland Water's Employee Assistance Program on 1300 687 327 (consultants are available 24/7) to discuss their situation and access support.

East Gippsland Water will cooperate with any/all legal order(s) protecting staff experiencing family violence.

### **Protecting your privacy, safety and confidentiality**

All personal information concerning family violence will be kept confidential in line with East Gippsland Water's policies and relevant legislation. No information will be kept on an employee's file without their express written permission.

The privacy of the employee experiencing family violence will be strictly maintained and disclosures of family violence will only be provided to other employees (such as Managers/or People and Culture Team members if necessary) as required and only with the consent of the employee experiencing the violence.

Any request for leave or support by an employee as a result of family violence will be dealt with on a confidential basis. The reasons for the leave or support will not be discussed with anyone outside People and Culture Team or line management unless there is a legal obligation to do so, or as agreed by the affected employee for the purposes of providing support or security.

Additional measures can be put in place to further protect your privacy, safety and confidentiality which can be discussed and agreed in consultation with you.

### **Flexible working options**

We recognise that experiences of family violence may affect your ability to work. East Gippsland Water is committed to supporting employees experiencing family violence by understanding individual circumstances and working with you to determine support options that best meet your needs.

Support options may include:

- changes to their span of hours or pattern of hours and/or shift patterns;
- job redesign or changes to duties;
- relocation to suitable employment within East Gippsland Water;
- a change to their telephone number or email address to avoid harassing contact;
- any other appropriate measure including those available under existing provisions for family friendly and flexible work arrangements.

In addition to the above support options, employees may access the following leave provisions:

- An employee (with the exception of a casual employee) will have access to **20 days paid** special leave for medical appointments, legal proceedings and other activities related to family violence.
- This leave is not cumulative but if leave is exhausted consideration will be given to providing additional leave
- This leave is in addition to existing leave entitlements and may be taken as consecutive or single days or as a fraction of a day and can be taken without prior approval
- People and Culture Team should be notified of the leave as soon as practicable, where it will be recorded confidentially. No leave request needs to be submitted in the employee's timesheet
- Casual employees are entitled to leave without pay for family violence purposes.
- Any leave taken under this arrangement should be in accordance with the guidelines contained within the current Enterprise Agreement.

### **Awareness and Training**

All East Gippsland Water staff undertake awareness training to gain an understanding of issues relating to family violence and to learn East Gippsland Water procedures. This includes office staff, field staff and meter readers.

All Customer, Community and Communications Team members are required to complete additional, ongoing training specifically designed to assist them to identify and respond to issues associated with family violence for those who may be experiencing it, to protect the privacy and safety of these customers and also around East Gippsland Water's internal processes. This will help all Customer, Community and Communications Team members identify different behaviours and attitudes and allow them to refer to 'specialist' staff. There will be approximately 3-4 'specialist' staff members within the team who will work with the customers, provide the support and financial assistance required, follow East Gippsland Water procedures and also refer to the appropriate support agencies.

### **Expert support services**

East Gippsland Water is committed to connecting customers experiencing family violence with specialist family violence services who can provide expert support and advice. We acknowledge the complex nature of family violence situations and are able to provide a range of referral pathways to help you access the assistance you require. Customers can be referred into external support networks and resources including:

Resource	Description	Contact
1800 RESPECT	1800RESPECT is the national domestic, family and sexual violence counselling, information and support service helpline available 24/7 in 28 languages other than English. Has a 'quick exit' button redirecting to Google	1800 737 732 (Avail 24/7) 1800RESPECT.org.au
Safesteps	Providing specialist support services for anyone in Victoria who is experiencing or afraid of family violence. Has a 'quick exit' button redirecting to Google	1800 015 188 (Avail 24/7) safesteps.org.au
Lifeline	National website giving support services and resources for those suffering from mental health issues, as well as those experiencing domestic and/or family violence	13 11 14 (Avail 24/7) www.lifeline.org.au
Beyond Blue	24/7 support to people experiencing anxiety or depression	1300 224 636 beyondblue.org.au
Kids Helpline	24/7 support and counselling for kids (5-25 years) dealing with issues such as family violence and mental health	1800 551 800 kidshelpline.com.au

East Gippsland Water also have a guide to help and support services available for customers specific to the East Gippsland region available on our website.

### Continuous Improvement

East Gippsland Water is committed to continual improvement in the manner it deals with customers and staff experiencing family violence. The Corporation will continue to attend and participate in industry forums to gain a better understanding of the issues that face vulnerable customers in an effort to be better equipped to provide the necessary assistance.

This policy and its associated programs will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure these adequately meet and reflect the changing needs of our customers and employees. This approach is to ensure our support remains flexible and can adjust to meet the needs of the community. Recognising that customers and employees may need a variety of support and information, East Gippsland Water is committed to diversifying its approach on a continuous basis.

In this respect, we'll work closely with peak bodies and customer committees to develop appropriate, customer focused support for customers and employees experiencing family violence.



## REFERENCES:

POL 036 Privacy Policy  
POL 020 Customer Support  
SOP 144 Customer Support  
POL 045 Customer Charter  
SOP 144 Customer Charter  
POL 055 Debt Management  
East Gippsland Water – Enterprise Agreement  
Water Industry Standard – Urban Customer Service  
Water Industry Act 1994 (Vic)  
Water Act 1989 (Vic)  
Privacy & Data Protection Act 2014 (Vic)

## REVIEW

This Policy will be reviewed every three (3) years or more frequently as required.