

VFBV Region 12 Council

President: Mick Sanderson



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For Attention the Fire Services Bill Select Committee

This submission is presented by VFBV District 12 Council which represents the brigades of CFA District 12 comprising the brigades within the Mitchell and Murrindindi municipalities.

All brigades are volunteer based. There are no integrated brigades within this District.

These brigades work cooperatively to provide a full range of services to their communities 24/7. The response services include:

- Grass, scrub and forest fire fighting,
- Structural fire fighting,
- Motor Vehicle incidents including crashes, rescue / extractions, spillage containment.
- Hazchem incidents,

Community engagement services include:

- Delivering Fire Safe Kids programs
- Delivering a range of fire Safety information to their local communities,
- Support paid Community Safety staff when delivering Community Fireguard, Fire Ready Victoria, Smoke Alarms, Residential fire safety etc.

They also work cooperatively and in support of SES, Police, Ambulance and DELWP Forest Fire Management in search and rescue, forest fire suppression, traffic management, fuel reduction burns etc.

There is also a fire boat based on Lake Eildon and crewed by CFA volunteers. The boat and crews work in cooperation with all emergency services to provide a comprehensive service which protects users and a conservative \$100,000,000 on water houseboat resource.

We also have a rescue brigade with a heavy rescue vehicle. Again crewed by professionally trained, skilled volunteers.

The brigades of District 12 would be described by Premier Andrews as being not or minimally affected by this legislation. In fact this legislation will have a wide range of consequences.

Some examples of the consequences:

1. The Black Saturday fires. (Surge Capacity)

District 12 was dramatically impacted by both the Kilmore and Murrindindi fires. On the day of the fire all brigades responded and in the following days most brigades were involved in fire suppression and blacking out.

On the Day CFA's "surge capacity" delivered a stream of strike teams to both fight the fires and protect life and property. They also provided relief for exhausted brigade members in the days and weeks following Black Saturday.

This surge capacity largely comes from brigades on Melbourne's fringe. They are well trained and gain lots of experience through a steady stream of emergency responses in and around their response areas.

When the next major fires occur will there still be the pool of highly trained volunteers to provide the surge capacity?

When volunteers are removed from stations and only paid staff are left what happens to surge capacity? Premier Andrews says volunteers thrown out of their stations will be given their own stations. When? Where? How will volunteers be used? If paid staff are the "owners" of the response area will volunteers get a start? Or will they be left on the shelf collecting dust, slowly deskilling? Or will they throw their hands in the air and walk away from CFA?

2. Operational leadership.

Each District (including District 12) is managed by an Operations Manager who is supported by Operations Officers. Under the proposed legislation these people will be transferred to FRV and then as FRV staff will be "rented out" to CFA to perform the duties they currently do.

Where will the loyalty of these people rest? With the organisation that pays them and provides their career path or with the organisation that uses them? ...and whose directions will they follow and what doctrine will they attune to? Will they work to the FRV doctrine which fails the Fair Work test and by the back door impose it on volunteers?

This structure looks like it came straight out of the Indian Army during the days of the British Raj. A local native Indian army commanded by imported British Officers.

This comparison becomes more relevant when we consider that there will be a need for many more Operations Officers in the near future and with the new legislation bringing MFB into the mix these metropolitan trained staff with no experience in working with or leading volunteers will be those Operation Officers.

3. Training.

Training has been an issue with volunteers for many years. The UFU have made it difficult for volunteers in many ways. Opposing sessional trainers, putting bans on the use of some equipment being two examples.

We note that Training staff may come under the same arrangement as Operations staff.

Should we expect the imported Operations and Training staff to work to UFU / FRV practices or CFA practices?

District12 has a purpose built trailer, built and outfitted to train volunteers in safe chainsaw use. A UFU ban sees it sit unused for two years so far. Again the question, where will Operations and Training staff loyalties sit, with FRV or CFA?

4. Funding / infrastructure:

The process of moving volunteers out of FRV fire stations and / or building separate, on site facilities at FRV fire stations plus the cost of providing trucks and fire fighting equipment is uncoded.

