

Prue Purdey

From: Paula Treacy [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, 27 June 2017 4:32 PM
To: LCSC
Subject: Submission to Fire Service Select Committee

My name is Paula Treacy of [REDACTED] I can be contacted on this email address or on [REDACTED]

I am a professional career firefighter with CFA, and have been since 2003. Prior to that, I spent 5 years as a career firefighter in Adelaide with the South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service, and prior to that, 2 years as a volunteer with CFA. I was desperately keen to make my profession firefighting, so applied all around Australia in the years that Kennett's cuts ensured that no recruiting took place within CFA and MFB for approximately 10 years. Adelaide was where I was successful, being one of two females accepted there, taking their numbers of female firefighters to 3.

I am currently qualified as a Station Officer, and am working around the district containing Dandenong, Pakenham, Springvale, and my substantive station of Rosebud. This means I am a crew leader and manage the station and any firecalls we go to when I am on shift.

I am a qualified Juvenile Fire Awareness and Intervention Program practitioner (I go and speak to school age kids about fire lighting behaviour, in an effort to avert damage, injury or worse). I hold the competency to operate the aerial ladder appliance, the Teleboom, and am a qualified ground observer (ground based intelligence gathering at fires, floods, etc).

So why do I support Fire Service Reform?

WHY IN ONE AREA AND NOT ANOTHER

I currently live in Frankston, where I am protected by a 90 second response of the career firefighters at Frankston. I have family that also live in the area currently defined as Greater Melbourne, and serviced by the CFA. They pay their rates (the same as me), they pay their taxes (the same as me), they live in a highly urbanised area (the same as me), but if they have a fire or have one of the members of my family suffers from a heart attack, where they live will determine that they get a lesser response. By lesser, I mean it will take longer. This means that perhaps a one bedroom fire will turn in to a complete house fire, or the beginning of a heart attack will end up being a full blown one (with all the accompanying organ damage). There is no reason this should be the case, except for the fact that the boundaries of the fire services, and the risk factors that should determine what fire response an area deserves, haven't been able to be looked at or reviewed since the 1970's.

EMR – the service that all CFA integrated fire stations provide (those stations with career firefighters working there), is a service that should be available to all urbanised populations, in Melbourne and in the regional cities. To not have this available to all will definitely cost lives. Of course volunteers could train in this skill, and in some areas already provide this service, but their response times mean that unless the patient is very close to the station, an ideal 10 minute intervention time is very limited. The career firefighters can travel 8.5 minutes from the station and still achieve this.

SAFETY

My home station is Rosebud, an increasingly urban centre down on the Mornington Peninsula. We used to only have two career firefighters turn out in the fire truck – thankfully the minimum crewing has now been raised to at least 4 on a pump. This allows us to make decision to send firefighters into burning structures in breathing apparatus (BA), as they always work in pairs for safety.

What is the case in the CFA area now, as opposed to the MFB area, is that in the MFB area, a fire response is guaranteed, and the fireground optimum of 7 fully qualified firefighters will be on scene in a very short time. In the CFA area, brigades are paged, and apart from the career firefighters, this response cannot be guaranteed. As volunteers have their own livelihoods and family responsibilities to look after, they are not always able to attend calls. I completely understand this, but if I am in a burning house and something goes wrong, I would like another pair of BA qualified firefighters on scene to pull me out, and I don't care that they weren't able to get to the call because they have kids at home to look after.

And despite the best intentions of the CFA volunteers that do give up their time to protect the people and places in their community, the skills mix you get from one job to the next can vary. Yes, a truck might turn up to help out the fire that I am inside the house in, but unless there are 2 breathing apparatus qualified firefighters there, it won't help me.

The process of dispatching 7 career firefighters to all appropriate calls would enable this safety loophole to be closed, and safety heightened for career firefighters (and to the benefit of the volunteers at these calls also, with a higher skills mix available).

The Independent Review Committee would assist in this, as it would dispassionately review the urban areas of Melbourne and Victoria, and based purely on evidence (not tradition, or personalities) decide what level of fire cover an area deserves. This would be a huge step forward to how things can sometimes work now. In this day and age, it is still a process of negotiation with surrounding brigade captains when a station becomes integrated and career firefighters are available to respond, of what type of calls they do and don't go to, instead of the community gaining immediately from the heightened service in their locale. This is a completely ridiculous situation, and one that the public really wouldn't believe is actually the case.

INADEQUATE RESPONSE

To illustrate the above point, I will cite an example of when Rosebud Pumper attended a call in Sorrento. Our closest brigade in that direction is Rye, and then Sorrento is the one past that. So, we were supporting a brigade two brigades over from us, and we were still the first firefighting appliance on scene to a structure fire. The crew that turned out from Sorrento, turned out in a car, as they didn't have a qualified pump operator (reference my above comment about appropriately qualified personnel and skills mix). One of their crew of three had only just completed his minimum skills too i.e. he had just done basic training, so his usefulness was rather limited.

Rye had been delayed in their response, which although may be understandable for whatever reasons they cited, doesn't help me once again in a burning house with no backup.

This is not an isolated incident.

MORALE

I have been in the mess of this industrial dispute for 4 years now. Every Enterprise Bargaining Agreement since I got into CFA in 2003, has been acrimonious and a fight. Every EBA has had the Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria volunteer association saying that many advances we have negotiated in safety and conditions will affect them negatively, yet here they are benefiting from OH and S improvements we have led the way in – trucks, equipment, personal protective clothing, etc. My union fights for conditions and improvements to my safety every EBA, as a union should. Yes, the VFBV should also work towards improvements for their members, but community and firefighter safety should come first.

To have the interference of the Federal Liberal Party at their last election, to hamper and make impossible my union to get an EBA through any time from now and into the future, has been almost more than a lot of us can take. My colleagues have been slandered in the Herald Sun, on the radio, on social media, almost everywhere you can think of, just for trying to do what we have always done – negotiate a fair and equitable EBA.

This dispute has broken the CFA, and like Humpty Dumpty, I don't think it can be put back together again. I will carry scars with me until I retire of this dispute. With no way forwards of an EBA for career firefighters in the CFA, the only solution is to separate the parties. Those volunteers who see the union as interfering in their organisation, will surely be happy with the solution. Those volunteers who are just happy doing what they have always done, won't be stopped from doing that. It is the best possible solution, and one that allows for future growth and revision of areas as populations grow and change.

I can't see the future with this mess not solved – it has affected my work life, my home life, and my peace of mind. There have been times when I don't want to go into work, and I love my work. I just want this to be over, and I implore the Government to act in a responsible manner on behalf of what's best for the community, and pass this bill. Career and volunteer firefighters alike need certainty so we can move forward.

Regards,

Paula Treacy