

Dear committee members,

My name is Joel Cowton and I am a CFA career firefighter currently working at the Frankston Fire Station. I live in Rowville.

During my time as a career firefighter I have had the privilege of being stationed at the Frankston Fire Station and the Springvale Fire Station.

I have been a career Firefighter for two years.

Prior to this I worked as a Police officer for 9 years and I am also a former Army Reservist.

I am a qualified Tanker operator, Pumper operator, Breathing Apparatus Van operator, Breathing Apparatus Operator and an Emergency Medical Responder.

In my prior role with Victoria Police I received a commendation for saving a woman's life after a serious domestic assault.

I am writing this submission in support of the proposed reform of the fire services for the following reasons:

As a firefighter it is important to have guaranteed backup. Guaranteed that two trucks with at least 7 Firefighters will be dispatched within 8 minutes. As a first responder I can tell you first hand that time and man power can be the difference between saving someone's life and saving someone's property. What that response means is better community safety and protection.

Our current model of sending one career firefighter fire truck and then paging the surrounding volunteer fire stations for support simply doesn't work.

While our volunteer brothers and sisters are still a vital cog in the fire fighting machine, unfortunately on countless occasions they have arrived to an incident far too late or sometimes not at all. When they do arrive their level of training dictates what they can and can't do on a fire ground, this in turn limits the potential options at the incident. By having a guaranteed career firefighter response many of these safety and time issues can be mitigated.

Earlier this year while covering a shift at Rosebud I attended a house fire in Rye. I remember this day vividly because on two occasions while fighting this house fire my life was placed into considerable danger. The first time I was conducting an internal fire attack, I was in the lounge room attempting to put out the fire with a hose. The fire had engulfed the entire room and was beginning to run along the ceiling. This meant that the fire was getting extremely hot and dangerous. While in the room I suddenly lost water to my hose so I could no longer control the fire or more importantly protect myself from it. I was forced to retreat out of the house. My radio was on at the time and no one gave any warning that the water was going to be turned off. I followed the empty hose line up to the pump and noticed a volunteer standing at the pump panel very confused. The volunteer had been asked to turn water off on another hose. He had become confused, panicked and turned every hose off at once, including mine.

I rectified this problem and returned into the house to finish extinguishing the fire. I had no sooner turned my hose on when I was shot in the face by another hose coming from the rear of the house. I received 475 litres per minute of water to my breathing mask. This knocked me over instantly and disorientated me for several seconds. Due to this second incident I again retreated from the house.

After exiting the house I walked around to the rear of the house to speak to the person who knocked me over with the hose stream. I located two volunteers holding a hose; they were shooting the hose stream through a broken window. I asked them what they were trying to achieve by doing this but neither of them could give me an answer.

My aim with this recollection is not to degrade or embarrass the volunteer fire fighters I dealt with on that day but to point out that these types of incidents happen on a daily basis. Unfortunately this comes down to the lack of training that volunteer fire fighters receive. One day a mistake such as this may cost a person's life.

A basic fire course done by a volunteer firefighter, followed up with a couple of hours' worth of training a week can't compete with 17 weeks of full time basic training for a career firefighter followed up by continuous daily training and study.

Yours sincerely,

Joel Cowton  
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Frankston Fire Brigade