

CRAIG SIMPSON

[REDACTED]

4th July 2017

Mr. Gordon Rich Philips

Chair - Fire Services Bill Select Committee

Re: The Restructuring of Victoria Fire Services as contemplated by the Firefighters Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017

Dear Sir,

Based on my own personal skills, experience and knowledge, I, Craig Simpson of [REDACTED] Victoria wish to provide the following for your consideration regarding the potential restructure of the Fire Services in Victoria. The content of this document is purposefully void of any emotion that is often associated with the noble act of volunteering ones time for no reward but is purely focused on what I would consider to be the best outcome for the communities of Victoria from a fire/rescue protection and suppression perspective.

I am currently employed as an operational Senior Leading Firefighter (LFF) and have served in the Melbourne Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) for 30 years. I have a significant number of specialist qualifications as a result of been stationed with many specialist appliances over the past 26 years in the Central Business District (CBD) of Melbourne. During the last 2 years I have been stationed at North Laverton fire station (49 Stn) which is located adjacent to the current MFB / CFA boundary. This area has a large number of high risk occupancies including nursing homes, schools, large industrial properties, major petro chemical / hazardous chemical facilities, large shopping complexes, a large network of busy freeways & ring road and private domestic residences, all of which require a mandatory specialist and timely emergency response. In addition, I have also volunteered as a Country Fire Authority (CFA) firefighter in my residential rural / regional area for 37 years. However, due to the erroneous and scare mongering propaganda disseminated by Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria regarding EBA contracts and the potential fire service reform dispute and this coupled with the decline of skill standards, skills maintenance, accountability, support and uniformity from within the CFA I have resigned as a volunteer FF.

I am writing in full support of the proposed Victorian Fire Service reform. The basic principle of local volunteers who generously give up their personal and family time to support their community in their time of need is an admirable trait and those that participate should always be commended for their generous commitment and dignified actions. However, the communities that have been served in the past now have an ever increasing expectation that when they call for assistance, help will be provided promptly and consistently and those that respond act in a co ordinated and proficient manner. Appeasing this realistic public expectation will continue to be a challenge for our Governments and Fire Services in providing a uniform response across Metropolitan, Regional and the Rural & Urban interface areas throughout Victoria.

I don't believe the changes contained in the proposed reform will have a negative impact on CFA volunteers, in fact quite the opposite, as it would appear that if these changes come to fruition, the CFA volunteers will maintain their autonomy, will be included in the Presumptive Cancer Legislation, albeit in a different format to career staff to ensure volunteer FF have access to this important assistance program, continue to support career FF's at 35 proposed Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) integrated fire stations, play a major role in providing "surge" capacity at major incidents in addition to the inclusion of a healthy injection of funds to provide long overdue improvements.

If a volunteer FF feels aggrieved by the calculated and approved introduction of career staff providing a faster, efficient and effective fire / rescue service to the community then it is my view that the volunteer FF needs to re assess their motives and realistically judge what is best for their community and not themselves.

The State of Victoria absolutely relies on the service provided by CFA Volunteers and their services should be maintained as a support agency in major regional areas and as a primary response in rural Victoria together with major Fire Campaigns. However I do have difficulty in endorsing any CFA volunteer that places their own perceived selfish importance above that of the community that they purport to protect by actively “blocking” the placement and benefits of career staff when deemed appropriate by a credible authority. I live in a rural / urban interface area that has been designated a “Bush Fire Prone Area” and my local CFA brigade fails to respond to emergency calls 50% of the time, so should I request assistance, I may be required to wait for a CFA career appliance 25 km away to arrive 24 minutes later which may or may not correspond with the next two closest volunteer stations, if they respond at all, given that there is no guarantee of availability. This is not a criticism directed towards CFA volunteers but the antiquated system that they are required to work under.

