

Ben Jenkins
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Assistant Clerk Committees
Department of the Legislative Council
Fire Service Bill Select Committee
Parliament House, Sprint Street
East Melbourne VIC 3002

26 June 2017

Dear Sir or Madam

RE: FIRE SERVICE REFORM

I am a Leading Firefighter with the Country Fire Authority. I have been a professional Firefighter for over five years now. Prior to that, I was a volunteer at Dandenong (which has both professional and volunteer firefighters) for 10 years.

During my 15 years of service with the CFA I have had the opportunity to become qualified in the areas of rope rescue, confined space rescue, heavy rescue (road/rail/industrial) and urban search and rescue. I have also obtained qualifications in many of the CFA firefighting appliances. I have been awarded the Nation Emergency Medal – Victorian 2009 Fires and a 10 year service medal.

I am currently stationed at Rowville Fire Station, in Melbourne's South East. Rowville has four professional firefighters on duty at any time. To the South and West we are supported by professional fire fighters. To the North and East we are supported with 100% volunteer firefighters.

As Firefighters we have a moral and legislative responsibility to protect life and property. The public's expectation is that when they call 000 and request fire, they get a response which is guaranteed, with appropriately trained personnel who arrive on scene in an appropriate amount of time.

The response at Rowville is guaranteed. We respond with a minimum of four professional firefighters. These members have all undertaken an intensive 16 week recruit course and have all been trained to meet the needs of an urban firefighting risk. All professional responses also included endorsed Incident Controllers which are required under CFA Standard Operating Procedures.

Rowville features a number of particular risks including;

- Major road networks including Eastlink Freeway.
- SP Ausnet power distribution switchyard which is the power hub for Melbourne.
- Lysterfield Park Reserve and the Police Paddocks are a significant bushfire hazard in summer.
- Stud Park shopping complex.
- Numerous primary and secondary schools.
- Numerous aged care facilities.
- Industrial areas to the north.
- Residential risks in the remainder of the area.

One particular incident I feel is worthy of discussing was the reported structure fire in the northern area of Rowville. The supporting brigade was CFA Scoresby Fire Brigade, a 100% volunteer brigade, and MFB 31 Station, a professional brigade. This incident occurred on 31st January 2016 at a Red

Rooster restaurant. The deep fryer inside the restaurant had caught on fire and by the time fire crews arrived the fryer was well involved and impinging on the structure.

Rowville professionals were committed at the time of the call, so our response was slightly delayed. As a result the volunteers from Scoresby and Rowville were first on scene. Once we arrived I was tasked to don a breathing apparatus and enter the structure to perform an internal assessment of fire extension and to assume a supervisory role of the crews inside. As I entered there was a flash of fire which came from the fryer, hit the roof and travelled across the ceiling. I quickly worked out that the volunteer crews inside had hit the fryer with water from the hose. Applying water to a fire would be expected to the lay person, but putting water on a going oil fire is catastrophically bad and caused the fire to violently flare up posing an immediate danger to the crews inside, and helped extend the fire into the roof space.

Fortunately the crews from MFB Station 31 arrived, which gave us seven professional Firefighters on the fire ground. With the additional trained crews on scene we were able to work together to knock the fire down using foam and then continue work to contain the fire which had now extended into the roof space.

Had this same fire occurred on the other side of Rowville, we would not have had the same professional response from MFB Station 31, but our support would have come from a 100% volunteer brigade. This would mean we would not have had seven professional Firefighters trained to the same high standard that I'm sure the Owners of Red Rooster were expecting when they called 000.

The push for seven professional firefighters on the fire ground means we can form a qualified team comprising

- 1 x incident controller
- 2 x breathing apparatus wearers for search and rescue
- 1 x pump operator
- 2 x breathing apparatus wearers for a backup
- 1 x safety officer

Structural firefighting is a high risk activity and like any high risk activity in any other industry it needs the right people with the right training to manage it.

