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From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, 5 July 2017 6:23 PM
To: LCSC
Subject: Fire Services Reform

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees

My name is Angelo Gentile and I am a career firefighter with the MFB. I am currently stationed at Fire Station 43, Deer Park, a suburb that shares several borders with both paid and volunteer CFA stations and brigades.

When you need the fire brigade, you call 000. Within seconds, firefighters are alerted of the need to respond. What happens next depends on where you live.

In the part of metropolitan Melbourne covered by the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB), within 90 seconds at least two fire trucks are out the door and headed your way. Speed is crucial - every second counts. Within a few minutes the first truck arrives, let's say at a house fire. A pair of firefighters will immediately prepare to enter the building, search for anyone who might need rescuing, and begin controlling the fire. The truck also carries an officer in charge of the response, and a firefighter tasked with securing a water supply and operating the pump. Obviously, entering a burning building poses numerous risks. As such, for safety, a second pair of firefighters ought to stand by fully kitted up and ready to assist if needed. No problem - the second truck was dispatched at the same time and is only minutes away.

This type of response happens like clockwork every day in the MFB area. It's so effective that most building fires don't make the news, because they are put out quickly, before they can spread beyond the room they started in - which can happen in a matter of minutes.

In the Country Fire Authority (CFA) area, the response to Triple 0 calls is very different.. Firstly, let's make it clear that, although a "Country" Fire Authority, the CFA is responsible for 60 percent of metropolitan Melbourne, and all regional cities. The CFA's response model relies on volunteers. When you call 000, two brigades are paged - that might be two volunteer brigades, one volunteer and one professionally staffed, or two professional brigades. When the pager sounds, those volunteers who are available make their way to the fire station. The hope is that, within four minutes the truck is ready to go, carrying a crew of four with the necessary qualifications to fight the house fire, and arrives on-scene within 8 minutes.

In reality, we know it often doesn't pan out this way. All too often, firetrucks take far longer than the crucial 8 minutes to arrive on-scene - and when they do, they aren't carrying enough appropriately qualified volunteers. It's easy to understand why - not all volunteers have the necessary qualifications, moreover, driving a private vehicle, without lights and sirens, through suburban traffic to the fire station, putting on a uniform and getting out the door in four minutes is a very tough ask for anyone, let alone for the four people needed. When every second counts, delays of many minutes can cost lives. If the truck hasn't left the station within four minutes, it is deemed to have failed to respond, and after a further few minutes of leeway another brigade is paged, and the clock starts again. Will this one successfully hit the road in time, or shall we try for third time lucky?

None of this is meant to knock volunteers. They do their very best, and their efforts are appreciated and respected by all. But in densely populated urban areas, we need to and can do better to keep people safe.

People living in CFA territory in metropolitan Melbourne can't take for granted that they will receive the same punctual, effective and efficient response that their neighbours living in MFB areas are guaranteed. This not only endangers public safety, it also places firefighters at risk. All too often a truck arrives at a fire on time, to find the second brigade has failed to respond. Should those firefighters violate safety protocols and enter the burning building without backup on-scene or even on its way? What if they think somebody is trapped inside? It's a dilemma firefighters face regularly, and should not have to. It needlessly risks their physical and psychological well being, as well as placing the public at unnecessary risk.

This is one of the major problems the CFA Enterprise Bargaining Agreement was meant to fix, at least partially, by stipulating that two staffed trucks are sent to any fires in the areas served by 35 of the busiest of the CFA's 1180 brigades. But the EBA was bitterly disputed, and now appears to be dead in the water, thanks to the Turnbull government's legislative intervention in the Fair Work Commission. Meanwhile, morale is in tatters all round, with volunteers and professional firefighters at loggerheads.

It's time to step back and ask: what is the root cause of this mess and how can we fix it?

Fundamentally, the structure of our fire service is broken. Practicality and economics dictates that we have a volunteer fire service for the bush and a professional fire service for busy urban areas. The CFA has attempted to meet the challenges of Melbourne's rapid urban sprawl into "country" areas by turning itself into a kind of dysfunctional chimera, a hodge-podge of professional and volunteer response. People living in our suburbs and regional cities deserve better.

The fix is simple, but it will take courage.

The CFA should be allowed to focus on its legislated role as a volunteer-based fire service for country areas of Victoria, while urban areas needing a professional response should have it, through a separate agency.

Those volunteers demanding that professionals take their "Hands Off the CFA" will get what they want. Volunteers and professionals alike will enjoy lasting protection from being used as political footballs. The CFA volunteers will remain in every one of the Stations in which they are presently located. They will be supported and managed through the existing CFA which will retain their board, management structure, and support staff.

Goodwill, which has been the hallmark of the relationship between fire fighters for decades, has been undermined and, at times, deteriorated into an ugly open warfare. It was personally and professionally damaging to firefighters; career and volunteer alike. It reflected particularly poorly on those who sought to promote and foster division. They have caused significant damage to the people, the organisation and its reputation.

Is the Government's plan the best fix? Time will tell. It does, however, separate out full time fire fighters from the volunteer CFA while still allowing interoperability on the fire ground and in emergency incidents. They can and will work together just as they have in the past but they will also have clearly defined organisational structures and budgets.

Every CFA brigade will remain; staffed by volunteers. Volunteers will be able to address their priorities and press the CFA for long needed improvements in equipment, training and resourcing. Gone will be temptation to point at someone else who is eating into your budget, resources or priorities. With a single aim of supporting volunteers, the CFA will need to clarify its vision and deliver. Under this structure, now more than ever, volunteers will need to have effective and focused representative organisations concentrating on delivering for their members and communities.

There may be those who want to continue to stir the pot, who are not yet satisfied with the damage done over the last few years, who would seek to continue to divide fire fighters and foster hate; they will be found out. They will no longer find support for an endless campaign of undermining relationships; important relationships amongst first responders who need to be able to rely on one another in life threatening situations. They will be seen for what they are.

For those who want to play politics while claiming to support volunteers – it's simple. Look at the new volunteers CFA budget, talk with volunteers and their representative organisations, establish the needs and give the commitment – take that to an election.

For those who have difficulty accepting that there is a place for volunteers and career fire fighters working together on the same fire ground for the good of all Victorians; your time is gone.

And, most importantly of all, the public will get the best possible fire service to keep them safe.

Kind Regards

Angelo Gentile



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