

Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017

Submission to Select Committee

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Background

I am currently employed as a career Firefighter with the Country Fire authority in the Suburb of Carrum. I hold the rank of Firefighter.

Experience

I have been a career Firefighter with CFA for nearly 3 years. Prior to this I was a volunteer firefighter with CFA for 5 years. I have worked as a career Firefighter in all areas of Melbourne including the rapidly growing areas in the outer Western suburbs of Melbourne as well as regional Victoria and the outer South Eastern suburbs of Melbourne.

Terms of Reference

IMPACT ON FIRE SERVICE DELIVERY ACROSS VICTORIA

EFFECT ON VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN FIRE SERVICE DELIVERY

SHORT TERM AND LONG TERM COST IMPACT ON FIRE SERVICE PROVISION

UNDERLYING POLICY RATIONALE

IMPACT ON FIRE SERVICE DELIVERY ACROSS VICTORIA:

Victoria is one of the country's fastest growing states. Melbourne is the fastest growing capital city in the country with areas such as Tarneit, Cranbourne and Craigieburn showing exponential growth in the past 5 years. However these areas do not have the same coverage that areas in inner suburban Melbourne with similar population numbers have. For example, staff members in Craigieburn have a large area which they are required to respond to with little or no support due to the surrounding brigades which are volunteer that may be unable to attend the fire calls due to many factors which are often beyond their control. This could be anything from traffic conditions to family commitments which prevent them from attending callouts. In contrast to this, areas within inner suburban Melbourne such as Caulfield have staff members from other stations close by such as Malvern providing a more reliable response to jobs which gives the community a more reliable service.

I am in no way blaming volunteers for the slower response but merely highlighting this as an issue. Victorians in outer metro Melbourne also pay a higher fire service levy for a service that is sometimes less reliable than what is provided to people closer to the CBD. I have unfortunately experienced this first hand. Whilst working at a CFA integrated station in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne, I attended a call further to the West at which we arrived on scene well before the volunteer CFA brigade which we were supporting. The local brigade was 100m away and was not on scene until after we had arrived, even after we drove for 10 minutes with lights and sirens before we reached the scene. The call was a motor vehicle accident where the driver was trapped in the vehicle. Our task was to stabilise the driver whilst we waited for the Rescue vehicle to arrive on scene. The patient was in various states of consciousness and in situations like this it is imperative to remove the patient before their condition deteriorates. If the local brigade was staffed, an appliance could have been on scene at least 5 minutes earlier and the patient could be removed quicker.

Another example of where I have attended a fire call where staff had to wait for additional support was at a fire in the Western suburbs of Melbourne within CFA area. We were paged to a Structure Fire at approximately 22:00 hrs. Whilst responding to the call we received what we refer to as further information. This is additional information about the call which the dispatch operator gives us over the radio which is surplus to the information we receive at the time of the callout. The information we received was that a house was fully involved in fire and 2 persons were reported missing within the building. To this type of fire three brigades in the area are normally paged due to predetermined dispatch arrangements. One of the other staff appliances which would normally respond to assist us was committed at another job in the northern suburbs. We only received this info on the way to the job. My officer requested another truck be responded but due to this being further away and that it was a volunteer truck we were unsure that it would respond in a timely manner.

Upon arrival to the property the house was indeed fully involved with fire and a male was lying on the ground with burns to over 90% to his body. Being that there were only four of us we not able to assist him at the time of arrival. The immediate priority was his partner and child who were reported as being trapped inside the house. As there were 4 people we all had roles to perform. The officer is in charge of the job and talks to the dispatch centre via radio as well as making operational decisions. The other Firefighter was driving so he was responsible for getting water into the truck so that we could fight the fire. The Leading Firefighter and I were wearing breathing apparatus so that we could go in and fight the fire.

The Leading Firefighter positioned himself at the front of the property outside in order to knockdown the flames coming from the front window. I was tasked to go inside the house and attempt to locate the mother and child. This had to be done without backup due to no volunteer brigades being on scene at the time which put my safety at significant risk. Inside this structure I experienced immense heat and steam burns down both arms. If I was to become trapped I would have had NO ONE to come to my aid as there were no extra resources on scene. Thankfully the mother and child were located outside and we were able to successfully extinguish the fire. Unfortunately the male with the burns succumbed to his injuries.

These two examples highlight the advantages of having an enhanced staff presence in the outer metro suburbs. These are not isolated incidents. This happens across Melbourne every day. The creation of a fully staffed organisation would increase reliability and enhance the response rate across these currently vulnerable areas.

EFFECT ON VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN FIRE SERVICE DELIVERY

There has been much speculation via various sources of media that volunteers would be effected. This has been reported in several ways. Surge capacity, volunteers' ability to respond to fire calls and the general "eroding" of volunteer culture within CFA. I can categorically say with my experience on both side of the fence that this is false and frankly disappointing that any factions of any group or organisation would state this. The fire service has always been and always will be run to protect the community and not the interests of individuals.

CFA has always had a unique ability to respond on mass to large scale incidents such as bushfires which are often referred to as campaign fires. Under the new layout of the fire services this will be maintained and volunteers will be unaffected. They will continue to perform the roles that they do so currently. Volunteers and staff currently work seamlessly and professionally together in an operational sense and this will not change under the proposed agreement.

SHORT TERM AND LONG TERM COST IMPACT ON FIRE SERVICE PROVISION

It is documented that a faster response time to fires within structures prevents further damage to property and spread of fire to adjoining rooms and properties. Therefore with these quicker response times of staff who are able to be dispatched within 90 seconds of receiving a call, costs will be less due to the earlier suppression of fire. This is in comparison to crews that respond from home or their workplace in a much slower timeframe. Cases of greater property loss or damage, injury or in worst case scenarios, death will be higher in areas of rapid population growth if already stretched volunteer crews don't receive support from career staff. This will also be improved when the independent Fire District Review Panel considers changes that are necessary across Victoria. This means the insertion of Career staff into areas that are currently serviced by volunteer brigades if required to provide a guaranteed standard of response.

UNDERLYING POLICY RATIONALE

As stated above, Victoria is growing rapidly every year. However the current Metropolitan Fire Brigade boundaries have not expanded significantly for some fifty years. This means that areas such as Tarneit, Springvale, Frankston and Eltham are currently classed as Country areas. Moving these boundaries is a logical option that provides a far more reliable service. However not all parties believe this is the case. For many years, there has been a toxic relationship on station and in the field. The current situation regarding the operational staff agreement has done nothing to improve this, rather the opposite. In fact the relationship is now so toxic that it is unrepairable, hence why it is so important that change occurs. Currently the MFB services around half of metro Melbourne. The reforms will change this dramatically.

Across Melbourne ALL volunteer brigades have what is referred to as a fail to respond statistic. This is when the brigade fails to respond to a job within the allotted timeframe. This may be 4-6 minutes from the time of call. This means that a truck has not left the station in this time. Staff appliances will be out the door within 90 seconds and often be on scene before some volunteer appliances have turned out. Some volunteer stations have a failure rate of over 60%. This puts the local community at significant risk. This is the main reason why it is so important that this reform is made now.

We have a chance to reform and overhaul the state's fire services for the good. To provide all Victorians with a better service. We cannot let individual beliefs and feelings get in the way of what is a critical issue.