

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees,

INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017

My name is Brendon Siinmaa, and having been a volunteer firefighter with the CFA, and a career firefighter with both the CFA and MFB, I believe I am uniquely positioned to offer valuable insight into the need for fire services reform. Time spent as a specialist instructor, as well as exposure to overseas fire departments, allows me to provide further context and points of comparison.

Volunteer and Career Service history,

I joined CFA in 2002 as a volunteer firefighter with the Newborough Fire Brigade, I volunteered for around 10 years and held positions in the brigade including,

- Communications officer
- 3rd lieutenant
- 2nd lieutenant
- Brigade Training officer

In 2008 I became a career firefighter with the CFA where I trained at the Fiskville training centre in Ballan.

After completing my 16 week recruit course I was stationed at Traralgon Fire Station from 2008 - 2011 during this time I responded to the Delburn complex of fires 2009, Black Saturday Churchill fire 2009, flooding in Gippsland and northern Victoria 2010/2011

Traralgon Fire Station is the eastern most interested fire station responding specialist equipment including breathing apparatus support and ladder platform appliances as far as the VIC/NSW border Traralgon Fire Station responds to around 500 calls per year.

In 2011 I transferred to Dandenong Fire Station, Dandenong is the busiest fire station in CFA responding to over 2400 calls per year.

Dandenong Fire Stations primary area includes a large foreign demographic with over 100 different languages spoken, over 50% of Victoria's heavy industry, major road and rail corridors, 3 major hazard facilities, 3 hospitals, numerous primary and secondary schools as well as providing rescue response for a large area and technical rescue support for most of the eastern side of the state.

I have been awarded the following service awards and medals

- 5 year certificate
- 10 year service medal
- National emergency medal for the 2009 bushfires

In 2017 I was seconded to the Metropolitan Fire Brigade and part of the CFA/MFB/EMV secondment program and I am currently stationed at Fire station 02 West Melbourne which primarily covers the lower half of the CBD of Melbourne, West Melbourne, Docklands, Kensington, North Melbourne and the Port of Melbourne docks. The station responds to over 4000 calls per year.

I have also travelled and trained three times to the United States of America, attending the Fire Department Instructors Conference in Indianapolis twice undertaking training with instructors from the fire department of New York, Boston, Camden NJ, Baltimore and LA county fire departments.

I have responded with numerous professional fire departments in the US and seen firsthand a risk based nationally developed professional response in both high and low socio economic areas work to its fullest.

I am endorsed and incremented on the following appliances,

- Heavy pumper
- 3.4c and 2.4c Tanker
- 42meter Ladder Platform
- Aerial Pumper
- Teleboom
- Heavy Rescue
- Breathing Apparatus Support unit

I am also qualified in the following specialist roles and a state endorsed rescue instructor,

- Confined Space Rescue
- Rope Rescue
- Trench Rescue
- Urban Search and Rescue
- Chemical, Biological and Radiological Detection.
- Emergency Medical Response

I am writing this submission in support of the proposed reform of the fire services for the following reasons:

Below are examples from my experiences which demonstrates the failures of the current structure:

Increasing Volunteer Workloads,

When I joined the Newborough brigade in 2002 the brigade responded to around 120 call per annum, had around 35 members and would on average respond with around 6-8 firefighters within around 5-6 minutes day and night.

Most members at the time were shift workers employed in the local power industry or casual employees whose work schedule meant they were available for long periods at a time.

The brigade activity level meant that apart from weekly training sessions on a Tuesday night there was minimal impact on members work and home lives and people were keen to commit to training and operational activities.

By the time I left Newborough and moved to the city the brigade responded to around 250 calls a year, had around 20 members with an average of 2-3 members during the day and 4-5 during the night.

Most work in the area now had gone and most members worked out of the area and we had very few a shift workers meaning crews for day time responses at that time were very low, on numerous occasions I responded on my own in the truck and the supporting brigade would either not respond or have one or two members.

The increased work load meant members were having to give up or delay work commitments or social activities and in some cases meant they simply couldn't keep up the time required by the brigade and left the CFA leaving the majority of the work load to around 5-6 core members.

Unfortunately, Newborough wasn't an isolated case and this is the reality of what occurs in volunteer brigade areas all around Victoria.

Believe me it's a horrible feeling standing in your turnout gear, truck running, time ticking away just looking up and down the road out the front of the station just praying for another member to respond, then having to drive the truck on your own to a car accident or automatic alarm at a nursing home, thinking the whole way "what will I do when I get there and it's something bad?"

Only recently the professional firefighters at Morwell Fire Station have been responded to ensure suitably skilled firefighters are enroute to all code 1 calls and if they are not required they are cancelled and sent home.

