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**Submission in support  
of the  
Fire Services Reform Bill**

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Brian Whittaker



My name is Brian Kenneth Whittaker and I have been employed with the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB) since 1985.

I am fully supportive of the Fire Services Reform Bill currently before the committee. Based on my experience I believe this reform is a great opportunity to significantly improve public safety and firefighter safety.

I currently hold the rank of Commander and I have held this rank for 6 years. I hold the position of Commander, South East Metropolitan Region, prior to this position I was Commander, Leadership and Development at the Victorian Emergency Management Training Centre.

My qualifications include:

- Graduate Certificate in Management
- Advanced Diploma of Public Safety and Firefighting Management
- Diploma of Fire Technology
- Certificate IV in Training and Assessment

During my career I have performed several roles including general operational firefighting activities and as an Officer I have managed station personnel, tasks and the command/control of fire scenes. As a career firefighter with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade I have attended numerous fires/incidents involving high-rise buildings, industrial premises, restaurants, houses, apartment buildings, car/truck and hazardous materials. Significant fire/incidents include Coode Island, Mayne Nickless Clayton, Yarraville Refinery, and Webb Dock chemical spill.

I have worked closely with both CFA career staff and volunteers on many occasions. This includes major fires and floods, fires within mutual aid areas, and interagency training projects. I can confirm that my encounters have always been positive toward a working relationship regardless of the status of the individual. However, it must be noted that significant improvements can be implemented to improve the functionality of the Fire Services, resulting in improved emergency services for the Victorian community.

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## **The MFB**

The Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) has provided exceptional services to Metropolitan Melbourne for over 125 years. The MFB consists of over 1800 career firefighters and 400 corporate staff. During my career the MFB has evolved to be recognised across the country as a leader in 'urban' firefighting and several specialist emergency response activities eg. Urban Search and Rescue (USAR), High Angle Rescue (HART), Hazardous Materials response (HAZMAT), Emergency Medical Response (EMR). To validate this I can confirm that most of the major fire services across the country, including the CFA, have approached the MFB for our 'training programs' and 'concept of operations' in the areas I have listed.

## **The CFA**

The Country Fire Authority (CFA) provides services to 'outer' metropolitan, 'regional' and 'rural' areas. This organisation has a combination of volunteers and career staff, and many support staff. I have personally observed the CFA grow over 30 years in it's attempt to provide the required fire services to their areas of responsibility. This point however, is the main reason change is needed. The value of volunteer firefighters should always be acknowledged and their commitment to protect their communities is remarkable. However, the pressure on today's society for volunteers to be available 24/7 at a moment's notice is being reflected in emergency response data.

## **Public Safety – Response Model – Standard of Fire Cover**

Metropolitan Melbourne and other regional areas have grown exponentially over the past 30 years and are expected to continue. Springvale, Dandenong, Rowville, Boronia, Frankston, Cranbourne, Craigieburn, Melton and Geelong and many other areas should no longer be zoned as 'country' areas. The population and infrastructure in these areas is significant and these communities should have the appropriate 'fire cover/service' and not increase the pressure on volunteers. The Victorian public cannot accept 'non-attendance' or 'delayed-attendance' when they call an emergency service. This is critical in the event of fire, the scientific fact that fire will reach 'flashover' (point of no return) of a typical urban structure in approximately 8 minutes and place occupants at risk cannot be ignored.

Victoria's antiquated fire service boundaries don't meet the needs of our state today - in fact, they are putting lives and property at risk. The 'urban fire response' model, or 'standard of fire cover' includes an 8 minute response time and 7 professional firefighters on two fire trucks - this is the minimum standard needed for emergency response to maximise the potential to save lives and minimise damage to property, this is also critical in regards to firefighter safety. The requirement of 7 professional firefighters on-scene has been established due to the roles/tasks each firefighter must perform. Currently this response model is only guaranteed in Melbourne's metropolitan fire

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district. In this area, specially trained professional career firefighters are in fire stations that have been strategically located to be able to respond within 8 minutes.

### **Response Time Measurements**

Different methods exist that measure response time, this is creating misleading commentary.

MFB response time is measured from the time the call-taker at ESTA receives a call to the time the crew is on-scene. Example; Emergency call received by ESTA call-taker (time commences), immediate electronic dispatch of crew from closest station, crew has 90 seconds to don firefighting clothing, get on truck and 'turn-out' from station, travel to fire scene and radio communications to ESTA of being on-scene (time recorded).

CFA response time is similar however there are different categories of measurement based on specific brigades, these categories include 'time lapses'. Time lapses I refer to are 'paging' firefighters and their time to travel to station, and 'non-attendance' of selected fire appliance (another fire appliance would then be selected adding to delay). This measurement, including 'non-attendance' becomes lost in data, as the time recorded is taken from the first fire appliance on-scene. This creates enormous risk to public safety and firefighter safety.

### **Training Standards**

The Public Safety Training Package (PSTP) provides appropriate training standards for firefighters across the country. Fire agencies ensure firefighters complete the core units and then select other elective units from the PSTP as required for the particular agency.

MFB and CFA career firefighters complete similar units of the PSTP during basic training delivered over a 18 week recruit course (off-the-job) and further training over approximately 3 years (on-the-job). These firefighters are then required to maintain their skills by participating in programmed skills maintenance sessions.

CFA volunteers are provided training from a completely separate stream of the PSTP, more designed as 'skill sets' than 'qualifications'. This allows them to operate safely at specific fire scenes, eg bushfires. However, the majority of volunteers across Victoria are not trained in 'Structural firefighting' or 'Operation of Breathing apparatus', meaning that it would be unsafe for them to operate safely at structure fires in an urban/regional area. There is absolutely no disrespect meant by this statement, as I have said previously, volunteers are of extreme value to the state of Victoria, however, it must be noted that the training of career firefighters to that of volunteer firefighters is vastly different, this is directly attributed to the training hours and specific units covered.

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### **Why Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV)?**

Further to the points made in my discussion of 'Public Safety – Response Model – Standard of Fire Cover' the Fire Services Reform Bill provides the opportunity to bring together the career firefighters into one organisation (FRV) and have volunteer firefighters remain in the CFA. This would have enormous benefit to each organisation and the firefighters.

As I mentioned earlier, career firefighters currently train to 'similar' standards, operate under slightly different operational procedures and operate different equipment. If employed by the one organisation there is no reason that career firefighters cannot be operating identically to ensure consistency, efficiency and safety. This would also provide a significant cost saving.

The CFA would be more independent to manage their volunteer firefighters, stations and resources, without the complications of also meeting the needs of managing career firefighters that operate in a completely different manner.

In conclusion, I again state that the Fire Services Reform Bill would be a significant improvement in public safety for Victorians and the safety of firefighters.

I would make myself available to elaborate on any of the comments made within this submission.

Regards,



**Brian Whittaker**

