

To: FIRE SERVICES BILL SELECT COMMITTEE 2017.

**I provide this submission personally and request it remains confidential.**

I am a Commander in the MFB with almost 28 years firefighting experience. My current role within my organisation is Operational Communications Manager. I am responsible for monitoring and improving; our systems that respond appliances to emergencies and also communication systems used by the MFB.

My current position provides me the opportunity to work closely with my CFA counterpart and ESTA to provide a high level of service to the community including the most efficient response to incidents by our agencies. I am also exposed to differences in dispatch methodologies and radio networks that create significant risk to communities and all Staff and Volunteer firefighters that rely on them.

I write to you in support of the reform as I see this as an opportunity to eliminate the current risks the community and firefighters face due to the current boundaries of the MFB and CFA.

This submission will focus on response issues and communication issues, in no way does it proportion blame on any agency or individual firefighters.

### **Response**

Computer Aid Dispatch (CAD) is a very complex system used by both MFB and CFA to dispatch appliances to emergency events. Both organisations provide rules for the way CAD selects and responds appliances. These rules are loaded into CAD by ESTA on behalf of each agency. From my observations these rules service each agency adequately for single agency response to events in their own area; they support each agencies procedure's for emergency response and are ingrained into the agency culture and history.

The failing of this system is when there is multi-agency response (MFB/CFA) and the work around required to mould different systems into the most efficient combined system. Unfortunately this is generally in the highly urbanised area of the antiquated legislated boundary between MFB and CFA.

In my role I have been made aware of significant events that have caused great concern for the community and emergency responders. Such events include situations where limitations on CAD are created when there are different or conflicting rules loaded by each agency. To overcome some of these limitations manual (human) intervention is required to select the appropriate appliance. In 2017 this should be considered inappropriate as it is time consuming and has the potential for failure in life critical situations.

Currently CAD does not consider the period of time that volunteers require getting to the station to respond. It will select appliances as per the agency rules assigned;

- In the MFB it is by provided assignment area rules and closest primary appliance via road network for escalated response I.E. when more trucks are required because of the size of the emergency, it will pick the closest available truck.

- In the CFA by provided assignment areas and tables of appliances decided and submitted by each brigade to designate the order of appliance or brigade to be responded depending on how many trucks are required and what type of event it is.

In the MFB when an emergency occurs near the boundary with CFA, CAD will select resources for an escalation via MFB rules. A Volunteer station that is closer to an event will be selected before a staffed appliance from a CFA Integrated Station or an MFB station. The travel time to station for responding volunteers is not factored in; this means that a volunteer brigade may be geographically closer but CFA staff or an MFB appliance which are able to be on scene quicker will still not be selected. If the volunteers are unable to respond a CAD alarm operates after six minutes and then another resource is selected. Vital minutes are lost in both scenarios putting our community and firefighters at risk. This situation has occurred a number of times in the last 18 months. Recently at a fatal house fire in Bundoora (MFB area) MFB crews worked extremely hard in trying to locate a person inside a burning house. An escalation was required due to the circumstances and a volunteer brigade was selected as per the above scenario. This resulted in a delay of resources until the volunteer brigade were able to get on scene. The resource took excess of 15 minutes to arrive on scene from the time of request, through no fault of the responding volunteers. Computer modelling of response times highlighted the fact that there was 3 other appliances (2 CFA staffed and 1 MFB Appliance) although not geographically closer would have been on scene earlier. This is unsatisfactory for firefighter and community safety.

Differences in CAD rules impact responses across the boundary. In simple terms MFB CAD rules select appliances and CFA CAD rules select Brigades and then the Brigade selects what appliance will respond. During the storm events of December last year CFA responded into MFB to assist with the volume of calls. This is not uncommon when a surge event occurs. On this occasion a CFA brigade was selected by CAD for response to an event in Notting Hill (MFB area) due to their location and a tanker being in station. At the same time five other calls were also allocated to this brigade due to the tanker being shown as available in CAD. On this occasion the tanker did not respond to any of these calls as there were no volunteers at the station at this time, so all were re-dispatched after the six minute failed to response alarm. One of these calls was for a rescue of someone trapped in flood waters and as it did not have any MFB or CFA resources responding required a manual intervention. This could have been catastrophic if it had not been picked up.

When an MFB appliance is moved up to cover for a staffed appliance in the CFA they are not selected by CAD for escalations in the CFA. This is because of they do not exist in the response tables that have been created by the brigades. An emergency could occur in the next brigade area and if they required further trucks they would not be selected. This is a huge risk for community and firefighters who rely on timely resources.

