

INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017

SUBMISSION FROM A PROFESSIONAL FIRE FIGHTER.

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees,

My name is Matthew Staple and I am a Fire Fighter Level 3 (Professional Fire Fighter) living in Warragul in Country Victoria, and working at the Hallam Fire Station in South East Melbourne.

I have been involved with the CFA since 2010, first as a volunteer at the Morwell and Traralgon fire stations, and then joining the Professional ranks in 2015. Throughout this time I have obtained and maintained a vast number of qualifications, and through my role as a Professional Fire Fighter I have had the opportunity to complete an accreditation as a Heavy Hazmat Technician.

I write to you to express the importance of the legislation before your committee, and to provide some factual examples of why the communities that we serve, and the Fire Fighters that serve them, desperately need fire service reform.

I feel it is important to point out for your records that Hallam is classified as being in the "Country Area of Victoria" as far as the fire service boundaries are concerned, and as such is serviced by the Country Fire Authority (CFA). Hallam and the surrounding areas are densely populated with residential, commercial, and large scale industrial zones throughout our response area. As such, the brigade responds to over two thousand calls per year, both in our own area and to support neighbouring brigades, covering a wide range of calls including motor vehicle accidents/rescues, fire of all types, hazardous materials, and emergency medical response.

More often than not, we provide support to, or are supported by neighbouring fully-volunteer brigades to the south and to the east. I would like to preface my next statement by reassuring you that Professional Fire Fighters value the work that Volunteers do. Understand that mutual respect does exist between the two parties, despite what you may hear or read in the media or from certain members of Parliament. I can say this from personal experience, and I have experienced "both sides of the fence" so to speak.

The downfall of a Volunteer Fire Service in built up, highly urbanised areas is, by no fault of their own, but rather, due to the fact of the following. I will provide examples of where the system has put Fire Fighters or the Public at risk, and they are personal accounts, that is, experiences I have had personally in only the past eighteen months to two years on station.

- **Volunteers have their own lives to live, working away from the areas they respond in, and by virtue of how they respond, cannot always respond on time, or at all.**

On Friday the 30th of September 2016 at approximately 1730 in the afternoon, Hallam was responded to support a neighbouring Volunteer brigade to a going house fire to the south of our station. I was the driver for the shift. For clarity, this also means that I am the “Pump Operator”, my job is to get the crew to the scene safely, and once on scene, provide and maintain water for the fire fight, whilst also ensuring scene safety and providing any tools or equipment that the crew may need.

En route to the call, it was clear that the house was well alight as we could see a large column of smoke rising in the distance. Our OIC responded an additional appliance (the next in line to respond is another Volunteer brigade, and to their credit, they did respond on time, however they are further away). Once on scene we got to work dealing with a large fire at the rear of the property. I did my job, providing and maintaining water for crews inside the structure, but after some time, it became clear that our crew was on its own in dealing with this call. The primary brigade (meaning the brigade whose area the call is in) had failed to respond in the allocated time, leaving us without any support for quite some time. As the brigade had failed to respond, the next available brigade is responded, which in our case was Cranbourne, meaning another appliance crewed by Professional Fire Fighters responded within 90 seconds of them receiving the call. Had Cranbourne been responded under the “seven dispatched to the fire ground” rule, we would have had at least seven fully qualified Professional Fire Fighters on scene to deal with the fire efficiently, and safely.

Although eventually all brigades responded arrived on scene, our crews were without any support for at least the first fifteen minutes of the call, and had something happened to personnel inside the structure, or had there been a casualty that required rescue and subsequent medical assistance, we would not have had the resources to provide that assistance or to rescue our own people.

Failure to respond from our surrounding brigades occurs on a very regular basis, and we as Professional Fire Fighters constantly find ourselves without support.

Due to massive urban growth in the areas we respond into, call rates for these brigades have gone through the roof in recent times, and the pressure and expectation placed on Volunteers to respond at all hours is often unrealistic, unsafe, and at times impossible to achieve.

- **Volunteers do not get the same level of training as Professional Fire Fighters, perhaps because of a lack of resources, and due to the sheer amount of time it would take on top of their own lives. It can be unclear what level of training or qualifications crews have, or even how many they have on the appliance when Volunteer crews respond.**

On the 1st of June 2016, we responded to support a neighbouring Volunteer brigade to a house fire in their area. Due to the location and traffic at the time, it took us eleven minutes to arrive on scene. The Volunteer brigade had been on scene for at least three to four minutes prior to our arrival. Once we arrived, we discovered that of the Volunteer crews on scene, none of them had the qualifications for breathing apparatus (BA), meaning that crews had not started an internal search or attack on the fire. Myself and my Leading Fire Fighter were the first in BA and the first to start attacking the fire, and clear the inside of the structure, ensuring there was nobody inside. For us as Professional Fire Fighters, we do not see this as a failure of the Volunteers in question, but rather a failure of the systems in place to ensure that Fire Fighters are adequately trained, and that enough personnel are available with adequate training to combat fires effectively.

For the record, in the above scenario the OIC of this call, being an officer from the Volunteer brigade in question, called specifically for another Heavy Pumper. This means that Cranbourne were responded within 90 seconds with a full crew of competently trained Professional Fire Fighters, effectively mimicking what the “seven dispatched to the fire ground” rule would have achieved had it of been initially implemented.

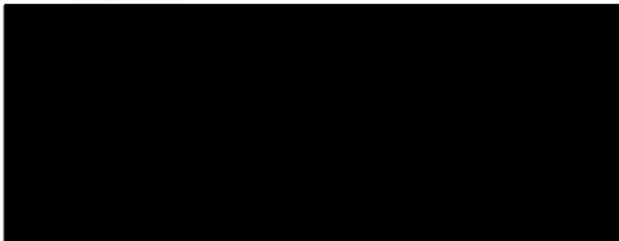
In the two scenarios that I have described above, there was an un-necessary risk placed on Fire Fighters, but more importantly, on the public, that could have easily been avoided. I know for a fact that these are not isolated scenarios and that these failures occur almost every day in our area.

I strongly believe that Fire Service reform is needed in our state so that we can stop putting the public and Fire Fighters at risk, and address the need for quicker, more reliable response in Victoria’s rapidly expanding growth corridors and regional areas.

This is about what is best for the community, and our community needs the protection of a modern and progressive Fire Service, not one that was built on a Victoria from over sixty years ago.

Thank you for taking the time to consider the facts, and my submission to your Committee.

Regards,



Matthew Staple
Hallam Fire Brigade