Acquiring land, building fire stations, building and supplying tankers, pumpers, quick attack vehicles, command vehicles, radios, quick fill pumps and the range of equipment required by brigades is uncoded but we suggest a cost well in excess of one million dollars per brigade.

Where will this money come from? When the real cost is established and it is in excess of Premier Andrews commitment will CFA be expected to fund the difference?

Also with the need to quickly provide all this infrastructure and equipment, how will this impact on CFA's existing building and vehicle replacement programs?

Will District 12's budget be redirected to help cover these cost and will District 12's building and vehicle replacement programs be delayed?

And how will Premier Andrews fund these additional costs now and into the future? **Will our members and indeed all country Victorians be expected to fund the appointment of hundreds of metropolitan firefighters through an expanded Fire Services levy?**

5. CFA Culture:

CFA members, whether paid staff or volunteers, develop attitudes and understandings about the communities of country Victoria and CFA's place in it.

Current CFA Operations staff understand the commitment and attitudes of volunteers. Many of them started their interest in fire fighting by being CFA volunteers.

CFA culture is a "can do" culture of helping themselves and their communities. Of fundraising for equipment not provided by CFA and investing in their community's fire safety.

Of being there when their community needs them. Not only for fire but for floods and storms and other threats to community safety.

Of leaving their workplace or farms on no notice and putting in long hours to keep the people of Victoria safe.

Of giving up nights and weekends to undertake training.

Of being part of the community and participating in activities like watering community trees and gardens during drought.

Of raising millions of dollars for the Good Friday appeal because they recognise that CFA and the Royal Children's Hospital are every community's business.

... and turning up at the local school to practice "Stop Drop and Roll" or "Get down Low and Go, Go, Go" with the local kids. Most households that have a home fire safety plan got them from what their kids brought home from school.

Of honour boards tracking families back before CFA, before the Country Fire Brigades Board, back a century or more to community volunteer bucket brigades. CFA and its volunteerism is part of the history of Victoria.

6. Presumptive Rights (Cancer) legislation.

The Presumptive Rights (Cancer) legislation does not treat paid and volunteer firefighters equally. Under this new legislation a paid firefighter with one of the 12 prescribed cancers will automatically get access to treatment and compensation.

A volunteer firefighter will have to be “considered” by an unspecified panel and then may be granted coverage.

Having watched the Fiskville process where members died fighting for their rights. We would hate to see our families having to go through the process. This legislation treats volunteers like second class citizens. It is unfair and unreasonable.

We also query why the Cancer legislation has been included with the Fire Services legislation. We can’t help but wonder if Premier Andrews is playing politics with the lives of Victoria’s firefighters.

7. The legislative process.

The Premier and government should hang their heads in shame. There are so many processes which are wrong and unjust!

- a. The CFA Act and the Volunteer Charter both require the government to consult with volunteers before making legislative changes. This did not happen. Indeed the whole legislation was prepared in secret even from most government members. Fire service executive management were only informed a few days before Premier Andrews went public.
- b. “Informing” volunteers and staff after the Bill was tabled is not consultation.
- c. There is a strong belief across Victoria that this legislation is nothing more than change for the sake of industrial peace.
- d. This legislation will affect every household and business in Victoria but is not worthy of a wider consultation. (This Select Committee process cannot possibly address all the issues and potential consequences in two short months.)
- e. In justifying the legislation Premier Andrews implied that a number of Inquiries and a Royal Commission into CFA had cast doubt on the current integrated model. The fact is that none of the inquiries criticised the model and the Royal Commission actually supported it.
- f. It has disenfranchised all CFA volunteers. They are being taken for granted yet again.

We believe that there are three outcomes which this Select Committee should support:

- 1. Break the Bill into its two components “Fire Services” and “Presumptive Rights (Cancer)” legislation.**
- 2. Support the movement of the cancer legislation through parliament.**
- 3. Send the Fire Services legislation to a full public inquiry or Royal Commission to determine Victoria’s fire needs.**

Yours faithfully



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Alex Caughey,
Secretary, District 12 VFBV

We have no objections to have this document displayed on the Standing Committee’s web site.