

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

- My name is Mark Sinkinson and I am employed by the Country Fire Authority (CFA) as an Operations Officer. I have been employed by the CFA for 17 years with a further 3 years as a Volunteer Firefighter (VFF) before this employment.
- My qualifications and endorsements include;
 - Associate Diploma in Civil Engineering
 - Diploma of Management
 - Certificate IV in Training and Assessment
 - Certificate IV in Firefighting (Operations)
 - Certificate III in Firefighting (Supervision)
 - Endorsed as Level 3 Operations Officer & Safety Officer, Level 2 Incident Controller, Division Commander, Sector Commander, Strike Team Leader & Staging Area Manager.
- I have been awarded the following whilst serving CFA and the community
 - National Emergency Medal
 - National Medal
 - CFA 15 years service medal (20 year medal due in November 2017)
- I currently undertake voluntary roles within my community as junior football coach and member of the senior committee at the St Albans Football and Netball Club. Up until October 2016 I was also a volunteer firefighter with the Leopold Fire Brigade. Previous to Leopold I have also been an active member of the Colac and Phillip Island brigades.
- I live in St Albans Park which is a suburb of Geelong and I am currently the Officer in Charge of the Belmont Fire Brigade. The Belmont Fire Brigade is an integrated brigade that consists of 30 professional firefighters and 6 volunteer firefighters who would be considered “active”. It should be noted the Belmont Brigade has 53 registered volunteer members that range in roles from firefighter through to non-operational members.
- My role as an Operations Officer also sees me as the senior officer responsible for the Grovedale and Highton Fire Brigades and both of these brigades are fully volunteer.
- The Belmont Fire Brigade is responded to approximately 1200 calls per year, Highton 250 and Grovedale 360.
- Broadly, across Geelong volunteer availability is continuing to decline, through no fault of the individual, due to factors such as work pressures and life style and family activities. This coupled with an ever increasing requirement for emergency response within our larger urban areas sees an increasing reduction of response capability from volunteers. Again this is not a slight on volunteers or a question of a volunteer’s commitment or desire to provide a service to their community.
- Current CFA legislation states words to the effect of “CFA is a volunteer service supported by career firefighters”. This may have been the case back in 1958 when this legislation was drafted but it is clearly not the case now. In the Geelong area career firefighters respond to and manage approximately 80% of the incidents that CFA are called to. The response of volunteers is not always guaranteed to any call. Again this is a fact and not intended as an emotive statement.
- I have recently attended a structure fire in Geelong where the primary volunteer brigade, who I will not name, failed to respond a fire appliance. Primary brigade means the brigade who is responsible for fires and incidents within a defined area. The call was for a unit fire and the further information indicated there could be a person within the unit. The responding career crews from Geelong City were therefore put in the position of attacking

the fire and searching for the occupant with less than the required number of resources to ensure optimum firefighter and community safety for a significant period of time until further crews could be responded.