As a career FF, having responded with and in support of the CFA, it is apparent that there are significant safety and operational difficulties when attempting to blend the two fire services together in their current form, to provide optimum fire protection and mitigation to all Victorian Communities that include, but limited too, the following points;

1. No guarantee of achieving a minimum of 7 trained firefighters (FF) on the fire ground in a timely manor.
2. Incompatible Breathing Apparatus (BA) sets including predicted air consumption rates.
3. The lack of necessary skill mix on responding appliances. E.g. Volunteers without BA qualifications.
4. CFA dispatch a station not an appliance, un necessarily resulting in excessive appliances from one station responding to a single emergency and leaving areas void of adequate fire coverage.
5. MFB responding as a support to CFA and ending up as a single primary response due to the lack of response from CFA volunteers.
6. CFA don't have enough staff to crew all the appliances in the one station and as a consequence are required to “Cross man” other specialist appliances that also respond from that station. This can result in significant delays while waiting for “primary” appliances to be released from an emergency (If it is possible) and return to their station before being able to transfer and respond in the specialist appliance.
7. Excessive response times for additional appliances from the next volunteer station due to waiting for the expiry of the mandatory “6 minute response time” before commencing the dispatch process for the next CFA station. This cascading effect results in significant delays.
8. CFA not responding the closest specialist appliance, regardless from what service, but requesting support from a distant CFA major regional city even though a similar vehicle, from the MFB was available 20 km closer reducing the on scene time by 20minutes. Not only was this an inefficient use of an appliance and crew but as a result of this action the major regional city was left with no Ariel appliance coverage and having to rely on a return travel time of 43 minutes if required.
9. CFA's inability to appropriately crew career stations due to inadequate staff / employee numbers resulting in MFB appliances having to “move up” to the CFA station to cover their area for the complete day / night shift.
10. Incompatible hose couplings.
11. Different emergency dispatchers using different analog and digital frequencies which includes call signs, radio terminology, poor reception / coverage and the CFA's lack of integration with the MFB's automated “Greater Alarm Response” matrix.
12. Incompatible fire ground portable radio frequencies and terminology.
13. Operating under different Incident Management Systems on the fire ground.

Note; Many of the above un desirable conditions are further exacerbated when volunteer CFA crews are dispatched to replace career CFA staff due to the career staff attending other emergencies.

Due to these significant number of incompatibilities, during larger multi agency emergencies within the MFB Fire District, CFA crews are generally given a pre determined area (Sector) to manage and run by themselves which contradicts the concept of interoperability and detracts from the overall effectiveness, accountability and safety on the fire ground.

Metropolitan Melbourne and major regional cities have become heavily urbanized since the current fire service boundaries were established many years ago and have long out grown the capabilities, effectiveness and efficiencies of the CFA and as a result are putting the lives of civilians and FF at risk while increasing the risk of sustaining substantial property damage.

Every Victorian property now pays a fire service levy and rightly expects and deserves appropriate and timely Fire / Rescue coverage. To optimize firefighter safety, minimize community injuries / fatalities and property damage, a modern fire service that can guarantee a maximum on scene time of 9 minutes with 7 trained career firefighters needs to be urgently invoked. An additional benefit of providing an increase in trained career staff is their ability to support Ambulance Victoria (AV) with the existing Emergency Medical Response (EMR) program that has been directly responsible for saving lives by specialist trained career FF's providing early defibrillation and resuscitation to the public while awaiting the arrival of AV.

Due to the modern building practices of open living plans and the increased use of composite building materials has resulted in the decrease of the average time of 10 minutes to "Flashover" (When all the room contents reach their ignition point simultaneously due to the excessive build up of heat causing a major eruption / escalation of fire). Under these circumstances, the need to arrive at a "going" fire at its early stages is imperative if attending fire crews are to increase the chance of saving life and minimizing property damage.

It is accepted that the occupation of firefighting has inherent risks but with a comprehensive reform of the MFB and CFA together with the introduction of supportive practices / policies and operational procedures, these risks can be mitigated.

The disruptive and negative impact of this ongoing disputation has had on me and my work colleges is wide spread as we can see an obvious benefit to the greater community and FF safety by approving this much needed and overdue reform. I strongly urge the committee to consider the amalgamation of MFB and CFA career staff positively and proceed with the long overdue and much needed reform to make our daily work place safer and to produce an effective and efficient Fire Service for all Victorians in their time of despair and need. I look forward to the day when I can simply come to work and purely concentrate on being the best that I can be at my chosen career.

Yours Sincerely,

A black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area.

Craig Simpson