

## **THE FIRE SERVICES SELECT COMMITTEE 2017 SUBMISSION.**

Dear Committee members,

My name is Brett Cowcher and I am a career fire-fighter with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade Melbourne (MFB). I have been a career fire-fighter for 32 years and I hold the rank of Commander. Currently I manage the MFB's Hazardous Materials (HAZMAT) unit and my role is to manage a staff of professional fire fighters and industrial chemists who support the hazmat response within the MFB and provide scientific advice at Hazmat incidents throughout the state. My department provides the ongoing skills maintenance for our HAZMAT technicians; provide the equipment maintenance and testing as well as hazmat research and development.

The first 28 years of my career has been as a shift working operational fire-fighter attending fires, car accidents, fire alarm calls, emergency medical calls, HAZMAT incidents and a range of other emergencies. During this time I have worked regularly with CFA volunteers and career staff on the fringe areas of the Metropolitan Fire District (MFD) responding to emergency calls in the Eastern suburbs.

### **WHY IS MY SUBURB DIFFERENT?**

I live in Ringwood North Victoria which is an urban area of Melbourne with a high rateable value and high population density. During the 30 years that I have lived in this area I have watched it expand and develop at a very fast rate, unfortunately the fire service has not expanded at the same rate. My house is situated in the CFA area of the suburb and until recently it was protected by volunteer fire-fighters and supported by professional fire-fighters from the MFB, it now has an integrated CFA station.

At times over the years I have been one of those professional fire fighters responding in support of the volunteer station. As a professional fire-fighter I am very aware of the need for a fast response and a heavy weight of attack to control fires quickly and safely, modernising the fire service with 'Fire Rescue Victoria" proposal will certainly achieve that. I have been at a loss as to why other areas of Ringwood have a career fire service and I am in an area that was deemed a country area with a different level of fire and emergency medical cover than my nearby neighbours.

### **THE VOLUNTEERS DO THEIR BEST BUT NEED HELP.**

The volunteers in the area provide the best possible service that they can provide with the current level of support that they obtain from the CFA. They attempt to supplement this support with fundraising within the community and this concerns me that a fire service tasked with protecting highly urbanised suburbs still has to run chook raffles and fund raisers to fund the volunteer brigades activities, this impost on

the community is in addition to the higher fire levy that we in the CFA area pay compared to the MFB protected areas.

The volunteers in addition to being fund raisers now have much higher call rates in these areas than 30 years ago when I moved to the area and substantially higher call rates than the 1950's when this current CFA model was implemented. Although these volunteers give it their all, I have observed many times where they cannot respond because there are no volunteers present (*at work remote from the area*) or they have a delayed response. A model where we exploit the good will of volunteers by overworking them with higher call rates to the point they have to prioritise their employment and family to the detriment of fire response is an unsustainable model of fire response. The model proposed by the government where an independent panel assesses the volunteer response areas based on an accepted and researched criteria will prevent this type of exploitation and support these volunteer brigades with additional resources.

### **PROFESSIONAL FIREFIGHTERS NEED TO HAVE BACK-UP.**

The nature of fire-fighting has inherent dangers and at times there are extreme pressures to undertake activities that put a fire officer and their crew in extreme danger in their attempt to protect the community. The overworked volunteers at times cannot be relied on to arrive at the scene of a fire in a timely manner. As a professional fire officer I need to know that when I commit my crews for an internal search and rescue or an aggressive internal attack wearing breathing apparatus, I need to know **for certain** that I will have a backup crew on route. This is to ensure I have uninterrupted water supply and an emergency Breathing Apparatus rescue crew should my initial crew become trapped or injured. Professional fire-fighters can only be guaranteed this level of certainty with the **response of 7 professional career fire-fighters** (*as per the governments proposed modernisation to the fire service*) to all fires where career fire-fighters have responded.

Without this guarantee, a search and rescue or an aggressive internal fire attack would have to be delayed until the volunteer crew arrived to ensure that they had responded and then we would need to confirm that they held the appropriate structural fire-fighting and breathing apparatus qualifications to enter an involved structure. The result of committing fire-fighters into dangerous situations without effective and timely back-up or appropriate training could be catastrophic for all involved.

### **PRESUMPTIVE LEGISLATION**

As a fire-fighter who has worked in fire-fighting for 32 years I have been exposed to toxic and carcinogenic chemicals and research has confirmed that unfortunately I am much more likely to be struck down with one of the many cancers that some my colleagues have contracted, some with fatal outcomes. The presumptive legislation that is part of the governments FRV package needs to be implemented as soon as

possible, to provide fire-fighters and their families with the support they deserve and to remove the stress, uncertainty and cost when fighting such an insidious disease.

### **IMPACT OF THE DISPUTE ON PROFESSIONAL FIREFIGHTERS.**

This ongoing dispute has taken a terrible toll on professional fire-fighters with public condemnation fuelled by the strong support of the media. A campaign of misinformation and lies and fabricated stories that have been designed to denigrate professional fire-fighters whose only crime is to be paid an income for their work and want a safer work place, with a better outcome for the community.

### **IMPACT ON VOLUNTEERS.**

The proposed modernisation of the fire service will have no impact on volunteer fire-fighters, the government and the United Fire-fighters Union (UFU) are strong in their commitment that it will only be the integrated stations that will be part of "Fire Rescue Victoria" (FRV) and the volunteers in these stations can choose to remain or move to an adjoining station. The remainder of the CFA volunteer brigades will have no impact from FRV. In addition there will be additional financial support for the fully volunteer CFA brigades. The "Hands off the CFA" campaign run by the CFA volunteers association will be a success with absolutely no interference by professional fire-fighters or their union. Any future changes to the models response areas will be made by an independent panel of experts and based on tested and researched criteria.

### **VOLUNTEER ASSOCIATION ASSERTIONS.**

- I note that the volunteer association has painted a picture that the end of the world will come and all the volunteers will leave the CFA and there will be no surge capacity for major fires if professional fire-fighters get their EBA without consulting with volunteers.
- That the work place changes to enhance our occupational health and safety will spell the end of the CFA volunteers because we will change some of the ways they have been doing things for 60 years. Victoria is a safer place for workers across the state because unions have pushed for safer working conditions.
- The volunteer association has indicated that FRV will respond quicker and into areas that were once volunteer only response areas because GIS mapping and computer aided response models choose the quickest responding appliance to attend. How can this be a negative when it makes the community safer with quick response, heavy weight of attack, and career crews working with volunteers?

## **THE ADVANTAGES OF A MODERNISED FIRE SERVICE**

A modernised fire service should provide a standardised modern computer aided GIS mapping supported response system so that the states fire services are monitored in their performance,

- Have the same measurements for response and on scene arrival.
- Have the same responsibilities and accountabilities so that any gaps in our fire services can be identified and actioned for the benefit of the community we serve.
- Increased safety for fire-fighters.
- Presumptive legislation to support fire-fighters who get cancer.

FRV will provide a more efficient organisation;

- With seamless interoperability between urbanised metropolitan Melbourne and major regional centres.
- This will remove duplication in areas of vehicle and equipment acquisition, training, and specialist areas.

## **THE DAMAGE DONE.**

The damage that the Liberal party, the Volunteer association, and the media has done to the working relation of professional fire-fighters in my opinion appears to be unreparable possibly with the exception of the CFA integrated stations who I am lead to believe have been better informed by their professional fire-fighter colleagues. The only way forward is to implement FRV.

Regards

Commander Brett Cowcher

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