

CFA Volunteer Leadership Group – D23

This submission is made on behalf of the Volunteer Leadership Group – D23, a sub-committee of the VFBV District 23 Fire Brigades Council, in response to the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation Bill and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) 2017 Bill. The Group comprises senior CFA volunteers from NE Victoria centred on the towns of Benalla, Mansfield, Moyhu and Wangaratta.

In this submission, each of the Terms of Reference will be addressed with the matter we wish to highlight followed by supporting commentary.

2nd July, 2017

Members of the Select Committee,

It is recognized that change is essential for the growth and renewal of an organization. However, good governance practises dictate that the change must be carefully thought through, trialled and adjusted after consultation with the stakeholders. The fundamental contention of the VLG – D23 is that a briefing and distribution of a press release by the Minister and Premier to stakeholders in the proposed restructuring of the CFA is not consultation; rather it is presenting a *fait accompli*.

Consultation constitutes the coming together of the parties involved, examination of the proposal, open-mindedly taking feedback and following it through. This has not happened. In this instance, the lack of consultation contravenes the requirements of clause 6(g)(c) of the CFA Act and the Government's obligations under the Volunteers Charter. The overarching flaws in the fire service reform legislation before the Upper House come from this lack of consultation.

The Impact on Fire Service Delivery Across Victoria:

The **secondment model** for staffing middle management of the CFA is destined to negatively impact on the ability of the CFA Brigades to successfully protect life and property in our communities across rural and some urban fringe areas.

We believe it will :-

- **Reduce the suitability of FRV staff seconded to the CFA** for the management of volunteer matters once the current incumbents leave the Districts. The future managers will come through the ranks of urban FRV Brigades and may consequently have little empathy for or understanding of the issues confronting volunteers.
- **Prevent the lateral entry of instructors, trainers etc** from CFA volunteer ranks or other related organizations such as DELWP and SES where pertinent skills and knowledge found in those potential candidates can prepare Fire Brigades to respond to the demands of protecting their own and other communities. This applies, in particular, to the role of Wildfire Instructors.
- Promotion through the ranks within the FRV model will not solve middle management staffing problems currently being experienced in the CFA and may indeed **exacerbate the**

situation in the future. The completion of a course does not give a person the skills to successfully perform a duty. There are grave concerns that the further reduced quantity and quality of candidates for secondment will be magnified when the pool from which these people are drawn is the fully urbanized FRV.

- The **Memoranda of Understanding** to be drawn up between the CFA and FRV covering staff secondment, equipment, training etc will have an impact on the fire service delivery across Victoria. The EBA that was presented to the CFA by the UFU last year, effectively had the power to block, hinder or alter any Memoranda by requiring all agreements to be referred to a CFA UFU consultative committee before it could be signed. (See Clause 19 of the latest version of the UFU CFA EBA as an example.) A CFA Chief Officer, a highly credentialed CEO, an established CFA Board and a serving Emergency Services Minister have all been removed one way or another because of this Union influence. On several occasions, the current Chief Officer, when confronted with fears of this potential union control, expressed the **hope** that he would be able to have control of decisions relating to the selection, deployment or discipline of staff seconded from FRV. How can this situation do other than negatively impact on the fire service delivery across Victoria?

Effect on Volunteer Engagement and Participation in Fire Service Delivery.

The effect of the proposed Legislation on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery can be examined on two levels – the personal aspect and operational concerns.

For the **people** who volunteer their time to protect their communities and those of others across the State in times of need, the escalation of the troubles of the CFA, especially that represented by the proposed Legislation, has destroyed much of their belief in the veracity of their political leaders with the resultant plummeting of morale. A couple of examples will illustrate :-

- There is a belief amongst volunteers in the Brigades in our District that they have been **taken for granted** because their political leaders have been far from open and truthful with them in devising this radical reform whilst knowing that Brigades will not abandon their communities when the need arises.
- The reportedly unfair provisions of the proposed Presumptive Cancer Legislation have reinforced the **feeling of disillusionment** with their political leaders with the consequent negative impact on morale. Volunteers have been made to feel second rate throughout this time.

From an **operational** perspective, the effect of the proposed Legislation on volunteer participation in fire service delivery is serious indeed.

- Last fire season, a relatively benign one, the Groups in District 23 experienced a challenge in getting volunteers to **commit to joining long haul strike teams** because of lowered morale. This coming fire season is expected to be more demanding, and volunteers will be expected to sacrifice family time, abandon holiday leave, lose pay (especially for self-employed members) and take up leadership roles. This has been made increasingly difficult when they see senior members with a lifetime of service and experience totally disregarded by this process.

