

Submission

To: Select Committee

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

Date: 07th July 2017

From: Chris HALL

My name is Chris Hall and I am an operational employee of the Country Fire Authority.

I have been an operational member since 2003 and currently hold the rank of Senior Station Officer stationed at South Warrandyte.

During my operational career with CFA, I have been involved in and held several other functions and roles including:

- Recruitment of career staff;
- Career recruit firefighter training delivery;
- Incident management team deployment for significant events both in Victoria and interstate;
- Volunteer catchment officer;
- Officer In Charge – Integrated Brigade;
- Fire Investigator;
- Worked operationally in several CFA Districts including urban & regional locations;
- Seconded to Metropolitan Fire Brigade for 12 months;

These skills and experiences have given me a diverse range of experiences within the organisation and among the broader emergency services sector.

It is important to recognise that CFA volunteers perform many vital functions within the emergency services sector including response and providing surge capacity. Their commitment, ability and service to the community should not be underestimated or undervalued.

CFA's operational framework dates back to 1958, is very outdated, and limits the ability of the organisation to perform its legislative function of managing the prevention and suppression of fires.

Issues such as: increasing population; volunteer demographics; urban sprawl; rural interface living; changing risk profiles; climate change; and extreme weather patterns; are just a few challenges that CFA has endeavoured to react to.

Emergency Services in Victoria and specifically Fire Services, must be agile, flexible and contemporary to be able to operate within the all-hazards all-agencies environment.

I do not wish to politicise the proposed reform to the Fire Services but believe that several critical factors have been misunderstood, misinformed or conveniently ignored in the debate.

1. Country Area of Victoria:

It is widely known that the Country Area of Victoria as defined in the Country Fire Authority Act 1958 was last modified sometime in the early 1970's. It does not reflect the population increase and urban growth that Victoria has experienced since that time, and more importantly does not reflect any type of risk profile.

Another defining characteristic of the Country Area of Victoria is an ageing population and generally lower socio-economic status, both of which have known links to the vulnerability to emergencies and occurrence of preventable fires.

The Country Area of Victoria currently accounts for approximately 60 - 70% of what is defined as metropolitan Melbourne. Along with these highly urbanised areas are some of the largest industrial precincts in the southern hemisphere.

I believe it is appropriate to ask ourselves two fundamental questions:

- i. What was the intent of this legislative boundary developed in 1958? and*
- ii. If the current reform was not being proposed, how long would we continue to observe this boundary?*

2. Community expectation and service delivery:

The historical, everlasting and sustained debate over "professional .v. volunteer" ability is demeaning to all parties and should not be considered a factor.

The community has an expectation that they will receive a response to their emergency that is guaranteed, timely, of an appropriate quantity (trucks and personnel) and with appropriate skills mix/training.

Due to the very nature of volunteering and competing work/life demands, this can be very hard to guarantee under a volunteer model, particularly in a highly urbanised or elevated risk environment.

Unfortunately we seem to lose sight of what I believe should be the overarching principle in this debate - what is best for the community and for community safety.

This prompts the question:

iii. What are the community's expectations of their fire service and service delivery?

3. Volunteers needs .v. community needs

In a similar theme to point 2, often in an attempt to motivate and engage volunteers, we can inadvertently place individual brigade and volunteer needs above that of the community's. This is a difficult balance to achieve as there are studies linking activity level and role performance with volunteering satisfaction. I recognise that not providing opportunity can also become a self-perpetuating cycle that can lead to a reduction in proficiency where trained members are not given sufficient opportunity to exercise their skills, however it is worth noting that other opportunities to exercise and practice skills can be facilitated including training and scenario exercising.

It is critical to ensure that the optimum service delivery to the community is not impeded by the secondary need to exercise and maintain skills of some members.

Additionally, CFA's integrated workforce model has not been fully harnessed for increased community service delivery as many volunteer brigades have autonomy over which other brigades are responded to support them for operational response. Many have chosen to ignore the strategically located integrated stations capability and instead preferred that their support came from another volunteer brigade.

Under-utilisation of strategically located, trained and expensive resources not only comprises the optimum service delivery available for the community and therefore community safety, but represents a significant wastage of community, ratepayer and taxpayer monies.

Question:

iv. How do we ensure that competing needs are prioritised appropriately to ensure optimum service delivery is provided?

4. The funding model

Victoria's Fire Services are now funded approximately 80 - 90% via a Fire Service Levy (FSL) which is calculated based on the Capital Improved Value (CIV) of the property, the property use and whether the property is located in the Metropolitan Fire District (MFD) or Country Area of Victoria.

It is interesting to note that for all property types (<http://www.firelevy.vic.gov.au/how-much-am-i-contributing.html>), the CFA levy is approximately double the MFB rate, and up to seven(7) times for vacant land.

Whilst I acknowledge the Fire Service Levy aims to recognise the different costs of funding each service and is not strictly a fee for service, the fact that it is a levy implies a level of service delivery. Many parts of Victoria are not practically serviceable by a full time career service due to a number of factors, but can we objectively justify that most Victorians receive an appropriate and equitable fire service that they pay for?

At present, the community is relatively uninformed of the differences in the levy, however a greater focus on this issue may require a more equitable application of the funding model moving forward.

I personally live within the Country Area of Victoria (26 km from the Melbourne GPO) on a traditional suburban residential block. Until the recent integration of my local CFA Fire Station I paid a higher Fire Service Levy but did not receive the full range of services that residents that lived in a comparable risk environment less than 1.5 kilometres from me did. This is in no way an reflection of the local CFA Brigade who are an extremely dedicated group of volunteers, but an indictment of this inequitable funding model.

Question:

- v. ***Do Victorians receive the fire service they pay for via the Fire Service Levy, rates and taxes?***

Thank you for the opportunity to tender this submission for your consideration.

Chris Hall