This recent development has been fostered by the great working relationship between the Newborough and Moe volunteers and career staff at Morwell Fire Station and the fact that Morwell now has a second fully crewed primary appliance that can respond to a larger area to support struggling brigades without leaving a coverage gap in their own area.

I'm sure that this example of volunteers struggling to maintain responses and membership numbers with an increased number of calls and time commitments isn't limited to Newborough and I know for a fact that this happens in outer metropolitan Melbournes expanding suburbs and regional areas.

These reforms will benefit volunteers as they include packages to assist with volunteer recruitment and retention across the CFA which will go a long way helping resolve the issues I listed above and create stronger CFA volunteer brigades into the future.

Unpredictable Responses,

Whilst stationed at Dandenong we regularly supported neighbouring volunteer fire brigades, due to the fact calls were in another Brigades primary area we would respond a single appliance from Dandenong in line with organisational procedures that being Dandenong pumper 2, which at the time had a staffing of 1 officer and 1 firefighter.

On numerous times we responded to that automatic alarms in multi storey buildings, factories and nursing homes where through no fault of their own the volunteers at that brigade would either fail to respond or not have a driver for their truck and fail to respond leaving just us two to respond and arrive on scene prior to the dispatcher notifying us that the volunteer brigade had failed the 6 minute turnout time and if we required another brigade to be paged, leaving the 2 of us at the incident until the next station responded and arrived in scene sometime later.

It is important to have guaranteed backup - guaranteed that two trucks with at least 7 appropriately skilled firefighters will be dispatched and arrive within 8 minutes to perform the critical required tasks at the scene to not only protect firefighters but ultimately the community.

This is by no means a "crack" at volunteers I was a volunteer for 10 years and I have been the wildfire member at the structure fire, I have been the breathing apparatus volunteer who had to go in on my own because no others turned out, and I have been the incident controller who has had to make the decision to send another volunteer in on his own to search a structure fire even though it was against CFA operating procedures.

Whilst we continue relying on a "wildfire" basic skills set to and people who don't work in their area to service heavily urbanised areas and regional cities then this will continue to occur and firefighters and more importantly the public can be put at an avoidable risk.

On average more people die each year in structure fires than wildfires

Yet we are so focused on "surge capacity" and numbers of people to respond to wildfires,

I implore you to ask "why?"

Why aren't we giving more thought to structural firefighting, emergency medical response and fire prevention in the outer metropolitan areas and regional cities?

Differing standards within the same organisation,

I have experienced first hand how all three current models operate, fully volunteer, integrated, and fully professional.

In many growing areas CFA has now placed career firefighters into integrated stations unfortunately the integrated model relies on volunteer "back up" in most areas the problem with this is that CFAs minimum required skills don't match the work performed within these areas and the backup required.

The wildfire firefighter skills set (*see appendices 1*) is the MINIMUM skills set required for a volunteer firefighter to get on the truck and respond to ANY call within the CFA area.

That means that a volunteer brigade could respond to a house fire with confirmed persons trapped and not be able to wear breathing apparatus, not enter that structure, not perform a search for trapped persons or provide first aid to anyone injured.

Compare this to the MINIMUM skills set for a CFA career firefighter (*see appendices 1*)

ANY operational career firefighter in the Metropolitan fire brigade or CFA can wear breathing apparatus, perform search and rescue, conduct internal firefighting and will soon be able provide emergency medical response to any persons on the fire ground.

In the CFA volunteer Lieutenants and Captains are voted into positions and do not have to had completed any type of crew leader training. It is "desirable" that they complete the CFA crew leaders course, compare this to the training and formal assessment process for Leading Firefighters and Station Officers in CFA (*see appendices 2,3 & 4*), the "mantra" that CFA professional firefighters and volunteers are trained the same is not correct and is just another example of the different standards within the one organisation that constantly leads to conflict and aggravation of both parties.

I have never once worried as a firefighter in MFB if there was going to be a enough suitably trained people to get the job at hand done, where as in CFA I regularly worried that if something went wrong who would be able to rescue me or one of my fellow firefighters or whether the volunteer incident controller was competent to be in control of this incident.

Moving all professional firefighters to a single body would mean that all firefighters in that organisation would be trained the same and have the same incident control and crew leadership training and that by removing that second set of standards relevant crew leadership and incident control training can be developed and delivered to CFA volunteers as decided and developed by their peers relevant to what is seen as important by them.

Outdated and Outgrown Organisational Boundaries,

Although the growth in outer metropolitan Melbourne mainly in the CFA area has exploded over the past decade and is some of the fastest growing urban areas in Australia the fire services that service those areas haven't matched the urban requirements, in fact the boundaries haven't been changed since 1958.

In the CFA area, a structure fire will have a minimum of two brigades dispatched and every CFA firefighter that responds to that call will have the wildfire firefighter skills set, that is the last of the "guaranteed" everything else after that is "possible" there is no guarantee of a set number of volunteer firefighters turning out, no set number of breathing apparatus qualified firefighters, no guarantee that someone will be able to drive the appliance.

