

Kirra Vanzetti

From: Neil Schlipalius [REDACTED]
Sent: Monday, 3 July 2017 4:41 PM
To: LCSC
Subject: Submission in support of Fire Service Reform

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees

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

My name is Neil Schlipalius and I work as a career firefighter with the Country Fire Authority. I am currently 49 years old and have been a member of the CFA since I was a junior firefighter aged 12 then joined the senior ranks as a 16 year old. I have been a career firefighter since 1989 (28 years' + service) and currently hold the rank of Senior Station Officer stationed at Rosebud fire station on the Southern Mornington Peninsula. I am a qualified Operations Officer and hold many specialist qualifications in the fire and emergency management sector.

I live in Sorrento and have been a registered volunteer with the Sorrento brigade for over 30 years. I also volunteer at my local football club where I have been junior club president and assist the senior club on match day training and medical support. I am a holder of a National Medal for service including first clasp and have also been awarded the National Emergency Medal for my role in the 2009 Black Saturday fires. My service includes being dispatched to over two thousand events including major bushfire and campaign fires throughout Victoria and interstate.

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

- I have worked my entire career responding to emergencies with what has been considered "minimum manning". This means the bare minimum to respond a fire appliance to a call with no guaranteed backup or support. I have accepted this throughout my career as "the norm" but as times change I can no longer accept that "the norm" is acceptable or safe and myself and my family and colleagues deserve better. I have worked on a station as a single officer responder and have faced making a choice of putting my life in danger to enter a building alone to attempt a rescue or just wait for unknown support from volunteers before an attempt can be made. Volunteers do an amazing job in protecting Victorian communities but so do career personnel and they now deserve support to be able to do their job safely. Guaranteed back up or support is essential for me to be able to do my job effectively and also provide a safe environment for my crews. It allows me to task personnel to effect firefighting operations or rescue knowing if an unexpected emergency occurs I have the backup to support my crews. The problem that I am currently faced with is that even if I have crew support from volunteers they may not possess the competencies to do the necessary roles on the fireground such as search and rescue, breathing apparatus and structural fire attack. The acceptable standard of support is to respond at least two trucks with at least 7 firefighters and be dispatched within 8 minutes. This currently is not the case.
- Having a competent first response crew means much better community safety and protection. Regardless of the time of day if a member of the public calls 000 they have the knowledge that if they live in an area where career firefighters respond then this response will occur in 90 seconds with a fully competent crew. Volunteers may also respond but the skill set of this crew will always be unknown as will the number of personnel available at any time.

- Reform is also required to ensure that the closest fire truck to an incident gets responded regardless of who's primary brigade area the call is in. This is currently not the case and individual brigade captains have the power to prevent career personnel for instance responding into an area without valid justification. Captains of brigades try to justify this as "supporting volunteers" by ensuring the career personnel do not get to the calls or are delayed in responding so as volunteers personnel have control of the incidents regardless of the response time. If calls are of a significant nature career personnel are often responded but in a much delayed timeframe than if they were responded during the initial callout. This is not in the best interests of the community we are paid to protect who don't care whether the truck has paid or volunteer firefighters on it but expect the closest truck to attend. The days of brigades protecting "their patch" with historical response boundaries needs to be reformed and regardless of where the line on a map is, the closest fire truck needs to be responded regardless of who's "patch" the call is in. Often career staff are responded to a call only after another brigade fails to respond in the six minute time frame which leads to a delayed response and greater community risk.
- As a dedicated CFA career officer I have been disheartened by the continued attacks on career personnel from governments, the media, volunteer groups such as the VFBV and individual volunteer personnel. The level of trust, morale and the ability to maintain the integrated model of fire service has been compromised by this ongoing dispute. A "line in the sand" has to be drawn to move forward and get on with this reform to strengthen the fire services and regain community confidence. The only way forward is to make CFA a volunteer only service and transfer all career personnel to FRV. Professional firefighters deserve employment security and the knowledge that they have the ability to negotiate for a safe working environment and conditions. The current legislation doesn't allow for this and the interference from volunteer groups in negotiations will make securing an agreement an impossible task. Volunteer groups have pushed vigorously for the ability to do what is right for volunteers. This is the opportunity to give them what they want and remove career personnel from the CFA and give staff the same respect by doing the right thing by them. I would dearly love to be able to be proud of my career choice again and walk tall in the community knowing that people respect what I do without the constant criticism and questions that I have had to field for the past three years. The mental toll being experienced by our personnel is extremely disheartening.
- Employing all career firefighters in one fire service will not affect volunteer turnout or surge capacity. The volunteers at Rosebud will continue to respond as they do now and if available they make themselves available to go away on strike team duty or other response. Having them part of a volunteer only CFA will actually strengthen the ability to respond away to surge capacity events as the requirement to maintain service in the home area will be maintained by FRV personnel. I see this as a win/win for all concerned. The reform will only affect 35 integrated stations primary response areas and it will have no other effect on other volunteer brigades or bushfire response other than providing full time support into their areas where a justification exists. Again it's about getting the closest fire truck with a competent crew to an incident in the shortest time frame. Volunteer support will be enhanced where the reform permits.
- It is so very clear to see that the service delivery model that exists today is broken. Career staff have waged a futile battle to increase support to the volunteer system but are faced with the stonewalling tactic of preventing this support based on the out-dated mentality that it is detrimental to volunteers if the career staff "put out our fires to quick". In the highly urbanised landscape that CFA protects the public deserve a model of coverage that is exempt from paroquial boundaries.

