

Submission

Inquiry Into The Firefighter's Presumptive Rights Compensation And Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017

My name is Adam John Shearer and I am a Senior Station Officer at Ocean Grove Fire Brigade with the Country Fire Authority (CFA). I have been an operational employee with the CFA for 17 years, 2 and half years with the Ocean Grove Fire Brigade covering the Bellarine Peninsula. I hold qualifications in Bushfire Investigation, Air Attack Supervising, Road Accident Rescue, Ground and Air Observing, as well as other specialist roles. I have experience in command and control in a variety of emergency incidents, and have been commended with a CFA Valour Award for my actions.

I am writing this submission in support of the proposed reform of the fire services.

I live in Barwon Heads, which is also in the Ocean Grove turn-out area for the career staff at Ocean Grove as we cover all of the Bellarine Peninsula, or ten volunteer brigade areas. We are covering these areas because a need was identified by both the State Government and from volunteer brigades themselves who have requested coverage by career staff so they can guarantee a response.

At Ocean Grove we have 4 firefighters on per shift, when we first started we only had 3. The current structure is designed that we should be supported by volunteers to make up 7 firefighters (the internationally recognised safe number needed for all structure fires) within 8 minutes, however this does not happen regularly.

In short the volunteers on the Bellarine Peninsula have admitted they cannot guarantee a response to protect the community on the Bellarine Peninsula, or us, so Fire Service reform is needed.

Let me first say that any Fire Service Reform should include volunteers, for without the volunteers we would be in an even worse situation here on the Bellarine Peninsula. However there have been a number of occasions, where my safety and that of my crews and the community have been compromised, due to the lack of 7 firefighters being on scene within 8 minutes. I will highlight some of those examples below.

On the morning of 4th of October 2016, my crew and I were responded to a house fire in Clifton Springs. Clifton Springs is an 8 to 10 minute turn-out for us, but still we got there at the same time as the local volunteer brigade, who was made up of only 2 firefighters. The house and garage by this time was going well. It was an extremely cold and windy morning this morning, with rain and sleet coming in of nearby Port Phillip Bay. A man was standing in front of the house in just flannelette pyjama pants and no shirt. I got him a blanket from our truck whilst beginning my "size-up" of the fire and deploying my crew. He told me that everyone was out of the house, but it was only after I had deployed my crew that he told me his wife and 3 month old baby

was sitting in a nearby car. The baby and he were in the shower at the time of the fire and they were dripping wet. He took me to the car and I noticed the baby starting to turn blue with cold, the mother was also showing signs of going into shock. My crew were committed fighting the fire, the volunteer crew of 2 were committed combatting the fire in the garage. As Incident controller I could not leave my firefighting crews unsupervised, and the ambulance crews were a still not on scene. I needed 1 more firefighter! I was forced to turn to the crowd of neighbours who had started to come out of their houses and say "Can anyone help me look after these people".

Thankfully an off duty nurse was able to take the family into her house and keep them warm until ambulance crews arrived. A first aid task that should have been done by the responding crews.

Another example was on the 21st of March 2016, my crew and I were responded to a gas leak at a café in Queenscliff. It was their opening day! It takes us 10 to 12 minutes to get to Queenscliff. When we arrive the local brigade still had not responded, a bobcat had gone through a gas line in an alley right next to the café, filling the rear of the café with dangerous flammable gas. There were people in the café, and in the busy main street, and I had a crew of 3, including me.

We manage to clear the café of people, try to stop people approaching on the main street and put a stream of water from our hose over the line to disperse the gas. The local brigade eventually responded and arrived on scene with 2 people, dressed in Bushfire fighting attire, not the appropriate protective clothing for this incident. They both say they had no experience with gas leaks, and were unqualified for anything other than bushfire fighting. At this stage I still needed to search for possible ignition sources, use gas detectors to see how far the gas had spread with people in proper breathing apparatus, get neighbouring buildings evacuated and get the main street properly shut down.

This situation was eventually brought under control, but took longer than it should have due to the lack of 7 trained firefighters on scene within 8 minutes. This longer time period meant that the potential for the flammable gas to find an ignition source was increased, causing a significantly increased danger to my crews and the community.

My last example was when I was in my own home in Barwon Heads on the 5th of April 2017. I was just having lunch with my two children aged just 2 and 4 years old when a neighbour banged on my front door to say another neighbours house was on fire. I asked her to watch my kids and went to see if I could help. The house fire was just building when I arrived, contained to one corner of a room, but smoke was filling the house. I called 000 as had several other neighbours who were on scene attacking the fire from outside with a garden hose. There was no one home and I knew from the smoke it would be deadly to enter the house without proper breathing

apparatus. After I isolated the power and gas, there was nothing we could do but wait for the fire brigades. It took about 8 to 10 minutes for the local volunteer brigade to arrive with a crew of 2, by which time the fire had extended into the roof space and took hold. One of the local crew was only in Bushfire gear again, and he said he hadn't been with the brigade long. The other crewmember was in structure firefighting attire, but was unsure of what he could do on his own. I instructed them to get a hose out, get a breathing apparatus on and to begin the fire fight, with me assisting as best I could with no protective clothing on.

By the time the career staff fire crew arrived from Ocean Grove the house was well alight, I had managed to get the pump on and water onto the fire, and the local volunteer with structure firefighting attire had just managed to get breathing apparatus on and enter the house with my assistance, a brave and unsafe thing to do by yourself. He entered a burning house by himself with no partner to carry him out if he got into trouble, or back up crew on scene to come to his rescue, but he had no choice as this is the fire service model that the CFA has today.

These scenarios highlight how local volunteer crews and career staff are forced to do unsafe things to try to protect communities, endangering themselves as well as the communities they are trying to protect.

The Fire Services need to be reviewed, as the current model just isn't working. This current bill is not about splitting up the CFA to push out volunteers, but about getting more firefighters, volunteers and career staff, onto the fire ground quicker to be safer for both the community, and for firefighters.

Please consider this submission when you make your decision.

Yours sincerely

Adam Shearer

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