

Michael Jones



To the members of Select committee

Thankyou for the opportunity to submit my submission regarding the Fire Services Bill.

My name is Michael Jones, I am a professional CFA Firefighter and have been employed by the CFA for 14 years. I hold the rank of Leading Firefighter. I am currently based at Cranbourne Fire Brigade, one of the 35 integrated stations in Victoria. I have been stationed at Cranbourne for three and half years, and throughout my career I have also been stationed at Frankston, Ballarat City, Corio and Dandenong Fire Brigades (all integrated stations).

I strongly support the Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017.

The City of Casey (which incorporates the suburb of Cranbourne) is one of the fastest growing regions in Australia. On a daily basis we see more and more houses built and occupied. There are new estates being established and new roads being completed on a monthly basis and a concurrent increase in industrial zones and associated infrastructure.

This growth is placing more and more pressure on the volunteer members at Cranbourne and our support brigades. For example, in the 3 years that I have been stationed at Cranbourne we have responded to approximately 950 emergencies per financial year. In the 2016/2017 financial year we responded to 1100 calls, a significant increase.

As an employee, this has no major impact on myself or my colleagues as responding to calls is what we are employed to do. However for the volunteer members the increased frequency of calls places extra pressure on them to respond, putting strain on their personal lives, and in balancing work, family time and brigade time.

I understand and sympathise regarding the pressure and strain placed on volunteers. I have witnessed volunteers turning up to fire calls already looking fatigued from their work and then expected to work hard at an incident or fire. One example where I witnessed this, I suggested to a volunteer, out of genuine concern for their welfare, to not turn out to further emergencies for the remainder of the evening and get a full night sleep. It is not fair on him/her or their families to have this much demand placed on them.

Our volunteers do an amazing job and need to be shown the respect they deserve. By modernising our fire service, we can ensure that volunteers working in suburbs with a high need are fully supported by professional firefighters, relieving undue pressure and ensuring a better fire service within these communities. I believe will only have a positive effect on volunteer engagement.

The implementation of Fire Rescue Victoria will enable important safety and service delivery improvements to be implemented. Many of these improvements have been proposed in the CFA's EBA for professional firefighters. However, changes to the Fair Work Act (introduced by the Federal Government) has effectively halted these and future EBA negotiations. The inability to improve our working conditions and operational policies has a direct impact on safety and the quality of fire services to the community.

For example, the following clauses in the EBA proposing:

The presence of 7 firefighters on the fire ground prior to the commencement of operations save and accept where otherwise agreed between the UFU and CFA.

Consistent with the increases in staffing provided in this Agreement, the CFA will conduct an extensive range of preventative and preparedness programs and meet its duty of care by ensuring a minimum of seven professional firefighters to fireground incidents that professional firefighters are dispatched to before commencement of safe firefighting operations in Districts 2, 7, 8, 13, 14, 15, and 27. Consistent with the increases in staffing provided in this Agreement, CFA will also ensure that there is a minimum of seven professional firefighters to fireground incidents that professional firefighters are dispatched to before commencement of safe firefighting operations for Shepparton and Mildura professional firefighters by no later than 1 January 2017 and Warrnambool professional firefighters by no later than 1 January 2018. To avoid doubt, in accordance with current procedure, after undertaking a risk assessment/sizeup upon arrival at the fire/incident, the first arriving Incident Controller on scene can determine the number of appliances and crews required for the fire/incident and can notify oncoming appliances and crews that they are not required to attend.

This change is underpinned by international evidence, demonstrating that seven on the fire ground is best practice to effectively fight a structure fire and ensure crew safety.

Approximately 18 months ago whilst relieving at Patterson River Fire Station. Which at that time the minimum staffing was one Senior Station Officer, one Leading Firefighter and one firefighter. On this day we had two extra firefighters as it was their first day on station and were not considered part of minimum staffing. Early in the shift, we responded to a call to a two-storey house fire. Once we determined that there was no one inside, our focus turned to extinguishing the fire. To do this effectively, it is common to do an internal attack. Myself, as the Leading Firefighter, along with one of the new firefighters in breathing apparatus (BA) commenced an internal search for the seat of the fire. There was extremely poor visibility, and, as a direct result of my training and experience, I felt uncomfortable with the situation and made the decision for us to withdraw as the best and safest option. Within one minute after withdrawing from the structure, the back half of the house fully collapsed. At that stage we had no other support and if we had still been inside the structure we would have been trapped. This could have cost us our lives. All the available crew were allocated tasks and there were no extra BA crews on scene. Eventually we did get support from Edithvale and also Frankston Teleboom, however

the response time would have been faster had the seven-on-the –fireground clause been in effect. This change ensures that the first responders know that there will be the right level of support, with the required qualifications, in a rapid timeframe.

This is just one example of why it is so important for this reform to occur, so that we can move forward with implementing essential operational policies to ensure best and safest work practices.

In closing, this fire service reform implementation has had vocal support from CFA Chief Officer Steve Warrington, CFA CEO Francis Diver and Emergency Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley. All the information coming from these people which I have the utmost respect and trust in is that there will be minimum effect on the CFA Volunteers and most change will be on the staff of the CFA and MFB – the vast majority who support this change.

Prior to this point, I have not been consulted nor have I expected to be consulted on the implementation of the fire services. I have faith in these leaders and the current government to do what is right for all parties involved and most importantly the community as a whole.

I have heard Chief Officer Steve Warrington say many times “nothing really changes for the CFA. The CFA Act and CFA policies and procedures remain the same and the CFA Charter also remains the same”.

My entire career it has felt like we have been in constant battles with previous Governments, fire service management, and other volunteer associations. Minister James Merlino recently spoke at Cranbourne and talked about changing that culture and working together rather than against each other. I have faith in this government to make that happen. Therefore, I support this fire service reform and the implementation of presumptive legislation.