

eSubmission – SELECT COMMITTEE

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

Dear Select Committee Members

The following represents the concerns of Rutherglen Group CFA within the terms of reference being ;

Impact on Fire Delivery across Victoria

Effect on Volunteer Engagement and Participation in Fire Service Delivery

Short Term and Long Term Cost Impact on Fire Service Delivery

Underlying Policy Rationale

We need to be consulted, we need to have a strong hand in how the future of fire services in Victoria will look. There is no doubt that change is now needed, but we must ensure that the immense experience and knowledge that volunteers have is used in the process of building a better fire service. Using this we can have an incredibly strong fire service for the state, now and into the future. Without using this knowledge and experience we risk having a reinvented wheel that will most likely start its life as a square and give a rough ride for many years to come.

We cannot agree more that the reasons for these changes must be clear, they cannot simply be for political reasons, or an engineered way around giving any one group control of the future. If this is the case it will have a severe effect on Volunteerism with unimaginable results for volunteers and the wider community. Volunteers are frustrated and tired of the games, but want what is right for their communities. The goodwill behind this however is running out fast and I fear the consequences if they are dealt another blow. These changes must be for the right reasons, that is to ensure Victoria is adequately protected from fire and emergencies and that all parties involved are treated fairly and respectfully.

We firmly believe that if CFA is to be autonomous the Operations Officers and Managers must be employed by CFA not seconded from FRV, this makes very little sense to us in an organisation that is supposed to be autonomous. While this may be OK for the short term future, what will be the outcome as these seconded officers are replaced. Surely an autonomous organisation has the right to employ and have its own middle management. Surely these officers can be remunerated as well as their colleagues within FRV. If CFA is not employing its own middle management do they get the right to even go through the evaluation process or do they get who FRV sends them. These sort of arrangements at the very least need to be made absolutely clear. If Operations Officers and Managers are employed by CFA from a wider pool then surely this also opens opportunities for suitably qualified, experienced and interested volunteers to fill these roles, giving some volunteers a career path and CFA the benefit of wider experience. Operations Managers and Officers, Trainer Assessors etc need to have extraordinary people skills and demonstrate a high level of people

management. Employing FRV personnel will only serve to detract from the unity CFA requires. Unity that was a recommendation from the 2009 Black Saturday inquiry.

We heard a lot in the early days when this legislation was announced that this was the NSW model and it works in NSW. Yes it does work in NSW, but they also, in some areas have some big turf wars that some in our Group have experienced first-hand. This should not be held up as a shining example. Furthermore the NSW model uses retained fire fighters, something we have been told will not happen in Victoria.

On a strong positive note the things that will benefit us and make our service better are the things such as ;

- Better training with more trainers. Structure brigades at a bare minimum should be seeing a structural trainer at least every 6 weeks to ensure skills are kept sharp. They should bring with them the props, BA's etc. that are needed for the training. Maybe a longer time frame between visits for areas with more rural risk. It is not sustainable to rely on volunteers to run the training and skills maintenance. The dedication that is needed by volunteers to develop, organise and properly run even simple 1-2hr skills maintenance sessions at brigades is quite large. As a result, many sessions are not as powerful as they should be. Help is really needed in the training area we believe. We are sure volunteers will be happy to continue to support these trainers, but help to take the pressure off would be appreciated.
- More Ops officers will help reduce the workload on brigades and groups and allow the Ops officer to have a stronger working knowledge and empathy with the brigades and groups they work in. They will be able to develop local knowledge so that they can help and be part of strengthening the resources and teams in their patch. Build a strong rapport with members. It is very important that the people taking on these roles have a strong empathy for volunteers. The pressure needs to be taken off brigade and group management teams. It is the same people doing it all and I can see people becoming burnt out, younger members are saying no way I just want to be a firefighter, this is unsustainable, help is needed.

Add things like this to the new CFA and we will start to have something that supports, values and encourages volunteers and ensures that our communities have well trained, well organised and well resourced brigades, this is what will make our communities safer.

In terms of presumptive legislation this is fantastic, but we hope that none of our members are ever in need of it. Surely there needs to be a strong focus in CFA on education and prevention. For instance at Rutherglen to our knowledge we have never had any formal training in what to do at an Asbestos Incident yet a large percentage of all house fires will contain asbestos of some sort. We had a career member from Wodonga attend to give a presentation on the dangers of smoke, but this was organised by me through Operations Officer Adrian Gutsche, it was never offered directly to us and it is not a formal course or information session. This sort of safety training and awareness in 2017 should be pouring through our stations, not having to be fought for. Then in terms of protection the number of BAs (Breathing Apparatus) supplied is ridiculous. A town the size of Rutherglen has 2 sets, while Corowa has 10. There are more sets in Corowa than there are in the whole Rutherglen Group. We don't have any spare cylinders to allow regular skills maintenance at the brigade, without someone travelling to borrow cylinders from Wodonga. It's hard to believe the

CFA and the government are serious about preventing cancer in firefighters when these numbers are considered. BAs are simply PPE just like a pair of safety glasses you are required to wear at work when you use a grinder. Adequate PPE (BA) needs to be supplied in the workplace if we are going to prevent injury and illness. We expect adequate protection in our career workplaces, we have a right to expect it in our volunteer workplace.

Now that change is needed let's seize the opportunity to build an even better CFA, that remembers and respects its past, but looks to the future to ensure our families, our friends and our community have a world class fire service to protect them and their property, and that the Volunteers are given the best possible support and protection to ensure that they are kept safe, so their community spirit does not impact negatively on their lives.

Thankyou for considering our thoughts.

Andrew Russell

Group Officer

Rutherglen Group CFA.

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