

6th July 6, 2017
Assistant Clerk Committees
Dept of the Legislative Council
Fire Services Select Committee
Parliament House, Spring St
East Melbourne Vic, 3002

RE : SUBMISSION FIRE SERVICES BILL

This submission is on behalf of the Group Officers of CFA District 24. Our district spans from Rutherglen to Corryong and Ovens Valley to Wodonga. The District 24 Group Officers have between 20 and 50 yrs experience and in their role with CFA collectively represent 62 Brigades and 4166 members. The following represents their questions, opinions and concerns regarding the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017

Terms of Reference

- impact on Fire Services Delivery across Victoria.
- effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery.
- short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision.
- underlying policy rationale

IMPACT ON FIRE SERVICE DELIVERY ACROSS VICTORIA

The uncertainty of volunteer staff continuing to commit to integrated stations is a major concern for surge capacity across the state. This surge capacity being required at the times of campaign fires. Simply put, any loss to volunteer numbers will have to have a negative impact upon fire service delivery.

While additional paid firefighters may impact positively upon fire service delivery at the outer metro areas due to response times, a balance needs to met to ensure this is not at the expense of volunteer engagement. Due to the vast expanse of our landscape in Australia, numbers on the ground are vital to fire service delivery.

There is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the proposed bill. There is a probability that aspects of the bill will have a negative impact upon fire service delivery eg training, funding, supply of equipment, volunteer engagement etc. Our fear is that once legislated there will be no recourse and Victoria will suffer the consequences.

EFFECT ON VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

'CFA recognises that effective volunteer management is neither easy nor cheap. It is however, a cost-effective foundation for delivery of public value. CFA also recognises that attracting and retaining volunteers is challenging, largely because volunteering involves freedom of choice. People who feel empowered, rewarded and appreciated in their role are more likely to contribute and continue to do so.' – CFA Submission Fire Services Review 2015

Volunteers in general are accepting of a reform. However any reform should be for the betterment of CFA, and provide greater service to the Victorian community. An effective, efficient, inclusive CFA is what is required.

Trust and a sense of unity is important to maintaining engagement of volunteers. We rely on being a cohesive unit, to be able to manage workloads. The proposal of seconded staff creates a divisive element that we fear will not be easily eradicated. How will this be managed? Drawing upon FRV personnel only, preventing lateral entry will restrict Operations Officers and Managers, Training staff etc to only firefighters who have trained in an urban environment. We need these roles in CFA to be filled by 'people managers' whom have some degree of experience with volunteering and wildfire.

Volunteers believe in the ideal of the Country Fire Authority and the tradition of Australians banding together to face the odds and conquer.

Mental Health statistics show that participation as a volunteer reduces the likelihood of mental health issues. It simply is important to country Victorians in many ways to maintain the fabric of CFA volunteerism.

Volunteers are trained and empowered to evaluate and act.

In today's busy world it takes some effort to engage volunteers. Morale has been affected by the attempted EBA 2016 implementation, the loss of Chief Officers, CEO's, CFA Board etc.

The manner in which this proposed reform has been thrust upon CFA volunteers has now increased the challenge to engage volunteers. Many volunteers are most certainly not feeling 'empowered, rewarded or appreciated.' We need to unify at this time, not divide.

The inference that an outside entity could unduly influence the direction and even day to day operations of CFA is demoralising to many. The effect of this bill upon volunteer engagement could be far reaching, if measures are not taken to ensure correct consultation with volunteers takes place. The consultation needs to be appropriately delivered upon any legislation designed to enact reform.

SHORT TERM AND LONG TERM COST IMPACT ON FIRE SERVICE PROVISION

Rebranding, time spent restructuring, extra staff required, extra training required, are all aspects that the formation of FRV will surely impact negatively the cost of fire service provision.

Any monetary saving perceived to be a bonus for CFA is surely to be born by FRV which in effect will draw their funding from the same pot.

The potential is that FRV will become the greater beneficiary to funding, due to being seen as the 'professional' fire service within Victoria.

Can CFA afford to relinquish funding ?

Without a doubt the greatest impact long term is potentially the loss of volunteer labour. The Jones Report 2011 quoted an estimate of \$ 840 million value that CFA volunteers provide to Victoria. This not being the total cost to replace unpaid with paid firefighters as much of the value of volunteers cannot be assigned a monetary value.

UNDERLYING POLICY RATIONALE

The collation of the Presumptive Rights and the Fire Services Reform into one bill reeks of underhandedness. While Presumptive Rights should be an entitlement to all firefighters the success of one should not be dependent upon the other. The policies should be separated.

Is it possible to diminish the numbers of volunteer firefighters and replace them with staff ? Those whom understand the mechanics of fire services in country Victoria say it is not. Is replacing our current integrated model with a similar model to NSW wise? Those in our area who have migrated from RFS to CFA would say it is not due to a lack of unity.

While maintaining the rights and the workplace conditions for staff is of extreme importance, doing so at the expense of volunteer engagement and fire service delivery will be detrimental to all Victorians.

SUMMARY

Volunteers want to see our paid brothers well remunerated for their efforts and ensured of job security and generous conditions. As much as the Victoria and staff rely on volunteers, volunteers rely on the technical expertise and particularly the 'people skills' of staff. To attract suitable candidates to fill these roles, suitable remuneration is required.

The only suitable pathway for paid and unpaid member of CFA is via active, inclusive and thorough consultation.

Thankyou for the opportunity of presenting our case to the Fire Services Select Committee.

We can be contacted at any time should you require clarification or further information.

Regards

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Group Officer Tallangatta Group : Max Wood

Group Officer Corryong Group : Colin Brown

Group Officer Ovens Valley Group : Gary Gunson

Group Officer Rutherglen Group : Andrew Russell

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