

By eMail: LCSC@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees,

*We request that the committee treats this submission as confidential.

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

We, as Career Fire Fighters and local residents in the Wangaratta-Wodonga area, are writing to you in the hope that you will support the fire services reform.

We are all active contributors to our communities, volunteering in all sorts of roles from sporting club coaches, umpires, committee members, youth volunteer services, and even CFA volunteers. All take a very active part in our communities; after all it is the place we raise our children. Our support for this reform is not simply a matter of political or industrial positioning, but a genuine concern for the communities in which we are so devoutly committed. Recent comments made by elected Members of Parliament that have tried to infer otherwise have been quite hurtful and disappointing to say the least.

In Wangaratta we are confident in saying that the proposed reform is being met positively by staff, **volunteers** & management at our integrated station. A recent poll in the local newspaper (Wangaratta Chronicle) showed the public are also in support of the reform, with 90% of the 689 voters in support. Our Brigade is looking at these changes as a **real opportunity to improve** the already quality service we deliver. We know there is a divide between volunteers as some share in our optimism and others don't. Do not be fooled; the idea that all volunteers are in opposition to this reform is a LIE, plain and simple. Most in our brigade, and those that often work with us, see through the misinformation that has been put out into the public arena. Speaking to those who are apprehensive and listening to comments made by some members of other brigades, it would seem the main point of contention is a lack of consultation, rather than objection to the reform itself. It is also obvious that arguments against the reform are rarely based on fact. This is what has been the hardest point to swallow.

With the amount of misinformation being promoted by anyone with a keyboard or radio program, it can be hard to find the truth. However, we take heart in the optimism of our leaders. Our Chief Officer, Emergency Management Commissioner, District 23 Operations Manager & Wangaratta Station Officer In Charge (to name a few) are all keen to see this legislation pass. These are all people who we trust would not support changes that would damage the CFA. An organisation they have dedicated their professional lives to.

Under the reform, **no volunteer is going to be displaced**, meaning no impact on "surge capacity". Not only that, the government has detailed a large investment to ensure an improved CFA in the future. A 100% volunteer CFA (which is what the VFBV asked for in their street protests. That CFA employed members keep "Hands Off CFA"). These reforms actually give them what they asked for. For us it is difficult to listen to volunteer members from other brigades who are concerned their role will be diminished, despite assurances this won't be the case from our Chief and other respected leaders. In our District (23) we have had to accept backlash from some members of neighbouring brigades and also those who are many km's from any integrated station. We are confused, and also disappointed, that these

members choose **to ignore the facts** of the proposed reform at the expense of improving all of our communities safety.

Some **FACTS** for serious consideration:

Victoria's population in 1958 was 2,718,000. In 2016 it was 6,100,900. It is projected to increase to 9-12 million in 2061.

Not only is population increasing, it is ageing too. Volunteerism is also on the decline. The mix of cultures as we become a more multicultural society does not always equate to more volunteers for CFA. In fact if you look at areas such as Dandenong, Corio and Shepparton the CFA volunteer membership is NOT a reflection of the cultural diversity that is found in these locations.

When volunteers speak about what CFA should be delivering to the community you are not getting a true representation of what that community expectation is. The voice of the VFBV represents a very small take on the community of Victoria.

We are governed by legislation that came into effect when Victoria was smaller in size, less culturally diverse, younger and did not take into account the changes that have occurred and will continue to occur. Therefore, it is vital for legislation to catch-up and be ahead of Victoria's growth. We need to deliver a fire service for 9-12 million people, from all sorts of backgrounds, from all ways of life, and to all parts of the state.

An analogy. It is said by some the "if it isn't broke don't fix it". There could be arguments that it is broke, but, let's start with the premise that it isn't.

A number of us have old cars from the 1960's. They get us from A to B. But our new cars have lap sash seat belts, cruise control, air conditioning, air bags, crumple zones and the list goes on and on. Though the old car works there is by far better ways of delivering an outcome that is safer and more efficient than that old car. This is definitely true of the CFA.

Some issues in our local area. These don't even come close to representing the vast number that we deal with but give a glimpse of what is really going on.

