

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees

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

I have over 21 years of experience with the fire services in Victoria, beginning with the CFA as a volunteer firefighter and now as a Senior Station Officer at the Ballarat City Fire Brigade. I am currently on a 12 month secondment to the Metropolitan Fire Brigade.

### **Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria**

The Fire Services Bill will result in:

- The CFA being able to refocus its energy into areas that it may have neglected. A real focus on volunteers and their requirements without needing to spread time and funds over the larger growth areas, day to day staffing issues, and EBA negotiations. FRV will be able to specialise in the management of their staff, taking away the multitasking that the current CFA model requires.
- All FRV Stations being trained to use extrication equipment that they already carry on their vehicles at road accidents and not having to wait for a designated Road Rescue Vehicle to arrive can only be a positive. There will always be a need for a Heavy Rescues, but often small extrication work can release a patient earlier or making a significant start while awaiting the oncoming rescue to attend.
- CFA/MFB boundaries being updated to suit current urbanisation. I frequently drive through the western suburbs to reach the city, and as an example I see no difference these days between the development of Caroline Springs compared to Deer Park. When these boundaries were last reviewed (before I was born) all of what is now called Caroline Springs was grass paddocks.
- Pooling MFB with CFA integrated stations will provide more career options for paid firefighters, which will help filling positions both short and long term around the State. This will lead to a cultural change in both workforces, breathing new life and new direction into the service.

### **Effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery**

For most CFA Brigades there will be no effect at all, they will still face the same challenges as they did in the past. Some of these brigades are the ones showing the most concern to change. In my time relieving around the State as an Operations Officer I have spoken to many brigades who face falling member numbers, aging membership and less time to give. These same brigades generally have no understanding of who or where paid firefighters work and often confuse Forest Fire Management crews with CFA career firefighters. This is quite evident in letters to the media. The creation of FRV will free up their CFA Catchment Officer and District team to concentrate solely on their issues, which can only be a positive. Current CFA Duty Officers will often be tied up with rostering issues and with the integrated stations day-to-day running, leaving less time to support volunteer brigades and members. Current integrated brigades will have to be treated on a case-by-case basis, but I have already seen the time the CFA Chief and his leadership team have been putting in, that this transition will be done with sensitivity. Integrated brigades have always been built with the infrastructure to provide ownership for the volunteer members, and in many cases, this would just be called co-location and would be business as usual.

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

In the short term:

- There will be some establishment costs with rebadging, but with some common sense being applied things like uniform changes could be staggered over the next 12 months and be worked in with the usual wear and tear replacement costs that the current organisations already budget for.
- Current integrated CFA stations, are already designed in such a way that to transform them into “co-location” could be done very cost effectively.
- There are many cost savings to be made with joining the current workplace pools that will significantly reduce vacant positions and the overtime bill. CFA’s budget will no longer be impacted by the cost of filling these positions and will clearly know how much is in their bucket.
- No longer with there be two separate EBA’s being negotiated which both current organisations spend a significant amount on legal costs to negotiate.
- Significant reductions in day-to-day running costs will be achieved through the ability to move current MFB personnel and/or vehicles into current CFA integrated stations due to operations or shortages in crewing.

In the longer term, there will continue to be growth of the Melbourne suburban area and in some regional centres. It logically follows that you would expect there to be a greater need for more FRV stations. However, this would also be the case under the current model with the need to move some all-volunteer stations to the integrated model. This is a similar cost under either model.

## Underlying policy rationale

- **Presumptive rights to cancer compensation:**

CFA has a significant number of volunteers who have never fought a fire and as such the Bill cannot provide compensation just because you volunteer with the CFA. I am confident that those who deserve this compensation will benefit from it with minimal red tape, yet it will have the protection from those who might seek to exploit it. The Legislation proposed by the Government is a good compromise and fair to all.

- **Formation of Fire Rescue Victoria and establishing the Country Fire Authority as a volunteer only service:**

To argue that the current model isn’t broken is to dismiss the numerous reviews into fire service that highlights this as a fact. There have been at least eight, but CFA has also had three restructures and several internal reviews over the same period. The Fire Service Bill provides the opportunity to reset the fire services, direct the leadership and focus into the areas that have been lacking. This will see the right fit in many areas and both organisations being able to concentrate on their own workforce’s needs. This means CFA can focus on the needs of its volunteers and provide more support and leadership.

- **Fire District Review Panel:**

Current boundaries are very much out of date and without this independent panel the problem will not go away and only increase. With the panel, future decisions will be based on transparency and real data, giving Victoria a fit-for-purpose fire service. It is ridiculous to consider largely populated areas of Victoria as “country” based simply on the fact that a line was drawn on a map some 50 years ago.

- **Emergency Services Infrastructure Authority:**

Consistent design and fit-for-purpose infrastructure can only be a positive. The differences around the state are currently quite significant, and streamlining this will produce substantial cost savings. One of the key issues is quality control, and this is across the board with infrastructure. From new builds to renovation works, we are not getting the quality for our money.

**Conclusion:**

For whatever reason this reform came about, people need to leave that in the past. This is an opportunity to move forward. It seems to me that it is the best shot at a “win-win” for both paid firefighters and volunteers. It gives Volunteers more empowerment and more say in their future with the same structure they have always had. Career fire fighters will have the new Fire Rescue Victoria. It is my hope that these changes will bring the best of both together, helping to rejuvenate and change the present culture. FRV will still work closely with the CFA and always will! The Victorian community gets a better fire and emergency service right across the state, giving the safety of Victorian residents the priority it deserves.

Yours faithfully

Jarrold Ashley Howlett

