

To the members of the Fire Services Bill Select Committee,

My name is Christo Ferguson. I am a full time professional firefighter in the Metropolitan Fire Brigade employed by the Melbourne Fire and Emergency Services Board. I currently hold the rank of leading firefighter and I am also a qualified HAZMAT technician with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. I was also a volunteer with the Diamond Creek CFA from 2004-2013. Currently I am based at Epping where the MFB shares a border with the CFA. We turn out with both career CFA staff (South Morang) and volunteers (Epping CFA) as well as South Morang volunteers. I greatly value the work of volunteers in our community and my opinions on fire service reform in no way reflects negatively on them.

Currently at Epping we have a Pumper Tanker with three crew. It is not unknown for us to attend situations where CFA volunteers are the second appliance on scene. My concern with this situation is as follows: the skill set of the oncoming appliance is unknown when it is crewed by volunteers. They may be BA (breathing apparatus) trained, or not. They may have first aid training, or not. They may be trained in structural fire fighting, or not. This is understandable for a volunteer brigade, but it is unacceptable for a highly populated and industrial environment such as Epping. I would like to know that the crew arriving after us is trained and capable of providing back-up and/or rescue if need be. This is assuming that the local CFA volunteers are available to respond, which on occasion they are not. Leaving us with a longer wait while a second, or third, brigade is called to assist. I am greatly concerned that with an industrial suburb like Epping that volunteers may not be sufficiently trained in hazardous materials (HAZMAT) emergency response. I believe there is potential for volunteer crews to respond to industrial sites without appreciating the dangers they are exposed to and without being adequately trained to deal with such sites.

When responding to incidents with the career staff from the CFA, I am always impressed by their professionalism and capabilities. However there are factors which are unacceptable. One being the different radios used by CFA and MFB. Another being the different layout of the appliances and the gear they carry. Even the different helmets make it difficult to immediately identify the rank and skill sets of firefighters. A merged service of career staff from CFA and MFB would allow one, cohesive, coordinated service. This would make the response to incidents in the outer suburbs safer and more effective, in an environment where every second can be crucial.

I live in Diamond Creek in Melbourne's north east. It is a very fast growing suburb with increasingly heavy road traffic and is serviced by a volunteer brigade (of which I was previously a member). Career staff from Eltham also turn out into Diamond Creek but they are around 10 minutes away with the possibility of further delay by

road and rail traffic. It concerns me on days when I hear the local CFA siren sound two, three or even four times in a row (a sign that insufficient crew have responded to the station and they are unable to get an appliance on the road). If my family is ever in need of help in an emergency, I worry that the local volunteer brigade will not have sufficient numbers to respond, or they will respond with a crew without sufficient training to deal with a serious house fire or car accident. As I pay the fire levy like every other property owner in metropolitan Melbourne, I find this unacceptable.

The Diamond Creek volunteers do a fantastic job with what they are given. However, I have seen first-hand how difficult it can be for members to gain access to training in first aid, breathing apparatus and other skills. The numbers of trained operators on the books of any volunteer brigade are just that – numbers. In many cases the majority of the more highly trained firefighters are not those who attend to calls or may even not be active members. The reality is that the appliances are generally crewed by those able to respond, or those close enough to the station to be able to get on an appliance. They may not always be the most suitable crew for the task at hand. It is not unheard of for crews to turn out with no BA operators and no firefighters trained in crew leadership. This is a recipe for disaster in a structural fire situation or a HAZMAT situation. I stress that this is not the fault of volunteers. It is a reality of relying on a workforce who have other commitments which can keep them from responding or training.

I do not believe the need for volunteers will ever diminish, even in the more urbanised parts of outer Melbourne. Wildfires are always going to be a large part of the Victorian landscape. The need for a quickly mobilised, well trained wildfire response force is greater than ever. Volunteers will keep making themselves available for this important work and they should obviously be supported in every way practical. I was part of the volunteer response to the Black Saturday fires, being based in the communications room at Whittlesea ICC on the day. I was in contact with those on appliances in the field and I was responded into Strathewen and Arthur's Creek in the days following. I saw volunteering at its best and I am a firm supporter of volunteers in the CFA. I do not believe the merging of professional career staff from the CFA's integrated stations with the MFB will in any way disadvantage CFA volunteers. I further believe the need for growing suburbs to come under the umbrella of a professional full time firefighting service as needs arise. The old boundaries are no longer relevant.

I honestly look forward to working with volunteer firefighters in the future. I look forward to two services; one completely professional and full time, one volunteer, working side by side. Victoria deserves the world's best fire services. Reforming the services into this model and reevaluating the boundaries is the best way to achieve that.

I request that this submission remains confidential. However I am more than happy to be contacted on [REDACTED] to discuss this matter further. I can also be contacted by [REDACTED] or by [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

Christo Ferguson