

## SUBMISSION for Fire Services Legislation Reform Bill 2017

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The purpose of this submission is to highlight my support for the current supposed changes to the Fire Services highlighted in the Fire Services Legislation Reform Bill as referred to the Select Parliamentary Committee.

My current position is that of an Acting Commander for the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFESB). I have been employed as a professional firefighter with the MFESB for 28 years and have held the rank of a Station Officer or above for the last 22 years. Throughout this time I have experienced and witnessed many changes within both my service and the CFA. This includes experiencing many summer fire seasons including events such as Coode Island, Black Saturday and large protracted incidents such as the Hazelwood Mine fire, where the need for clear communication and cooperation within the Fire Services was paramount in achieving a quick and successful end to these incidents.

At the Hazelwood Mine fire my responsibility was to manage the Health and Safety Cell at the ICC and while in this role I was given the opportunity to see how the services worked together. The professionalism and ability of all personnel within the Command Centre to work together as one was commendable considering their many different backgrounds, however the doubling up of personnel from both the MFB and CFA was notable. This doubling up naturally created increased workloads on logistics in sourcing personnel and equipment from two different organisations also resulting in potential communication breakdowns.

The potential for these communication breakdowns between services then extended to the fireground due to both services having different:

- Radio/communication systems
- Equipment.
- Rank structure
- Fireground incident management and control systems and
- Procedures

These breakdowns in extreme conditions can create a danger to both firefighting personnel and the community.

The ability to source personnel was also evident. Sourcing professional firefighters throughout this incident remained quite constant and achievable whereas as the incident progressed it did become more and more difficult to source volunteers.

This is not a negative on the volunteers however it does indicate that volunteers do have responsibilities and careers of their own which can impact on their ability to attend fire calls. This only further highlights that with the urban sprawl being what it now is I do not believe we can continue having purely volunteer fire stations in heavily populated, commercialised and industrial locations. This is due to the fact that there is no guarantee of a response from a volunteer brigade. On many occasions their ability to attend/respond quickly to fire calls is effected by their working arrangements. This delayed response however still does provide assistance to professional fire crews!

While holding the rank of a Senior Station Officer I have recently been stationed at one of the Outer Eastern MFB Fire Station's, Ringwood. At this location we regularly respond to firecalls with volunteer brigades. On these occasions and as the OIC it is quite often difficult to know when and where your backup is coming from and what their skill sets are going to be. To safely commit manpower into a burning building to perform firefighting activities or to carry out a rescue we require fully trained backup crews to be on scene and ready for the safety of both our personnel and members of the community.

It is for this reason we require 7 professional firefighters responded to all calls as we are guaranteed a response and a known level of training. In saying this, it does not eliminate the need or the response of volunteer firefighting crews. CFA Volunteers in the outer fringe areas will continue to have a role to play and they will continue to be responded to fire calls along with professional firefighters.

Unfortunately there has been a lot of False Truth's and Scare Mongering created regarding the effect of the CFA's and MFB's EBA's and the current Fire Service Reforms on the volunteers. The volunteers will continue backing up the professional firefighters and being used for surge capacity as done in the past.

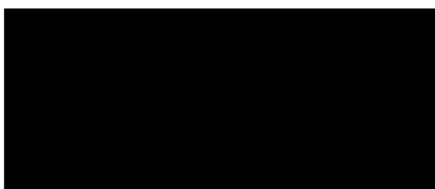
Over the last two years I have witnessed firsthand the gradual breakdown of moral on my colleagues and on the relationships between professional and volunteer groups. This includes considerable damage done between CFA professional and volunteer staff. This should not have happened and should never have been allowed to degenerate to this point. In many instances these bonds will not be repaired for a considerable time!

Melbourne's current Metropolitan Fire District is in excess of 60 years old and was originally created when the population of Melbourne was between 1.33 – 1.85 million people. With a population growth of almost 300% since then and population bordering on approximately 4.7 million, Melbourne's Fire Service and fire coverage has not evolved with these changes. The government of that time was wise enough to determine that the Melbourne metropolitan/urban area at the time and the community was best served with professional full time fire coverage. The Country Fire Authority was originally designed to cover the fringe and rural areas using a volunteer service and this was found to be sufficient. This was due to the fact that they protected large undeveloped areas creating minimal fire calls within these areas other than a possible surge during the fire season.

The current Fire Services Reform will bring about the necessary changes to take both organisations into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and align the Metropolitan Fire District with the current urban sprawl and the current Metropolitan urban boundaries.

These changes are not a nice to have, rather they are of vital importance. They will create long term cost savings in the form of having the one management system with further savings created in training and development, equipment standardisation and purchasing.

The Fire Services Reform will once again allow the CFA to focus fully on being a volunteer organisation and will not have a negative impact on fire service delivery across Victoria. It will once again provide local CFA brigades a level of autonomy within their region. Conversely the restructure will allow for change to the level of fire service provided to a region when a trigger point is reached involving population, commercial and industrial growth.



Craig Williams