Reliance on accurate response data for CAD to select the appropriate appliances has failed the community in the past. Recently an MFB appliance was not selected for a house fire that was close by. The MFB station appliance had been inadvertently left out of the appropriate table of response for that type of event and resources required.

The antiquated legislated boundary between the MFB and CFA area contributes to the issues of the model of response. The boundary also acts as the boundary for emergency response for CFA and MFB. This means when establishing assignment area and rules (where and which trucks will respond)

they are agency specific when it comes to Heavy Rescue appliances and EMR capable appliances. This means that these specific resources for one agency will not be selected to respond into the other agencies area to perform these lifesaving functions even if they are the closest appliances. This is due to CAD rules supplied by each agency to support each agency procedures. It is not as simple as changing the CAD rules to allow this to be rectified as legislated response areas, agency procedures, cultures and past work practices are needed to change. There have been a number of occasions when a CFA or MFB Heavy Rescue and MFB or CFA EMR capable appliance has not been selected to respond across the boundary even though they are the closest appliance. This needs to change. Supporting the reform will allow this to happen.

### **Radio Communications**

MFB currently uses the MMR network that extends out past the current CFA integrated stations that abuts the MFB area. This is a UHF digital network that is provided by Motorola. The CFA utilise a combination of a VHF digital network across the state known as RMR and a VHF analogue network in the outer metropolitan area where the above integrated stations are located. Two radio systems operating when there is a multi-agency response forces each agency to carry one or two radios of the other agency for fire ground communications and response communication. This creates two issues; the first being not all messages are transmitted and received on both radios, critical information is missed, including critical scene safety information and situational awareness information when conducting operations on the fire ground. The second issue is not all responding firefighters have access to a radio, a common radio channel and the ability to communicate to every other firefighter on scene. This is an enormous safety risk for the responding crews.

The current analogue system is poor quality; there have been a number of issues raised by crews trying to use it. I have experienced this myself responding to a fire as a Commander in the highly urbanised area of Mill Park, I was unable to speak to the CFA OIC and get situational awareness before I arrived on scene. In 2017 there should be an expectation that all responding crews and command staff can communicate via a common radio channel that is of high quality.

MFB and CFA continue to work through the communication challenges and the anticipated extension of the RMR network will address the quality issue for all CFA staff and volunteers in the boundary area. The MMR network being UHF provides greater penetration in built up areas and should be considered the network to use in the greater Melbourne area. Under the current organisational structures this would be difficult to achieve.

### **Summary**

The failings of our systems is also on display and available in the public domain accessible by different computer applications. The greater community is mostly oblivious to this. I fear an uptake of this technology may cause greater concern for the community. The examples I have provided in this submission are factual events that have occurred in the past and are only some of my total experiences. There are many other examples of these types of events occurring but are similar in the root cause. MFB and CFA and their firefighters regardless of volunteer or paid status provide great service to the community to keep them safe. Both organisations have proud histories, yet we fail when our systems require to interact with each other. This is not intentional and much work is done

to address the issues I have identified, yet they continue to exist. Why? Change is difficult nearly impossible under the current out dated legislated arrangements.

Supporting the bill to create a single body (Fire Rescue Victoria, FRV) will provide the opportunity to remove most of the risks I have mentioned.

This model:

- Could ensure all staffed appliances are responded by the same rules regardless if it is an initial response or an escalation our firefighters and the community will get the most appropriate resource dispatched without human intervention in a timely fashion.
- Remove the emergency response boundary and it will ensure the closest (timeliness) Rescue or EMR capable appliance will be responded to the community members in need.
- Provides the opportunity to review all response areas and assignment rules and computer model best response without organisational cultural or legislated boundary inhibitors.

I acknowledge that this model may impact the volunteers at integrated stations or brigades in the highly urbanised areas of greater Melbourne if the modelling suggests that staffed appliances should be responded in addition to Volunteer appliances. This will not reduce the amount of calls volunteers would be dispatched to but provide a greater first response. If this decision is backed by science and data to get the quickest response to our community I believe our community minded volunteers would welcome this. The CFA charter of being a Volunteer organisation supported by staff holds true in the rural and outer regional areas. An opportunity can now be created where our valued volunteers can be the support to FRV in the highly urbanised areas of the greater Melbourne areas, while also providing the State with the current surge capacity it provides now.

I expect I will be a little sad if the bill is supported due to the fact that the organisation I have invested in for almost 28 years will no longer exist. I also realise that my emotional reaction is insignificant when compared to the greater benefits to the community and firefighter safety. It is for this reason why I make this submission.

I thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission and wish you well in considering all the facts in deliberation on this bill.

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