

Submission to the Fire Service Bill select committee.

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Dear Committee members. I ask for your support to modernise Victoria's fire services for the safety of Victorians and firefighters across the State.

The reforms proposed are appropriate and long over due. They will deliver the level of fire protection through Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV), Country Fire Authority (CFA) or the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) to all locations within Victoria based on the development, risks and needs of the community. Not the current outdated determination of what locations are metropolitan or country, or the protestations of vested interests that fear perceived loss or gain, or sense political advantage.

I am a serving 29 year Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) career firefighter, currently a Commander and the officer in charge of MFB's Eastern District on C Platoon. I manage 11 MFB stations, 19 appliances and all emergency response. Six of these stations have direct interface with the current outer north eastern MFB/CFA boundary including volunteer brigades and integrated stations. I see first hand the challenges and am convinced the proposed legislation will improve the safety of the community I respond to protect.

Frank, fearless and objective advice. This is the foundation of our bureaucracy. I use this standard to provide my personal submission for your consideration based on experience and observations as a professional emergency responder spanning 29 years. Some participants in this discourse only argue to maintain things, *as they have always been*, thus denying Victoria's progress and evolution. All services that support our State should likewise evolve to meet today's challenges; not yesterday's or those of decades long ago. Citizens justly expect no less.

There is real need for change and evolution within Victoria's fire service model. The 2016 Census results confirm what we already know - the rapid growth Victoria is experiencing, in particular Melbourne's greater metropolitan regions. *"The Bureau of Statistics estimates that in the 10 years to June 2016, the population of greater Melbourne grew by 880,876, or 23.4 per cent. In a decade, the city added almost a quarter to its population."* (Tim Colebatch, *The Age*, Victoria, 8/4/2017)

Clearly, decades ago many suburbs within greater Melbourne ceased to be country. These suburbs, despite greatly increased density and complexity do not receive the long established MFB urban response standard; the immediate dispatch of two appliances with seven to eight highly skilled firefighters. With an arrival goal designed to provide the greatest likelihood to save life and property. A goal that is consistently met and demonstrated to be effective.

CFA integrated stations provide the immediate response of highly skilled firefighters. This model is not reflective of MFB's service delivery and strategically located station network. It rarely results in a minimum of seven career firefighters dispatched to ensure safe fire ground operations. This occurs in many suburbs where a full career response would be reasonable and expected by the community. In my experience urban community members have a poor understanding of their local response model.

When responding to structure fires, every second matters. Two fully crewed fire appliances appropriately skilled for urban structure response is required; not a small brigade vehicle, or an under crewed appliance absent of critical skills needed to enter building fires to save life. This unacceptable situation is not uncommon and risks the safety of all involved. Modern lightweight construction, coupled with today's typical highly toxic smoke and rapid fire development have placed greater importance on timely arrival and effective rapid intervention.

This is why legislation should provide the guiding hand to ensure public safety. In Victoria, fire service legislation, to date, has addressed a desire that the status quo remains between agencies. I doubt the original legislators anticipated that the former Metropolitan Fire District would not grow in line with Melbourne's metropolitan expansion. Previous funding arrangements and turf war mentalities effectively rendered that logical outcome improbable. The opportunity has presented to ensure such biases no longer impact community safety.

What is best for Victorians calling 000 every day, because their house is on fire, or they have seen someone needing rescue? What is in their best interest? What response do they need and expect? What provision of service is appropriate to where they are located? It is time community safety is placed front and centre in the design of Victoria's fire services.

The Committee should seek to fully understand:

Certainty of response

Community expects certainty from their emergency services. The level of certainty an area receives is demonstrated in the data gathered by Victoria's Fire agencies. The data illustrates a very high level of certainty within the Metropolitan District. In urban areas outside the Metropolitan District the level of certainty varies greatly between different locations. To the point where uncertainty is often prevalent.

