

Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017

Submission to
Fire Services Bill Select Committee

Michael James
Senior Station Officer
CFA

July 2017

My Background

My name is Michael James. I am currently employed as a Senior Station Officer of CFA, based at Patterson River, in the outer Melbourne Metropolitan suburb of Carrum.

Qualifications

- Associate Diploma of Applied Science (Fire Technology)
- Graduate Membership Institution of Fire Engineers

Awards

- CFA Long Service Award
- National Medal

Experience

My CFA experience totals 35 years, with 5 years as a CFA volunteer firefighter, followed by 30 years as a professional CFA operational officer.

I commenced service with CFA as a volunteer firefighter in 1982, at Greenvale Fire Brigade, prior to that brigade becoming an integrated brigade.

Since 1987, I have been employed as a career firefighting officer with CFA.

Through most of my career, I have worked at CFA integrated fire stations. I have also worked extensively with volunteer firefighters in rural and remote areas of Victoria for a significant number of years where I was based at various CFA District and Regional Headquarters. I have worked in most parts of the state and understand the many considerations that apply to different geographic locations.

I have responded to and been in incident management roles at many thousands of fire calls and related incidents, including significant structure fires, major wildfires, floods, hazardous materials incidents and Emergency Medical Response.

My background involves a broad involvement in emergency management over a considerable period of time. I believe that I have an excellent understanding of the likely implications of the fire services reforms as proposed.

Terms of Reference of the Select Committee

IMPACT ON FIRE SERVICE DELIVERY ACROSS VICTORIA

I have served at most of the 35 integrated brigades throughout Victoria during my 30 years as a career firefighter. I am very used to working side by side with volunteer firefighters.

Despite the best intention of the volunteer firefighters, I have numerous examples of delays in response of volunteers at the current integrated brigades, and involving many other brigades on the urban fringe of Melbourne and regional cities.

One unfortunate example was a fire in the main electrical switch room at the Frankston Hospital where the supporting volunteer brigade responded with only two crew, with only one breathing apparatus qualified person who was also the crew leader and pump operator. Due to the CFA's inadequate assignment tables, there was no response of a second crew of career firefighters in support of this call, which directly compromised the safety of the crew working inside in breathing apparatus, and could have resulted in reduced ability to evacuate patients and staff at the hospital if it became necessary.

Communications was a problem at the fire and critical to my ability as Incident Controller to manage the developing fire, which had the potential to shut down all of the operating theatres at the hospital in a short space of time.

I requested the response of a specialist Communications Vehicle, but the response was delayed due to difficulty in achieving an adequately skilled volunteer based crew. This delay in response most definitely compromised safety on the fire ground.

This example of unreliable response times of inadequately skilled crews is a stark example of failure of the current fire service delivery model.

The proposed fire service reforms would ensure a more reliable response for a greater number of significant life and property risks through greater certainty of response in areas served by Fire Rescue Victoria.

If there had been significant loss of life from this one example that I have given, I wonder what would be the recommendations of a coronial enquiry when deficiencies in fire service response are well documented?

EFFECT ON VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN FIRE SERVICE DELIVERY

For the majority of brigades across Victoria, there will be absolutely no effect as the changes in no way impact on them. Administrative support will continue to be provided by the same personnel. Operational support will also continue by the same Operation Officers and Operation Managers as before, who will most likely be seconded to CFA, doing the same job as previously and reporting to the CFA Chief Officer as is currently the case.

It has been suggested by others that CFA surge capacity will be adversely affected by the proposed reforms without any evidence having been provided to support this claim. Surge capacity includes career firefighters as well as volunteers. A new Fire Rescue Victoria will be able to call on a combined pool of thousands of career staff working harmoniously in a single organisation. Volunteers at the 35 CFA integrated brigades have been told that they will be supported and encouraged to remain as fully volunteer CFA brigades in Fire Rescue Victoria areas. The CFA volunteers will still be required to respond to similar fires in similar areas as before. The volunteer firefighters will continue to be respected and required. Surge capacity will be maintained.

CFA Volunteer brigades adjoining the current MFB boundary already respond into the current MFB area in a seamless way, working well with MFB crews. There is no reason to imagine that similar good working relationships would not happen with CFA brigades responding with Fire Rescue Victoria crews.

SHORT TERM AND LONG TERM COST IMPACT ON FIRE SERVICE PROVISION

Faster response times are likely to reduce cost associated with fire losses in the densely populated urban areas.

I have personal experience that rapid response by at least 2 fully trained fire crews can result in significant reduction in property damage from fire, and obvious cost savings.

How do we measure the potential financial losses and other risk if there is significant loss of life or property due to failure to modernise our fire services to provide the appropriate coverage for the community?

As Victoria grows over the coming decades, there will need to be consideration of additional fire stations and other infrastructure. The independent Fire District Review Panel will consider required changes to CFA and Fire Rescue Victoria areas to prevent unnecessary duplication of fire service resources, which can contain costs in the long term. The Emergency Services Infrastructure Authority should also reduce costs through standardisation of infrastructure design.

Cost include more than monetary value.

Greater injury and loss of life can reasonably be expected in heavily populated urban areas if the volunteer brigades are unable for whatever reason to reliably maintain adequate response performance.

UNDERLYING POLICY RATIONALE

The population of the Victoria is anticipated to increase from 5.5 million residents in 2011 to 10.1 million in 2051 (source "Victoria in Future 2016"). The outer suburbs of Melbourne are some of the fastest growing areas in Australia. The vast majority of the population growth will be in the outer Melbourne metropolitan and regional cities.

Fire services in Victoria operate on a model where the MFB currently is responsible for less than half of metropolitan Melbourne, with CFA covering 60% of Melbourne.

There is no logical reason to maintain the current MFB boundaries. More than 30 years ago, there was a process to review the MFB boundaries. The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission recommended a process for reviewing the MFB boundary. The proposed legislation provides a mechanism for ongoing review of Fire Rescue Victoria boundaries to ensure that appropriate fire coverage is provided in the growing heavily populated urban areas of Melbourne and the regional cities.

For a number of years, there has generally been a toxic relationship between management and other staff of MFB and CFA. The Fire Services Review identified low morale, as well as a fundamental disconnect between management and firefighters. The proposed legislation provides a mechanism for a different, less confrontational approach between management and staff for the good of the fire services in Victoria. An accord will be entered into by Fire Rescue Victoria and the United Firefighters Union, committing both organisations to working together to create a new culture and improved working relationship between management and workforce. The current relationship between management and personnel is so badly damaged that major reform is urgently required.

The Presumptive Legislation reforms are necessary and appropriate to assist both volunteer and career firefighters who contract specific cancers as a result of their fire service involvement. The different process for volunteer and career firefighters is absolutely necessary as it provides a basis for validation of volunteer claims that the cancer was presumed to be caused through firefighting activity. Rather than be a negative provision, it should be seen as reducing the potential claims from insurers when volunteers seek to make claims.