

Firefighter Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform Bill) 2017

Submission to Parliamentary Select Committee

My name is Mark Francis Burbidge. I have been a Country Fire Authority (CFA) fire fighter for 29 years, six of those as Brigade Captain and twelve as Deputy Group Officer. I am currently endorsed as a Strike Team Leader and Sector Commander as well as CFA Level 3 Logistics Officer.

This submission will attempt to address the Terms of Reference of the Select Committee. Some readers may feel some of what follows would apply to more than one or better to an alternative term of reference. Please transfer as you see fit.

I would be happy to attend any public hearing of the committee. I do not require confidentiality for this submission.

(a) Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria

Increased career fire fighter numbers will undoubtedly improve response times in what are now outer Melbourne and Regional CFA integrated fire station response areas. This must not be at the expense of the supporting first response and surge capacity provided by volunteers.

Volunteers in busy areas will benefit from reduced impost on their time away from family work and leisure activities but I am led to believe, from my close association with many, that they also value their contribution to community safety and the camaraderie of being volunteer fire fighters and support personnel. They will not remain in the fire services if they are sidelined, under-utilised or treated as second class responders. Equipment and operating procedures of career and volunteer fire fighters must be totally interoperable.

It is important that co-located and neighbouring volunteer brigades continue to share the same dispatch pager messaging and radio channel (and preferably fire-ground channels as well) with career brigades (be they Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) or CFA staff) within a District. These measures will provide the most timely turnout, escalation and de-escalation of career and volunteer resources responding to the emergency needs of Victorians.

The first arriving crew at an incident should appoint an Incident Controller to direct operations regardless of agency or career/volunteer status. Sensible pre-planning and negotiation should see other responding agencies arriving support the emergency response under the initial Incident Controller until a transfer of control to the best qualified/experienced and resourced person can be achieved in a co-operative manner that provides the most efficient response to resolving the emergency.

Participation in Incident Management Teams (IMTs) in Level 2 (Medium) and Level 3 (Large) incidents should continue to depend on qualifications, experience and agency and inter-agency endorsement with no superiority of any agency other than the current "control agency" listings under the direction of Emergency Management Victoria (EMV). It is to be hoped that the exemplary co-operation between personnel from different agencies that I have experienced as a member of Level 2 and 3 IMTs continues following any changes to the Fire Services in Victoria.

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(b) Effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery

It is important that any changes to Victoria's Fire Services are implemented in a way that is respectful of and fosters the continued involvement of volunteer service.

I do not assume the need to fill Country Fire Authority (CFA) operational career ranks requires that they be members of Fire Rescue Victoria seconded back to CFA. If alternatively they continued to be employees of CFA this would be more acceptable to many CFA volunteers with whom I have discussed these changes.

The choice of the Victorian Government to propose Fire Rescue Victoria as a way of implementing the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement to career fire fighters following changes to The Fair Work Act suggests volunteers could be adversely affected. It is important that volunteers be resourced, trained, and utilised to maximise the safety of Victorians and other Australians and visitors when the need arises.

Recruitment to CFA career staff ranks (operational, training, support and administrative) should continue to value prior service as a volunteer and allow recognition of prior learning (RPL) and flexible implementation to training programs to make up deficiencies in required competencies. This approach should also extend to lateral transfer of personnel from other fire services e.g. Forest Fire Management Victoria, other emergency services within Victoria, inter-state or overseas and other sections of the community including defence. It is important there not be a one size fits all recruit training course. There should be provision for part time and casual employment opportunities including for suitably qualified volunteers for instance in support and training roles and where possible, operational roles. All employees should be free to belong to a union or association or not.

Many volunteers have expressed disappointment that there appears to be discrimination between volunteer and career fire fighters in the Presumptive Rights Compensation part of the proposed Legislation with the latter group being granted automatic compensation from day one of employment and volunteer claims to go before a review panel. Volunteers require further explanation and guarantees that the process for them will be fair and prompt in their time of need and great distress.

In fire stations and other CFA facilities where career staff and volunteers are co-located or working together it is important that they all be free to share common areas such as meeting rooms, lunch rooms, rest rooms and training facilities, as well operations and communication rooms (depending on role). This does not exclude the need for career staff to have exclusive personal office and sleeping areas where required.

(c) Short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision

It would seem obvious that there will be short term additional costs associated with re-branding uniforms, turn-out gear, appliances, buildings and stationary if Fire Rescue Victoria is formed.

Provision of separate appliances for co-located volunteer brigades would also entail extra expenditure.

In the long term, duplication of Fire Services in current integrated brigade areas may entail ongoing employment and replacement and maintenance costs.

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The formation of Fire Rescue Victoria with deployment to outer metropolitan and regional centres could lead to a reduced share of Fire Services Levies and other Government funding to CFA. It is vital that funding in the short and long term be sufficient to meet the ongoing and growing needs for training and equipping volunteers in all areas where they provide emergency and community education services, particularly smaller towns and rural areas, many in remote locations with little capacity to generate their own funds.

CFA Volunteer Brigades and Groups currently contribute to provision of additional fire-fighting appliances such as second tankers, ultra –light tankers (ULTs) and forward command vehicles (FCVs) through fund raising activities and supported with donations from their communities. Any decline in volunteer participation or community support that might arise from disenchantment with changes to Victoria’s fire services must be avoided by adequate continued support to volunteers as outlined in this submission above.

In many areas CFA volunteers also provide privately owned fire fighting appliances (tankers and slip-on units) as well as plant such as graders and disc ploughs to create fire breaks.

Volunteer trainers and assessors contribute large savings to the training budget

(d) Underlying policy rationale

Many of the points raised above under the first three terms of reference may be perceived by some as matters of implementation but I hope they illustrate the need for changes that improve emergency services in the most cost effective way possible, utilising willing, well trained and resourced volunteers on an equal footing with paid staff. Volunteers are very proud of their contributions and want to feel they are an equal part of the emergency services team.

Victoria is in one of the most bushfire prone areas of the world. Climate change would appear to be increasing that risk. It is imperative that the great first response and surge capacity of volunteer fire fighters be fostered. Over many years response to large campaign fires has relied on the surge capacity of outer metropolitan CFA volunteers.

Volunteers also provide invaluable local knowledge to assist with better decision making for incident management teams.

I believe about one third of turn-outs by CFA volunteers are to motor vehicle accidents (MVAs). They are often first on scene and provide vital first-aid, requests for back up services, and control of traffic to ensure safety until police arrive as well as performing their fire fighting role. This undoubtedly reduces the road toll but comes at a cost to provide adequate training and resources distributed throughout all areas of the state.

I strongly suggest that the final form of the Legislation include requirements for regular liaison meetings between the different fire services at all levels of those organisations to foster efficient, co-operative joint operations, training and community service.

Mark Francis Burbidge

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