

Michael Lia

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Senior Station Officer

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Hallam Fire Station

[REDACTED]

12-14 Belgrave – Hallam Rd Hallam

[REDACTED]

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Dear Madam/Sir,

I have pondered over what to write for some time.

I have been a member with CFA for over 34 years. That's more than half my age. Yes, I have seen many changes in CFA and all these changes have occurred within the career membership. I was a UFU shop steward during the 1990's and worked hard to protect our careers. I have been through what I thought was the most destructive period of CFA with the Len Foster and Jeff Kennett era where the stress placed on the employees was enormous. As employees we have accepted many changes such as rank restructure where we lost Officer Ranks, the removal of career personnel from fire stations and introduction of new appliances/equipment with little or no consultation. Minor things like the change of title for station Officers eg; Station Officer to Fire Officer. This was on the understanding that the Regional Officers were changing to the same title with the idea that this would give firefighting creditability to Regional Staff in the eyes of the Volunteers. Have a guess; yes changed the Station Officer title to Fire Officer and no change to Regional Officer title, just another example of trying to undermine the station staff. I could go on and on with the industrial issue's concerning CFA, however I am sure that you are well aware of the history with CFA since the mid 1990's.

In recent years some good outcomes have happened with having a say in our working conditions, practises, equipment and PPE. With these outcomes, many benefits have flowed on to the volunteers.

I am a strong supporter of volunteers. I am heavily involved with the social side of the brigades that I have been and still am involved with. I have been a member of social committees and annual dinner committees since the early 1990's. I took on a role in these committees for a couple of reasons; to encourage newer volunteer members to stay, to create friendships among brigade members and as a way of thanking the families of the volunteers. Some years ago the volunteer committee members at Hallam Fire Brigade changed the meeting nights to my night shifts. This was their suggestion saying I should not be attending in my own time and refused my objections.

I have received a brigade award (Matthew – Merrett Award) which is voted on by all members of the brigade and is for the person that contributes the most to the brigade for activities outside of firefighting. For my service to Hallam Fire Brigade I received Life Membership in 2015.

Any comment made regarding Volunteers is often seen as an attack on Volunteer Firefighters.

The reality is that times have changed, people work longer hours, Mum and Dad both work, time with children is precious, children have weekend sport, employers cannot afford to have employee's

leave the workplace, industry does not shut down for 4 weeks over the Christmas period, the government industries that allowed workers to volunteer don't exist (SEC, Gas & Fuel, Telecom, Board of Works etc.), increased traffic can make it hard to get to the station in good time. These are example of some the many hurdles faced by volunteers.

My station, Hallam Fire Station, has around 35 volunteer members. During the day between the hours of 0500hrs and 1900hrs there are three volunteer firefighters (2 retirees - over 65yrs and 1 unemployed) that respond if available? After 0500hrs in the morning Volunteer members are hesitant to respond as they need to go to work and at the end of the day there are other factors; such as children's sport, family time, helping with family duties and so on. Outside of these hours the response by volunteer firefighters is hit or miss according to some of the factors mentioned above.

Hallam Fire Station has responded to just over 2000 emergency calls. A lot of these calls are to neighbouring Volunteer brigades. The crewing on the Hallam Pumper is three. One Station Officer, one Leading Firefighter and one firefighter. I can give you two examples where I attended as the supporting brigade to going house fires.

At one of these house fires my two firefighters were inside fighting the fire when the home brigade arrived on scene. Alarm bells started ringing in my mind when the appliance arrived with no lights or siren on. Three firefighters got out of the appliance, two in structure gear and one in bushfire gear. I asked the first Firefighter "do you wear Breathing Apparatus (BA)" response "ONLY OUTSIDE", second Firefighter - do you wear BA "NO". I required firefighters in BA to assist my firefighters who were inside fighting the fire.

The other occasion was a little different. The home brigade was the third brigade on scene at a house fire. The second brigade on scene was a Volunteer brigade that is stationed probably 10 kilometres plus away. Fortunately the second brigade had BA wearers.

Another occasion a house (kitchen) fire occurred opposite my home. I heard a smoke alarm sounding and went to investigate. I found the kitchen on fire and telephoned 000. Hallam arrived and extinguished the fire. Hallam FB is 10 kilometres from my home and the local CFA Volunteer Brigade is 5 kilometres from my home.

It pains me to make comments and give examples on my own organisation. I support Volunteers, however blind support does not service the community and does not give full and proper support to Volunteering; in the end it will only undermine Volunteers and CFA.

In the last 12 months I have worked in District 10 Gippsland, District 13 Dandenong Ranges and District 8 Hallam Fire Station. I have worked as a Senior Station Officer and higher duties as an Operations Officer supporting Volunteers. Volunteers have asked me many questions about the EBA.

As an example; I was asked about "the despatched appliances" I was surprised at the number of times a volunteer has said that they "HAVE TO WAIT" for the appliances to arrive before they can fight the fire. WHO IS TELLING THEM THIS RUBBISH? I explained that the EBA says "despatched", other words fight the fire and if the appliances are not required then cancel them as usual. I go on to explain that I am an employee and, as such, CFA is required to provide me with a safe workplace. The fire ground is not a safe place but, as a mechanism, CFA can provide a minimum skills mix with career crewing that is not guaranteed with a Volunteer response. Not one volunteer disagreed.

It beggars believe that an organisation (VFBB) that has a history of accepting anything from CFA has been allowed to interfere with the CFA employees EBA. As an example the VFBB has allowed CFA to move a firefighting appliance with safety concerns and with an OHS safety pin-notice from a career station to a volunteer station. CFA also purposed sending a transport pod appliance to a volunteer station after rejecting any career firefighter input to its design. Yes, the volunteers were willing to take the appliance.

As an employee I have been subjected to change with no input. I have had to accept changes to my station wear clothing, I have had to accept changes to my turnout gear, I have had to accept new appliances, and I have had to accept the removal of career firefighters from stations. Now I have input through my representative body and by agreement change can and is being made.

It is my belief that the volunteers do not want any change. When asked about change the answer is "why change we have always done this way".

I believe there needs to be a change in how Victoria manages the fire fighting resources and the approach to fire fighting response across the state. All factors need to be considered and applied when determining fire service response and as such an independent body should be appointed to manage and monitor Victorian Fire Service response.

I believe it is time to remove the career firefighters from CFA in line with the restructure of the fire services in Victoria.

Yours sincerely

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Michael Lia.

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