For many years I have been deeply concerned by current arrangements. By way of example; to ensure the safety of my crews I now insist that my Officers respond with two MFB appliances when supporting structure fire calls outside the current Metropolitan District (when a CFA staffed appliance is not concurrently responding). This is because the certainty of a volunteer brigade response is unknown. Neither are the skill sets or number of volunteers that may respond. My instruction ensures the initial despatch of at least six career firefighters. Still one short of seven, the number required to establish minimal, not maximal safe fire ground operations.

At some point, each suburb of greater Melbourne, our growth corridors and major regional centres, will outgrow the capacity of well intended, dedicated, volunteers. They struggle to meet the protection needs and certainty of response expected by our modern society. This is not to slight volunteers. It is a predictable outcome of increasing population density, community development and the increased risks and complexity associated with growing industry presence and call volume.

Performance measures and on-scene arrival times

Fire agencies do not report like activities in a like manner. The Victorian Auditor-General's 2015 report: Emergency Services Response Times, outlines Victoria's emergency service's inconsistent approach to reporting the dispatch and response process. Agency acceptance also varies in what constitutes an appropriate 'first response vehicle' to satisfy on-scene arrival performance. In essence if the first arriving vehicle does not possess the capacity to physically intervene with sufficient equipment and skilled crew numbers it is an inappropriate measure of first arrival.

The committee should seek to fully understand the differing methods to measure response performance and the many variations that influence the recorded outcome. Currently, performance measurements can mask true indications of effectiveness and failures to respond within standards set.

CFA data indicates the struggle many outer suburb volunteer brigades have in meeting their response obligations. Historically, it is the reality that few wish to address. In the face of these trends our community is less safe. This legislation and associated funding commitments improve safety and seeks to strengthen volunteer capacity.

Arrival performance and skills on-scene are the critical factors in understanding the effectiveness of service delivery. The committee must seek to understand the arrival data and vagaries that construe its face value; what constitutes meeting the relevant standard and the incidence of failing to do so.

Committee Terms of Reference

Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria.

I contend, by far, Victorian's are at risk day to day. These risks and resulting emergencies are concentrated in Melbourne's expanding suburbs and our State's regional centres.

First and foremost our fire services must meet these day in, day out demands; the house fires, the rescues, heart attacks etc. The surge capacity argument only speaks to infrequent (exceptional) emergencies. The State's capacity to respond to these extreme events is undiminished. Suggestion to the contrary is scurrilous and lacks evidence. The Victorian Auditor-General's 2014 report: *Managing Emergency Service Volunteers*, made a number of findings, one relating to volunteer workforce planning and recruitment which states - "*Neither CFA or SES has a sound understanding of the total number of volunteers needed to fulfil their operational requirements*" this highlights the problems associated with claims that surge capacity is at risk when it is not clearly understood what level of surge capacity is sufficient or desirable.

The proposed legislation is the most profound improvement I have seen throughout my career. It builds the capacity of Victoria's fire agencies to appropriately meet the needs of our communities across the State. It responds to the recommendations of too many reviews. Reviews that all key stakeholders contributed very detailed submissions.

It heralds the standardisation of work methods and specialist skills provided by career firefighters across the State. Importantly it enables CFA to refocus on its origins as a volunteer force providing the essential fire response in the towns and communities where emergencies are infrequent and career firefighters not warranted.

It rids our State of two independently functioning career firefighting services and the duplication and variances of many standards, implementations and parallel processes.

Most importantly, perhaps not readily apparent, it brings Victorian career firefighters under the leadership of a single Fire Service Commissioner. A Commissioner who will rightly sit as the senior organisational leader responsible to the legislation. In my observations the procession of MFB CEO's has brought nothing but instability to MFB as each one seeks to impose their own management philosophy. The fact that MFB firefighters have endured this unstable leadership for so many years and not let it impact service delivery is testament to their resolve to serve the needs of those experiencing the trauma of an emergency. This alone will have a stabilising and positive impact on all career firefighters and fire service culture.

Effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery.

It is the consistent view of senior operational fire agency officers that proposed fire service reform improves fire service delivery without detrimental impact on volunteers in their current locations, I support their assessment. It does not diminish volunteer capacity to continue in established roles within each Control agencies legislated area or respond to infrequent but large bushfires or floods in previous capacities.

Short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision.

Cost should not solely be assessed in financial terms. There is a cost to community safety and individuals that can be considered in positive or negative terms. The committee should consider the human cost, when experiencing loss of property, income, dislocation, the sense of place. In the case of fires affecting businesses the flow on loss of economic activity, including employment. Any time the consequences of fire are reduced the human and economic costs are less impactful or enduring.

In terms of cost outcomes as a result of structure fires the previous method of fire service funding is instructive. Outside the Metropolitan District the fire services component of insurers premiums was greater. As I understand this was reflective of loss due to fire experienced by insurers and

reflected in premiums. This outcome based cost variance is attributable to the arrival and execution of effective mitigation to reduce fire damage.

Beyond the observations above I am not sufficiently informed to provide a view of cost impacts as a fire service business expense or budget impact. I note that many claims in the public commentary regarding career service costs seem sensationalised to oppose reform. All fire service models, career or volunteer are delivered at financial cost to community.

A thorough understanding of service cost is critical. It should encompass career service budget and expenditure, formal financial support of volunteer brigades (CFA and VFVB), business activities of volunteer brigades as well as informal fund generation such as community based fund raising and specific use and accumulation of those funds.

Any examination of costs would be incomplete without comparative understanding of response outcomes; the success or otherwise of response activities that reduce damage and lessen the dollar term costs and impact of fire.

Underlying policy rational.

Presumptive legislation

Some suggest the dual focus of fire service reform and presumptive legislation is improper. I do not share this view.

Presumptive legislation must primarily be beneficial to older firefighters. If our newest and younger colleagues need presumptive legislation when they reach our years of service, we have failed them! Failed to teach and demonstrate better practices than when we began our careers years ago. Failed to minimise exposure with better understanding of the risks now than before. That is how we as firefighters must conduct our passing of skills and knowledge gained over a career. Without question, we need the health security of presumptive legislation - no firefighter I know, (career or volunteer) myself included, wants to access it, ever!

Presumptive legislation alone is not enough. The proposed fire service reform establishes safer methods of work for all career firefighters. The legislation will ensure the correct initial response in complex urban environments. This is where most of the inherent risks to all firefighters during emergency operations are found.

The formation of FRV will see an end to agency variations in safety and operational procedures. FRV will progress to operate under a single set of common standards and procedures. Though not obvious, is a tremendous improvement in safety for career firefighters and community. While hopefully lessening the need for any volunteer or career firefighter to call on the provisions of presumptive legislation.

Fire service reform and presumptive legislation are each much weaker without the other. It is appropriate that these two critical pieces of legislation are enacted in tandem.

Independent fire district review panel

A key reform is the establishment of the independent fire district review panel. If the current experience has exposed anything, it is a parochial, steadfast stubbornness by some to even consider that fire service reform is beneficial, or worse, that the community could be less safe in some locations. Those who conduct themselves in this manner provide a disservice to the ultimate goal of community safety. The independent fire district review panel sidelines the 'loyalty' biases and turf war mind sets too often on display.

I thank the Committee for their time and respectfully remind each of you that ultimately what best serves the community should be the standard used to assess the evidence that supports the reform of Victoria's fire service agencies. When every moment counts there is no place for emotional, social, pride, ego or other personal attachments of volunteer or career firefighters to be elevated above what best serves our community in times of emergency. Neither is it the role of politicians to back career or volunteer, your responsibility is to back communities and the outcome that best supports their safety wherever they reside or work.

Whether any Victorian location warrants a career or volunteer response model is dependant on the current needs of that location/community, not what the current service may be.