These differences happen all around the outer fringe of metropolitan and suburban Melbourne and archaic boundary and response systems means that in some cases if you live or work on one side of a road you receive the professional response listed above and on the other side of the road a response that may lack the required skills and crew numbers to safely protect or save the public.

(See attached border map)

For example

- If a child had a severe asthma attack, severe anaphylactic reaction or cardiac arrest at the Yarra hills secondary school they would have a minimum of 3 emergency medical response trained career firefighters dispatched at the same time as ambulance Victoria and on scene to assist ambulance in under 8 minutes.

BUT,

- If a child suffered the same complications at Pembroke primary school then they would simply have to wait for ambulance to arrive which could take up to 15 minutes for a priority 1 call.

This is Purely based on antiquated boundaries and response systems and a 60 year old boundary,

These reforms will see an independent body review and decide on operational boundaries based on risk, call volume and population growth ensuring the best possible response for the community.

Industrial interference.

In the 9 years of my professional firefighting career 7 of those have had some form of industrial action occurring but nothing has been as appalling as what can only be described as the opportunistic use of both volunteer and professional firefighters over the past 2 years, the ongoing and continual creation of fear and mistruth regarding the proposed enterprise agreements, reforms and the professionalism of the states career firefighters has damaged volunteer and career relations irreparably.

To see the current CFA chief officer, a 30+ year veteran of the service, both career and volunteer awarded with an Australian Fire Services Medal, someone who to me embodies CFA and is a sound leader called a "union stooge" "lap dog" "labor puppet" all for supporting much needed reforms is absolutely appalling!

These relationships have been damaged in a way that has now lead to a fear that either party is always lying or wanting to meddle in the other business and if not fixed I fear will begin to impact on the fire services ability to deliver services.

The only way I see this being fixed is to separate career and volunteer firefighters into separate organisations where each party can focus on their own issues and contribute to move forward and provide services to the Victorian public and their members.

The fact still remains that as professional firefighters we will always work with and support the states volunteers when needed to ensure the public are protected in their time of need.

This Legislation re affirms that professional firefighters will continue to provide support services to volunteer brigades with Operations Officers and Operations mangers seconded back to CFA, wearing CFA uniforms, operating under CFA procedures and the CFA Act providing the same level of support and assistance as they do now.

This will further be enshrined by the MOU between the commissioner of FRV and the Chief Officer of CFA as detailed by the CFA chief Officer on his members update videos.

What I never want to see again is the wedge being driven between two groups of people both striving to do the same thing in their own capacity for political gain or some fostered view that it is their patch or legacy that is being taken away.

Removing career firefighters from the CFA will not effect the way Career and volunteer firefighters respond this is evident through the many "Good" stories regularly published on both CFA and MFB social media where volunteers from CFA and professional firefighters from MFB regularly train together and foster good relationships.

Conclusion,

The public don't care what truck turns up with what badge on the side, what the public do care about is that in their time of need that the fire service can deliver,

- If their loved on is trapped that the fire fighters can rescue them.
- If their property is under threat that it will be protected.
- That when they call the brigade arrives on time.

The ultimate decider should always be,

What is best for the community.

I strongly support legislation as these reforms go to the heart of the issues by,

- Ensuring that urban areas are serviced by professional firefighters who are all trained to structural firefighting skills sets as a minimum, provide a guaranteed response in a worlds best practice time frame and also provide emergency medical response.
- Returning the CFA to a fully volunteer organisation and further enshrining their roles in legislation, removing the ability of external parties interference in volunteer activities, returning direction and independence to volunteers.
- Ensuring that an independent body will assess response standards and areas and make recommendations to future proof growth areas ensuring the public receive a timely and appropriately skilled response, removing the "Us vs them" and "patch" mentality when deciding boundaries and response areas.
- Establishing an independent body to decide on infrastructure requirements and locations ensuring that the areas that need new stations and appliances get the suitable facilities and equipment they need.
- Providing relevant and overdue presumptive rights legislation for both career and volunteer firefighters suffering from occupational related cancers.

I ask you to please support these much needed and overdue critical legislation for the better of all firefighters and the safety of the Victorian public.

Yours sincerely,

Brendon Siinmaa

Brendon Siinmaa

Leading Firefighter

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I attach the following documents:

Appendices 1 - CFA Volunteer wildfire Skills set compared to CFA Level1 career firefighter skills set.

Appendices 2 – CFA Volunteer Lieutenant minimum requirements compared to CFA leading Firefighter skillset and assessment process.

Appendices 3 – CFA Volunteer Captain minimum requirements compared to CFA Station Officer skillset and assessment process.

Appendices 4 – CFA LFF progression pathway and assessment process.

Map 1 CFA / MFB border map