- A review and subsequent reform of the fire services would, in my opinion, ensure the appropriate response, training and ultimately firefighter and public safety model is provided to the community of Victoria as required and this is supported by new and modern legislation.
- My role with the 3 CFA brigades I support sees me being responsible to provide leadership across all facets of CFA's service and membership requirements. A major component of this is HR management and personnel wellbeing. Over the last period of years in particular I have been heavily involved in managing scenarios around CFA members being subject to situations of conflict, angst and personal attacks from various sources within the community. This has included comments made by media, unions, associations, politicians, brigades, individuals and any other member of the community expressing their opinion. Often these situations have been fuelled by inaccurate information, personal agendas, political views or positions and in some cases individual malice. The politicisation of the fire services has been to the detriment of CFA, it's members and ultimately the community. A separation of career and volunteer firefighters from a legislative perspective will, again in my opinion, see a return to firefighters providing a service unhindered from political agendas. I believe this will be a positive reinforcement for the relationships between career and volunteer firefighters.
- The reform will allow for the continued ability for volunteers to respond within Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) areas as appropriate to provide the required service delivery based on risk. The requirement to respond will be based on the actual needs of the community and not the outdated CFA response model. The legislation will ensure the required number of firefighters and their associated competencies are responded allowing volunteers to respond as their time and work requirements allow. Further, this will improve the ability for CFA as an organisation to focus on actual areas of deficiency in relation to response, training and community engagement within identified brigade areas.
- Surge capacity of volunteers has been widely spoken about in recent times. My position is that with the introduction of reform the capacity for this focussed and sustained response will only be enhanced. In FRV areas, where the expectation of response from volunteers has been reduced, CFA volunteers will have the ability to commit more time and effort around training for and responding to large and protracted incidents. It should also be noted that this is not limited to, as the current public focus is around, bushfires but also incidents such as the Hazelwood mine fire and the recent ship fire at Portland.
- Under the reform proposed, my current role as an Operations Officer with CFA will see no change to the service I provide, or the areas I am responsible for, in relation to CFA volunteers. I will still be providing the leadership, support and advice to the volunteers at the 3 brigades I have already mentioned. The only "difference" I can foresee is the organisation who will be providing my fortnightly remuneration.
- Further, my role as an Operations Officer undertaking the duties of a Rostered Duty Officer for District 7 will also continue to see me providing a daily service to CFA volunteers to ensure readiness and response capability within the District and provide additional support where this may be deficient. Again no change to the service to volunteers.
- The ability for FRV to utilise resources, including personnel, across the FRV response areas of Victoria will see an ability to maximise economies of scale and budgets in relation to fire and rescue services. Interoperability will transition to working as one entity when all career firefighters are employed by and working under the one service provider.

- Legislation is somewhat cumbersome at the moment although the streamlining of consistent policies and procedures across agencies has been utilised over the last few years. This is evident in example in the creation and growth of the Emergency Management Commissioner (EMC). The EMC is constantly reviewing Standard Operating Procedures and the like with a view to having one piece of governance for all agencies wherever possible. The next logical step is to review and reform the overarching legislation that defines the roles and responsibilities of our fire and rescue services to reflect a modern and contemporary urban fire service.
- It is therefore clearly evident that the CFA are now required to provide Outer Metropolitan Melbourne and the Provincial Cities of Victoria the same level of service that Greater Melbourne receive and expect of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB).
- As evidenced by the newly announced joint recruit firefighter training courses to be run the process has started to occur already to have one fire service for career firefighters. Surely this is a great example of change being driven from “the bottom up” and we now require our senior leaders within Government to accept, endorse and embrace this change too.
- The ability for CFA volunteers to become more autonomous in decision making and setting the directions and priorities of their brigades will also be an outcome of this reform. Reference has regularly been made by volunteers over the years that some felt they were not afforded the same resources, training and infrastructure as career firefighters. I would generally refute these claims, however should the reform pass there will be no influence whatsoever, even if only perceived, that career firefighters have had over a decision or resource allocation. Again another positive for CFA volunteers.
- An increase in funding solely for CFA volunteers in the areas of training, resources and capital expenditure is also a positive of this reform package. CFA and it’s volunteers will be in the position to allocate their funds to the areas they identify as appropriate.
- This reform package and associated legislation also sees the provision of presumptive legislation for both volunteer and career firefighters. This is a fantastic outcome for any firefighter who is in the unfortunate position to suffer the effects of a cancer as listed within the legislation. Again this is a huge positive of the reform that I support.
- Finally can I say that I support the overall the intent and intended outcomes of the legislation. Will there be implementation hurdles? Yes there will. The exact nature of these issues is not known at this point in time. The provision of fire services is often an emotive and at times personal topic. It is imperative that the Select Committee doesn’t let emotion and personal opinions overrule the subjective review of this proposed legislation. If the focus is maintained on the ultimate outcome of community and firefighter safety then I believe the only option for the Committee is to endorse the concept of the reform, taking into account any recommendations for improvement or modification. From my perspective the service I provide to the community and CFA volunteers today will be the same (and in some cases enhanced) should FRV be established.

Thank you for your time and I do encourage the Select Committee to contact me should you seek clarification or require further information.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Sinkinson