

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees,

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

I write to express my support for the long overdue reforms to Victoria's fire services.

My name is Brett Hall. I am 40 years of age and I am a Leading Fire-fighter with the MFB and have been a full-time fire-fighter for over 7 years. I am currently stationed at Eastern Hill Fire Station on C Platoon and have worked at this station for 6 years. Before working at my current station I was stationed out east at Box Hill, Oakleigh Ringwood and Templestowe. I live in outer eastern suburb of Mount Evelyn. I have lived in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne all of my life. I am writing to you to let you know of my full support of the proposed Fire Service Reform. During my time as a fire-fighter I have seen and heard of many changes to the fire services that protect the entire state. From a very personal view I can honestly say that these new reforms are the best step forward into future proofing the safety of all Victorians I have ever seen.

I wish to draw your attention to four considerations I believe should be at the forefront of the decisions made by this committee:

Medical Emergencies

In the 7 years I've worked as a fire-fighter, I've responded to numerous medical emergencies including cardiac arrests, drug overdoses, car, bus, tram and train accidents in which occupants have been injured and/or trapped. These incidents are time critical. A delay of mere minutes can and does literally cost lives. This system has been in place since 2001 and in a 2015 media release (www.mfb.vic.gov.au/News/MFB-firefighters-attending-increasing-number-of-medical-calls.html), then Chief Fire Officer Peter Rau stated "had saved more than 200 lives" As a resident of Mount Evelyn I find it extremely difficult to explain to my neighbours and fellow residents of Mount Evelyn that fewer emergency responders would be sent and they'd potentially wait longer for them to arrive on scene when compared to other parts of Melbourne. I find it unconscionable that in 2017 we base Victoria's level of emergency response on boundaries, systems and structures that were drawn up more than 60 years ago. To put it simply many cannot understand that we pay the same fire service levy as many others in neighbouring suburbs but receive less protection.

Structure fires

Responding to fires that occur in houses, apartments, workplaces, schools and hospitals is the core function of fire services. A well-established system of ensuring the safety of both the occupants of these buildings, and the fire-fighters who attend is to send a minimum of seven fire-fighters. The reason for minimum of seven fire fighters is for fire-fighter safety. Unlike inner Melbourne, this response is not guaranteed in areas like Geelong, Bendigo, Frankston, Shepparton, Dandenong, and Point Cook. These densely populated areas contain among other things high rise developments, major hospitals, universities, and large shopping centres. These regions and their residents are deserving of the exact same coverage that exists in inner Melbourne. Last month a well-publicised fire took hold of the Grenfell residential tower in England. This fire took place in west London, crews were on scene within 6 minutes, more than 500 people live in the tower, 80 of which lost their lives. The fire accelerated rapidly due largely to the combustible cladding on the building's facade. This material has been found to be present on a number of buildings throughout Melbourne and Victoria. I believe it is incumbent on this committee to consider the ramifications of a compromised emergency response to any incident that takes place in the densely populated regions of the state.

Surge Capacity

I have read with interest the threats from some that this restructure will have a detrimental effect on the state's fire service's surge capacity when responding to significant events. I find this argument offensive as I have stated earlier I live in an area covered by a fully volunteer fire brigade and are in close contact with many of its members. I can honestly say that I have not heard anything but support for the fire service reform if anything the general consensus is they feel that they would benefit with further funding for training and gear. When events such as Black Saturday, the Hazelwood coal mine fire, even the 'asthma storm' of November 21, 2016 occur the furthest thing from the mind of emergency responders is organisational structures or the alignment of the fire services. Rather our prime focus is the protection of life and property to the best of our training and ability. I personally have responded to events alongside responders from Ambulance Victoria, Victoria Police, the SES, and CFA both career and volunteer. I did so without hesitation and will no doubt do so many more times throughout my career. I'm filled with admiration for the thousands of people who volunteer as part of Victoria's fire response, the selflessness of their actions I find commendable. The implication that due to the proposed restructure, these same volunteers would decide en masse not to make themselves available to support their communities during a time of crisis I not only hope but unwaveringly believe to be a misrepresentation of their intent.

Response Times

In regards to this I won't spend hours in regards to statistics saying that areas of Melbourne covered by a fulltime fire brigade have a quicker response to calls then area covered by volunteer brigades I'm sure you've heard and read enough. It is unfortunately most of the time correct. There are many factors affecting this but I would like to draw your attention to one that I find very applicable. It takes a very unique and strong individual to be a fire-fighter. Unfortunately the same attributes are in very high demand throughout the entirety of work forces. Add on top of this the demands of higher costs of living (the need to work longer hours) and stronger needs of spending time with family it is plain to see that the time left to give up your time to volunteer is going to be significantly less. I don't blame volunteers for the delayed response but if the number of call outs it puts too much pressure on the volunteer stations to continually turn out. I think that a system should be put in place to fix this problem. Having a set of rules such as number of call outs, number of residents, schools, daycare and other major infrastructure in an area automatically creates the need for a full time fire station in that suburb. Volunteers would not be removed from that area but used in the same surge capacity as now.

I would also like you to take into account that during this whole ordeal with the restructuring of Victoria's fire service the mental strain this has taken on all fire-fighters both career and volunteer. The constant defending and justifying of our roll in the community due to untruths being portrayed in the public through the media puts unneeded stress on top of what is an extremely stressful job already.

When I joined the MFB there was a very close relationship between the MFB and CFA both full time staff and its volunteers. During this whole process many people in their own ways have tried to break down these strong bonds but due to us all having the same goal, **community safety**, the relationship is still strong.

Finally, there has been some consternation within the ranks of career firefighters that making a submission to this committee be seen as a breach of the Code of Conduct for Victorian Public Sector Employees. Specifically Clause 3.5 of the Code that states "When making a comment in a private capacity, public sector employees [must] ensure their comments are not related to any government activity that they are involved in or connected with as a public sector employee...". I've been assured that I make this submission under the protection of parliamentary privilege and request that my views remain the confidential property of this committee. I do not wish to denigrate or cast aspersions on anyone associated with the Victorian fire services and firmly

believe that this moment presents us all with an opportunity to create a far more capable and robust fire service that will benefit the people and state of Victoria.

I am more than willing to be contacted for any clarification or queries relating to this submission.

Regards,
Brett Hall

