

INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS

COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT

(REFORM) BILL 2017

I am Leading Firefighter Brad Harker from the Country Fire Authority and I have been employed as a professional firefighter for over 10 years

My qualifications include; Station Officer qualified, Leading Firefighter qualified, CFA Structural- Wildfire firefighter qualified and a series of 74 assessed competencies to achieve qualifications.

Specialist qualifications include; AIMS Qualified, EMR responder, Ground Observer, Chemical, biological, radiation technician, 42 metre ladder platform endorsed, Ariel Pumper endorsed, Protective Equipment Van endorsed, Hazmat technician endorsed, confined space rescue endorsed.

I live in Botanic Ridge and work in Hallam. I was also a volunteer with the Country Fire Authority in Portland for 5 years.

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

The community of Victoria deserves a modernized and adequate urban fire brigade. Unfortunately in the current format CFA fails in most aspects of this. CFA has become a major urban firefighting force but has not appropriately adjusted. The status quo which has worked well in Rural Victoria, is now, grossly out dated due to rapidly developing suburbs and cities. It is only a matter of time before a person(s) or a firefighter(s) gets injured from these outdated practices.

- **Current assignment areas:** Assignment areas set up by CAD with approval of the brigade OIC and Captains are outdated. I have seen many circumstances where the closest brigade, with the most qualified crew, has not been responded to time critical incidents by this archaic boundary style of response.
 - Rowville and Pakenham stations were integrated at nearly the same time. Pakenham respond to every structure fire in the Cardina Group, as per a hub model of response (which guarantees 4 qualified firefighters to all structure fires and support to the local brigades). In contrast, Rowville are 'stone walled' and barely respond outside of their primary boundary, even though, in some instances it's the closest firefighting appliance to the incidents.
 - Recently, I attend a motor vehicle accident on Belgrave-Hallam Rd, Narre Warren North. This call was approximately 3 kms from Hallam fire station. Hallam Pumper, 3 staff and EMR qualified firefighters did not receive a call to this life critical incident due to the incident being in a neighboring brigade's assignment area. The local brigade was called numerous times and failed to respond within the current SDS, eventually responding 18 minutes later, with 1 fire fighter.

- Hallam Fire Brigade were eventually called to turn out, only after, Dandenong rescue arrived on scene and advised there were no adequate firefighting appliance in attendance.
- After Hallam received the page to turn out, we were on scene within 3 minutes. Unfortunately, this was almost 20 minutes after the emergency call had been made to 000.

This indicates that response to many incidents where the closest fire appliance and highly trained firefighters are not attending. This puts the community at grave risk when often, minutes count.

- **Current crewing:** On response, most CFA career stations respond their primary appliance being a Pumper with a minimum of 4 qualified firefighters which include a Station Officer, leading firefighter and 2 qualified firefighters. However, when some volunteer stations respond, they do so with only 1, 2 or maybe 3 firefighters (through no fault of their own, due to work and other commitments). Sometimes, they do not have the required breathing apparatus wearers or may be bush firefighters responding to structure fires. Currently, CFA does not specify the minimum number of crew required nor the qualifications relevant to the type of incident they are responding to.

Not having reliable or adequately trained back up firefighters is a serious safety risk. Many times we are put in danger at structure fires because adequate back up is not on the way or has not been responded. The current CFA system allows this to happen. If we, as firefighters, don't have adequate back up, we cannot perform our role to protect the lives and property of the community.

- **Leadership:** Leadership on the fire ground is imperative for the safety of all personal and in placing sound strategies and tactics to combat the incident. As a professional firefighter with years of training and experience ,we have to sit a series of exams from command and control, rural TEWT (tactical exercise without troops), bushfire theory, operational theory, operational legislation, develop and present a lesson and Human Resource scenarios for Leading firefighter and Station Officer assessments. Unfortunately, this is not a requirement for CFA volunteers. Currently within CFA to be elected a Lieutenant or Captain, there are NO pre-requisites or qualifications to be endorsed into these roles. After a popularity vote, a person could be delegated the powers of the Chief Fire Officer with little or no training and be responsible for not only multiple appliances, firefighters safety, community safety and millions of dollars' worth of assets, just to name a few. This would not happen in any other industry or organization.
- **Surge capacity:** Surge capacity under the proposed changes will not diminish. Currently on Total Fire Ban days surge capacity is maintained by volunteers. This will not change. The volunteers are good at making themselves available at my station and other stations I have worked at on spike days. This will still be a vital role for the CFA volunteers moving forward.

- **Integration:** Unfortunately integration at fire stations in its current form has been destroyed. To have a workplace where external parties or individuals can meddle in the working conditions of an employee, ruins the fundamentals of integration. The mantra 'we work as one' is completely flawed and inaccurate, when you see many fire stations branded with 'hands of CFA' posted on the front of them. Some stations earmarked for integration embrace the concept while others fight bitterly to avoid it. In doing so, not only are they fighting against integration, but also against a better response for the community.

From my experience above I draw to the conclusion the urban fire response within CFA needs a severe overhaul. The establishment of Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) will develop a greater urban response and better future planning than what occurs at the moment. The volunteers at the 35 stations will still play a vital role with local response and more so for bushfire capacity. This reform is long overdue.

Yours sincerely,

Brad Harker