There are a number of discussion points which come from this fire at Red Rooster.

Mind set;

There is a distinct difference in the mindset of a responding volunteer and a responding professional. A volunteer, by nature is required to be active on an adhoc basis. This means for the most part that they are at home, or work when they receive a call. Their head space is not in fire fighting world, but rather their lives. I understand this and it is perfectly reasonable. The issue arises when they receive a call and are expected to stop what they are doing, respond to the fire station, get dressed and then get a truck on the road with in four minutes as dictated by CFA. This rush does not allow for a calm and collected approach to the incident.

I can personally vouch for this – I was a volunteer for 10 years. When the pager went off, your priority was getting to the station and trying not to miss the next truck out the door. You hadn't had time to reflect on the job you had been paged too and start processing it in your head.

A professional response is different. When we arrive for duty at the start of our shift we enter the head space of a Firefighter. Our whole day is orientated towards potentially get a

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

call out. We check trucks, do fire related training sessions and are expecting to get a call. Even when we go out for lunch we all go out together with our gear, expecting to be responding in 90 seconds should the pager go off. When we do get a call we are already in the mindset of being operational. Enroute we are able to calmly discuss what we are going to and come up with a plan. We know that as a professional crew, who train and work together at a high standard that we can rely and trust in each other.

I can relate this to the Red Rooster job described above. As the first professional Firefighters on scene I can recall the chaos amongst the volunteer crews on scene. Nobody had assumed control of the incident, there was no specific functional positions filled by the crew's on scene. Yet, people had donned BA and entered the structure. There appeared to be no plan to tackle the call, but a very adhoc, reactive approach.

Is this what you would expect when you call 000 in Rowville, an area which is still classified as 'country'?

Training;

There is a distinct difference between the training level of a professional and volunteer Firefighter.

As a professional Firefighter I was required to successfully complete an intensive 16 week recruit course prior to being operational. This course includes training in the areas of; structural firefighting and compartment firefighting, emergency driving and pump operations, breathing apparatus and search & rescue techniques, gas detection, emergency medical response and hazardous material training.

Conversely a volunteer is required to complete a minimum skills course which takes most students approximately 40 hours. This course focuses predominantly on rural firefighting and includes very limited urban training. This course does NOT give them the skills to wear breathing apparatus, conduct an internal structural fire fight, drive a fire truck or any other specialist skill. It is basically a safety course to prevent them from getting injured. It is then optional for the volunteer to further their training by doing weekend courses to increase their training.

Based on this alone, who do you want coming to your emergency should one arise?

Experience;

I currently work as crew of four professional firefighters at Rowville. Our combined experience stretches over 55 years of structural firefighting experience.

Fitness and pre-entry requirements;

Firefighting can be a very strenuous activity. And the initial fire fight at Red Rooster was no exception.

There are many differences when it comes to the physical requirements for our volunteer and professional firefighters.

Professional firefighters are required, as part of their pre entry selection to participate and pass;

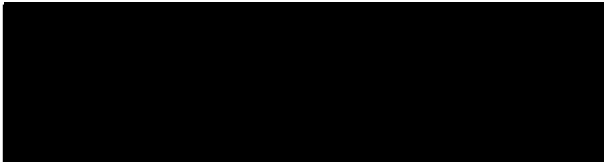
- Police check
- Level 9.6 on the beep test

- Psychological profile
- Aptitude tests
- Two interviews
- Challenge test (including claustrophobia, physical and dexterity testing)

Volunteers by nature, come from all walks of life. My understanding is the only requirement for a volunteer is that they pass a Police check. There is no mandatory fitness requirement for volunteers. This is evident by CFAs provision for seat belt extenders for our grossly overweight members – the same people who you are relying on when you call 000.

The simple fact is that Melbourne is growing, but the fire service is not keeping up. It is time for a reform. It is time to give the people of Victoria what they are paying for in their fire service levy.

Yours Faithfully



Ben Jenkins

Professional Leading Fire Fighter