- Highly qualified volunteers were not brought into ICCs last season in favour of salaried team members from further afield. The danger with this practise is **the loss of local knowledge** about how fires develop in the varied terrain of the North East with potentially disastrous results.
- Much has been written about the loss of **surge capacity** the breakdown of the integrated model will cause. This is a major concern to those living under bushfire overlays for extreme fire danger, as many do in the North East.
- There is the potential for the **breakdown of operational relationships** brought by the manoeuvring by salaried and volunteer members to find their place in the new organizational model. This could be expected to have serious consequences for the safety of our communities when fires come.
- The tensions between some salaried staff and volunteers in the integrated stations has already had a detrimental effect on **crewing of appliances**. Crewing restrictions are likely to take place in FRV stations driven by EBA agreements which will entrench these problems.

Short and Long- Term Cost Impact on Fire Service Provision:

With no business model or budgetary information available, more questions arise than there is information to analyse. Obvious concerns include :-

- The cost of **duplication of equipment and infrastructure** resulting from the splitting of integrated Brigades into volunteers only and salaried members irrespective of whether they co- locate or separate.
- The **division of assets** amongst the CFA and FRV on the macro level and the volunteer and salaried divisions of brigades on the micro level.
- The strengthening of CFA policy that money raised by members belongs to the CFA has already angered communities who worked hard to provide equipment and amenities for their Brigades. It can be expected that **fund raising will become nigh impossible** in this climate where salaried firefighters are promoted as the only “professional” firefighters.

Questions that illustrate this issue and are relevant to the Legislation that creates the framework for our fire services include :

- What **model** will be developed to ensure adequate funds for the CFA when its risk profile differs from that of the proposed FRV?
- When will **budgets** be developed for such matters as recurrent spending on vehicle typology, non- seconded members’ salaries, infrastructure, etc.
- How is it proposed to **collect and administer** the Fire Service Levy with the FRV/ CFA model?

Underlying Policy Rationale:

It is difficult to analyse the policy rationale for the separation of the CFA and the development of FRV. The unspoken background to this Bill is the failure of the CFA /UFU EBA process and the effect of such EBAs on the administration and volunteer members of the organization. Some things appear obvious :

- **Joining two pieces of unrelated Legislation** to try to facilitate the passage of one (the Fire Service Legislative Amendment (Reform) 2017 Bill) by using the other as a lever (the

Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation Bill) to stifle debate on both issues is a cynical ploy that reflects poorly on the government.

- The **exclusion of the VFBV** from consultation, claiming it does not represent volunteers shows a lack of understanding of how broadly it is supported. Brigades and Groups must pass a motion to subscribe to membership of the VFBV. In District 23, there is a 100% affiliation of the 57 Brigades and four Groups – this represents in excess of 2000 volunteers in this District alone. Additionally, across the State, the rate of VFBV affiliation rose to 95% last year, the highest rate ever. There can be no rationale for this policy of exclusion.
- Each of the inquiries cited by the Minister and others as justification for the “modernisation” of Victoria’s fire services identified changes that would improve CFA’s fire service performance. In **none of the inquiries** was there a recommendation to abandon the integrated service model – rather each recommended its strengthening.
- The Victorian Government has **abandoned public duty and good governance** by failing to consult with those most effected, develop working models and details with fire agency leaders and provide creditable rationale for the policy before trying to convince volunteers that the change will be in their favour when it clearly is not.
- The secondment model which will see the CFA employ staff from FRV will impose, through middle level managers’ conditions, **the FRV/ UFU EBA within the CFA**, including those clauses that have been the cause of the long resistance upheld to this day.

Members of the Select Committee, your patience in reading this submission is greatly appreciated. We, the senior volunteer leaders of District 23, believe that it is totally wrong that we are having to protect our Brigades, Groups and CFA from interference founded on political motives.

On behalf of the Volunteer Leadership Group – District 23,

Sharron Jones,

Secretary,
Mansfield Fire Brigades Group,



VLG Membership:

J. Barnard (GO Wangaratta Group), M Egan (VFBV State Council), Fred Forrest (GO Mansfield Group), L Gales (Captain Wangaratta N Brigade), R Glendinning (DGO Wangaratta Group), C Griffiths (Comms Officer, Moyhu Group), M Jones (DGO Mansfield Group), D McPherson (GO Moyhu Group), R Moorehead (GO Moyhu Group Ret.), G Nash (DGO Wangaratta Group), R Neely (GO Mansfield Group Ret.), J Renkin (GO Benalla Group), G Rowe (DGO Benalla Group), K Rowe (Lurg Brigade), J Seymour (VFBV State Council).