In the 2006/07 fires there was a fire as a result of a lighting strike on top of a mountain. Many fires were burning in the area, resources stretched. Fires had been running for many days, volunteer numbers just not there. A helicopter was containing the fire. A strike team of vehicles were ready to go. However, we were unable to crew them (no surge capacity that is spoken of), and had to pull the helicopter off the fire and let it run.

A structure fire we had in Wangaratta in May 2016 had no pumper (structure fire appliance) support at all (as there is none nearby that could have travelled the distance in time required). The only support is Tanker (grass fire appliance) support. The main support brigade is South Wangaratta. They failed to respond in time so Oxley was responded. Very few members of Oxley have the ability or qualifications to assist with an aggressive internal structure fire. The South Wangaratta Brigade Captain even apologised to us that his Brigade had failed to respond yet again. They did eventually, but, by this time they were not needed. South Wangaratta is provided with Breathing Apparatus and the required training so they could be helpful to us and the community, yet over and over they fail to respond.

They have also complained about responding to alarmed premises, as they do often result in false alarms. These alarms are in place because they are our biggest life risks, such as hospitals, nursing homes and shopping centres. This was why South Wangaratta was given the Breathing Apparatus in the first place. CFA management have supported them on this

issue and they are now only paged to selected alarmed premises. This means the community of Wangaratta's largest life risks have a response only from the Wangaratta integrated brigade. This simply is not good enough. Why are the people of Wangaratta put at risk because of the deficiencies of an out-dated CFA system? Why are our Fire Fighters from our integrated brigade left dangerously under resourced?

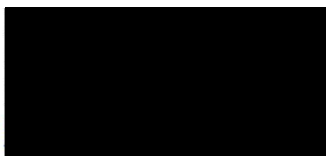
And this year a fire in a large industrial factory required B.A qualified personnel and pumper support. Local support brigades could not provide B.A qualified members, and Benalla (nearest volunteer pumper brigade) failed to respond. So the only option was to request staff from Wodonga. We are required to wait (the community is required to wait) at least 40 mins for Pumper support. Even then, there is no guarantee volunteers will respond. The only way of guaranteeing a response is employed fire fighters, who we know carry the skills required.

In short, what is being proposed by the Government for our area:

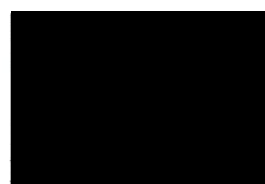
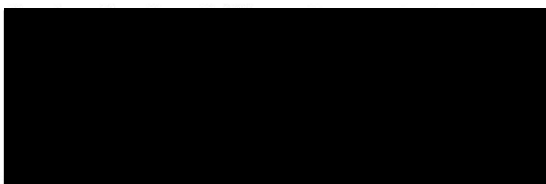
- The volunteers get what they were asking for. An organisation free of enterprise agreements that they don't agree with. Fully volunteer CFA.
- The professional Fire Fighters that will be employed by FRV will guarantee a certain level of service delivery to the community of Victoria.
- FRV will be co-located with CFA volunteers in Wangaratta. NO CHANGE to existing arrangements. NO reduction in surge capacity that the VFBV is arguing.
- More funding for CFA to address the recruitment and lack of cultural diversity within our volunteer ranks.
- Increased funding to the CFA that will enable such things as an additional Pumper for Wangaratta CFA to address some short falls as detailed above.

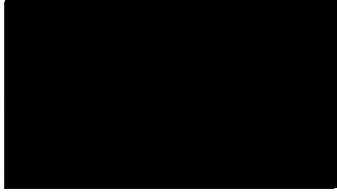
We have not gone into too many specifics of the reform as we are sure you already have the relevant documentation which details the many benefits to all Victorians. Also, we don't presume to know more about how a re-structure would work than the CFA's Chief Officer. One thing we can speak openly about is the damage this ongoing dispute is doing to our members. We talk about this issue every day, several times a day, and it is draining. The toll it has taken on our mental health is significant. You have an opportunity to help us move forward, and in the process, ensure Victoria's Fire Services are better placed to protect our communities now and into the future.

Regards,



Co-Signatories





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