- The reform will benefit volunteers as it has included a package to assist with volunteer recruitment and retention across the CFA; and includes funding for volunteer station upgrades. This is much needed funding and can only be seen as a great way of supporting a new CFA.

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

- Thursday 29th June at 0409 hrs Rosebud staff responded to a structure fire in Rye (Support area for Rosebud). Rye brigade volunteers "timed out" which meant that career personnel had no backup to effect a safe entry to the premises and attack the fire. When Rye brigade did respond only one member was competent to don breathing apparatus and assist with the fire attack. Luckily there were no persons trapped or first on scene crews wouldn't have had enough trained personnel to effect a rescue.
- Numerous calls to Dromana brigade area where career staff are not responded until the home brigade requests via radio for the career staff to be paged. Normally this is due to further information being given to the first responding volunteer crew and they realise that they will need the assistance from the career personnel and that they have not been automatically paged to the event. This creates an unnecessary delay in response.
- Numerous calls where there is no response at all from a brigade to an event in their primary area but career staff attend and deal with the event. This data is not shown up as a "fail" by the home brigade as they have no data to track and the event just gets logged as a primary response by the career staff even though they have travelled to another brigades area to respond.
- Regular calls where Vicfire request whether or not to turn out another brigade where the home brigade does not meet the service delivery standard.
- Regular calls where the skill set on the fireground is not suitable to effect a safe fire attack or rescue. There may be sufficient numbers on scene but the qualifications of those on scene means that vital roles such as wearing breathing apparatus cannot be achieved. This often means that crews are tasked in areas that may put them at risk.
- Rescue call in Dromana area where a serious motor vehicle collision occurred and a mother and young child were injured requiring helicopter transport to Melbourne. Staff did not get a page to the event at it occurred after 1800hrs and the response automatically falls to two volunteer brigades only. Had the even occurred before 1800 hrs the Rosebud career staff would have been responded and been one of the first appliances on scene and capable of assisting the home brigade in providing fire scene protection, light rescue capability and emergency medical response by trained operators. The reason supplied for this change in the response data is that volunteers are less available before 1800 hrs but more available after 1800 hrs so staff aren't needed after that time. Surely common sense would dictate that you would have the most effective response to such an emergency regardless of whether they are volunteer or career staff? Unfortunately this is not the case.

The opportunity to comment on the reform proposal is important in the process because it gives us rank and file personnel an opportunity to let you know what is occurring out in the real world. So often process is hijacked by party lines and the inability to secure a way forward based on sound judgement that is obviously in the best interests of the state. I respectfully ask the committee to please support the reform and help get the states fire services back on track and give the community

a fully volunteer CFA and let career personnel jointly protect the state as an independent professional fire service.

Reform is required and this legislation gives us a chance to move forward.

I am very happy for anyone to contact me to discuss this submission.

Yours sincerely,

Neil Schlipalius



Neil Schlipalius Senior Station Officer (A Platoon)
Rosebud Fire Brigade - 99 Boneo Rd Rosebud 3939
HSR Rosebud Fire Station



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