

Submission to the select committee
for fire service reform

My name is Neil Poulton, I am currently a Leading Fire fighter with the Country Fire Authority at Dandenong and have been a Career fire fighter for 15 years. I was also a volunteer from between Nov 1992 and Nov 2009 holding the rank of Lieutenant. I have been awarded the 20yr CFA award and the National Emergency service award for my role on the 2009 fires.

At Dandenong we respond to approx. 2500 calls a year and protect 47% of Melbourne's manufacturing. We also protect the Melbourne Gas gates, being the main distribution point for gas coming in from Bass Strait.

I am writing to you in support of the reforms to the fire services in Victoria.

Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria

Whilst working as a career fire fighter I have on numerous occasions responded to a call where the next responding brigade has not responded or had a delayed response, which has put the safety of my crew at risk.

An example of this is a car fire at Narre Warren Nth service station, I responded with myself and a fire fighter in Dandenong pumper 2 to this call. I requested additional resources whilst on route to the call as I could see a column of smoke issuing from the area we were responding to. Upon arrival there was a car on fire at the service station. We aggressively attacked the car fire so as to stop the potential spread to the service station. After the car was extinguished (approx. 15min after our arrival) the support brigade arrived.

The proposed changes will alleviate the risk of combatting a fire of this type with only 2 people and secure a guaranteed support response. Under the changes my appliance will have 4 personal and the support appliance will also have a guaranteed manning and faster response time (7 personal being dispatched to the call within 90sec). This would ensure that the potential spread of a fire such as this will be kept to a minimum. This will improve safety for myself and my crew, as well as reduce damage suffered by the community and improve the safety of the community that find themselves at incidents like this.

The fire service need these reforms, as the volunteers do a fantastic job when they can, having been a volunteer myself, it is unreasonable to ask from them, the level of commitment away from their employ and family that is required to maintain this level of support to the community in larger built up areas. When people work, socialise and relax away from their residence, regardless of the level of commitment they give, it is unreasonable to expect the level of response required for safety to both the community and the responders.

Effect on Volunteer engagement

As a person who was a volunteer and still having constant communication with volunteers, all I can see is how this restructure will improve the support to volunteer brigades in the CFA. With the way the spoke and hub model works in areas currently supported by integrated brigades, the extra resourcing of these brigades will supply a better response to the CFA volunteer brigades when responded. When a FRV brigade is responded to support a CFA brigade they will have a crew of 4 with another crew being dispatched as well. If and when the CFA brigade arrive on scene and assess the incident they then make a call as to either, maintain, upgrade or down grade the response. If the incident is a involved structure or complex job then the worst case scenario is they will have timely assistance. If the incident is downgraded, then the responding brigades return just as they do now. There is no detriment to anyone.

By increasing the crewing on appliances in FRV it enables the complete crew to assist CFA and function in any roles that are required by them.

For surge capacity to diminish it would take volunteers from brigades, outside those currently integrated, to quit. Of all the Volunteers I have spoken to within my local community and around my working community, that is not is what is going to happen. At Dandenong we currently have a strong pool of volunteers that are still keen to stay and embrace the changes coming.

Short and long term cost impact on fire provisions

The cost impact on the community can only be reduced. With a greater level of response to an incident through the number of fire fighters, means that the incident will be dealt with quicker, therefore reducing the damage and the expense. There will be minimal increase in expense for equipment as the number of brigades does not change.

With the level of retention in the fire service currently 30yrs+, continued re-training of staff is at a minimal level. Also the experience level is high which relates to a quicker resolution of an incident.

The cost of down time for fire fighter through workplace injuries to both career and volunteer will also be reduced due to increased level of crewing and experience on the fire ground.

Underlying policy rationale

To bring the fire services in Victoria into the modern era, where maintaining crew levels at an incident, guaranteeing levels of support to enable fire fighters to perform their task and protect the community, can only be a good thing.

We need to stop looking at what individuals will “lose” and look at what the community and fire fighters will gain, with an improved service model. We need to replace the squeaky wheel with a new one that is better for the people that respond rather than continually spending good money patching and oiling the wheel that no longer works.

These reforms are the first real look at the fire service in Victoria in the last 60yrs. This is beyond due. These reforms will also bring the fire services in line with other emergency services in the state which will only assist with better interoperability.

Neil Poulton

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