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4<sup>th</sup> July 2017

**Re: Fire Services Reform Bill**

Dear Members of the Fire Services Reform Bill Parliamentary Select Committee,

My name is Ben Schmidt and I have been a professional CFA fire fighter for 4 years and a Leading Fire Fighter in the Northern Territory for 9 years prior to that. I am currently based at Mornington fire station. I am a husband and father of two girls, I have completed two degrees and I am currently studying my Masters in Emergency Management. I was the founding volunteer President of the Make-A –Wish Foundation in the Northern Territory and I have been awarded a Pride of Australia medal for Community Service.

I write to express my support for the proposed fire services reform.

I am often left shaking my head at the structure of the CFA, it's antiquated response model and the fact that it has been allowed to manifest to the extent that it has to the detriment of both public and fire fighter safety. If nothing else this great saga has left me confused with my role within the CFA, in conflict with my capacity to efficiently undertake several of the State's key priorities including protection of life, property and critical infrastructure and at a loss with the role media and politicians have played in the very public assassination of the vocation I once loved.

I am confident in lieu of my studies and experience in three fire services (we were sent to Qld to complete the NT recruit course) I am well placed to make informed decisions on our emergency management (EM) structure. However I would also like to provide some information and examples in the hope that it will allow you to make a more informed decision about the future of Victoria's EM and more specifically the role fire fighters will play within that space.

It feels easy to get lost in the continued negativity within media reports concerning our EBA and resultant proposed reform however I always try to maintain any discussion under the banner of 'What is best for the community we serve'. I am hopeful that you are in a position to do the same.

In the area of Mornington, we use an archaic response area model that prohibits our professional career fire fighters from responding to jobs that occur beyond a 3km radius from our station. That is to say that the surrounding communities of Mount Eliza, Moorooduc, and Mt Martha do not get our response, despite it being our job, and despite it being within 3km of our station. Furthermore the crew on station at Mornington is made aware of the call that they are not allowed to attend through

our paging system which causes a great degree of stress and anxiety. We are legislated to serve and protect the Victorian community yet the response model agreed to by surrounding volunteer stations doesn't afford us that opportunity despite repeated conversations to fix it. As it currently stands volunteer captains get to choose the brigades that attend jobs in their areas, which is then signed off by CFA management. In some of our surrounding brigades we at Mornington are not called in until the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> brigade has failed to respond. That is some 20-30 minutes after the initial job. These brigades seem to want to protect 'their' jobs from career staff. I take great umbrage with this especially when we should all be employing the community best practice model. Firstly, I rebuke the notion that the brigade takes ownership of the job as theirs. It isn't theirs, it's the communities and if they were truly servants of the community then surely they would want the best possible response, be it career or volunteer. The very notion that they don't want career staff attending should raise immediate concerns around their motivations and greater concern with regard to the ongoing the safety of their community. In the same context I cannot understand how Brigades in areas including Berwick and Werribee, with significant infrastructure and risk do not want career staff involvement in their area. It beggars belief and yet the structure remains unchanged. To argue that volunteers can do it is simplistic, irresponsible and mischievous in its intent. There is no doubt for the most part they can. However career staff must turn out within 90 seconds of receiving a call. Volunteers have between 6 minutes and 20 minutes to respond depending upon their location. If my house was burning in any of those non staffed urbanised areas I would want everyone coming but I would especially like to know that there is a guaranteed truck coming within 90 seconds with a guaranteed crew on it with a guaranteed mix of competent skills. Volunteers, good as they may be, just can't guarantee that by the very nature of being a volunteer.

Recent examples of Mornington's response inefficiencies include:

- During a visit from a member of parliament to our station on the 20<sup>th</sup> May there was a job in Mt Martha, approximately 7km away and we were not immediately paged to attend. Some 5 minutes later we were paged due to Mt Martha volunteers failure to respond.
- A recent truck fire on Peninsular Link 11km from our station and we were not paged to attend. 3 volunteer brigades were paged to attend this job, despite career firefighters manning Mornington station with a 90 second response time and a guarantee of skills mix and competence.

Victoria's fire services boundaries have not changed significantly in 60 years. Under this retrogressive system, 35 areas are poorly zoned as 'country', despite being heavily urbanised and residential. Frankston, Cranbourne, Dandenong, Craigieburn, Melton, Springvale, Boronia and Geelong are just some of the 35 'country areas', in concert with volunteer manned brigade areas including Berwick, Werribee and Narre Warren. These areas among others need to fall into line with best practice fire fighting models as part of this reform inclusive of 90 second turnout times, 8 minute on scene response times, with 7 professional career firefighters on two fire trucks as the minimum standard for community and fire fighter safety.

Our reliance on volunteers to make up numbers is not safe and nor is it reliable or fair on volunteers. My personal experiences in this area include:

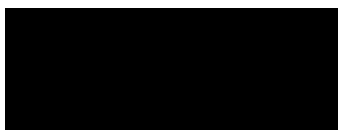
- I have been sent internally to three separate structure fires by myself, or with no back up breathing apparatus team because the neighbouring volunteer brigades did not turn out or did not have the members with them qualified to use breathing apparatus. This compromised both my safety and the safety of members of the community. The reforms of the additional 350 FF's have at least allowed us to have two members on the truck to go inside a fire, however the knowledge that additional career firefighters are en route is without doubt a necessity for my safety and that of the community.

I understand the role and need for volunteers. I am a volunteer with a charity myself. However the very nature of volunteerism is such that there is no guarantee of availability to respond, and if they do get to station there is no guarantee that they can drive the truck and if they do get to the job there is no guarantee that they can wear breathing apparatus to assist with my or public rescue. Any Risk Manager worth their salt would consider that unacceptable risk and would introduce control measures to mitigate it. Some of those measures might include increased training opportunities for volunteers, however a more immediate measure would be to allow career staff into wider response areas and a guarantee of two appropriately manned career trucks responding to jobs. Please continue to send volunteer brigades. We want them coming, however they should not be included in our safe practice fire ground numbers (7) until they actually turn up and they actually have the appropriate competencies and experience. We cannot rely on volunteers to do this day and night and nor should we.

As mentioned previously there seems to be a fear among volunteers that we will be taking 'their' jobs and they will in essence be made redundant. You know my thoughts on this however I might offer an alternative thought for the volunteers of Mornington. If career staff are afforded the opportunity to respond more broadly (as we should be) then Mornington volunteers will be responded to jobs in our absence. Contrary to disingenuous misinformation I would suggest these volunteers will in fact be busier and met with greater responsibility.

I can only hope that you are in a position to look beyond politics, to look beyond media misrepresentation and arrive at a result that will better serve the people of Victoria.

Kind regards and thank you for your consideration,



Ben Schmidt  
Leading Fire Fighter  
Mornington Fire Station