

SUBMISSIONS TO THE FIRE SERVICES

REFORM SELECT COMMITTEE

6/7/2017

To the Fire Service Reform Select Committee,

I would like to express my strong support for the Fire Service Reform to go ahead for the state of Victoria.

My name is Samuel Hutchison and I have been a career fire fighter with the CFA since March 6th 2015. In this time I have completed a 19 week recruit course at the Victorian Emergency Training Centre, taken up an operational roll at Paterson River fire Station, and then moved on to my current position at Dandenong fire Station. To date, as a relieving fire-fighter I have worked shifts from Rosebud to Ballarat, and many station between. What's become clear to me in my relatively short time with the authority, is the vast differences between the areas in which the CFA attempts to provide an emergency service by applying the same out dated model. I believe the modern emergency service that the community deserves is more important than an individual brigade's need to protect their assignment area or "patch" due to a sense of nostalgia or self-entitlement. The proposed changes to Victoria's Fire and Rescue Service that my colleges and I seek are not driven by sentiment. The push for a modernised fire service is driven by the daily occurrences that professional firefighters face which repeatedly demonstrate that the current fire service model is not adequate to serve the state of Victoria in 2017 and into the future.

An example of this for me was in October of 2016 when I was on duty for day shift at Patterson River fire station. At the time Patterson River had a staff manning of only three career members per shift, being our Station Officer, a Leading Fire Fighter, and myself as the only on duty Fire fighter. At approximately midday we were paged to a house fire in Aspendale Gardens in our neighbouring volunteer brigade's primary area. Despite the neighbouring brigade generally being quite active in comparison to other volunteer brigades in the area, we arrived on scene as the first appliance, and the two storey structure was fully involved. As I was the only fire fighter able to wear Breathing Apparatus due to our inadequate manning at the time, I commenced the fire fight externally by myself which raised many safety issues. The neighbouring volunteer brigade arrived and joined us in our efforts to suppress the two storey house fire and more importantly at the time, in protecting the adjoining property which was under immediate threat but not yet completely involved. During the early stages of this particular job several things happened that outlined the safety implications of having to rely on volunteers who are undertrained, and in many cases not fit for the roll. Early in the firefight I was left without water on my hose line without warning whilst directly attacking the fire, I was left without back up on several occasions due to the inadequate fitness levels of the Volunteer BA wearers I was working with, and I was required on several occasions to stop the firefight and redirect volunteer firefighters for their own safety. It is understandable that mistakes will be made on the fire ground, however critical deficiencies in training, knowledge, and suitability when it comes to firefighting in an urban environment are purely dangerous to the individual, the people that they work alongside, as well as the community they are suggested to serve.

Only a few months later whilst working at Rowville Fire Station I was responded with my colleges to a three car motor vehicle accident in a neighbouring volunteer area. Originally we were not paged to the call, however the on-duty Operations Officer had noted via radio traffic that one volunteer brigade had failed to respond, and guided by history he knew that the next brigade of the dispatch assignment table was likely to be delayed in their turn out or fail to respond also. On the way to the job we listened to the radio correspondence between our dispatcher and the Volunteer captain who was the incident controller. There were three cars involved, multiple people needing medical attention, possible multiple people trapped in the cars. It was clear that it was a big job, and the emergency services on scene were under a great deal of pressure. What was also evident, was the Captain's alarm that we as a career staffed appliance had been dispatched to the job. Half way to the accident location we hear via the video that a tanker from a small brigade that was initially paged was turning out to the same incident, with an unknown number of members on board, with an unknown level of competencies between them. Without any hesitation, the very next point of order was for the Volunteer Captain running the job was to cancel the response of the Career brigade appliance. Here I was as relatively new firefighter and member of the CFA, listening to and obviously busy job still underway, sitting in a fully stowed emergence response appliance, fitted with emergency medical response gear, as one of four professional Emergency Medical Response providers, with two of which who were highly experience road accident rescue operators, and the first instinct of the Volunteer Captain was to turn our appliance around unutilised. We later found out that one of our fellow career firefighters from the same station was an off-duty passer-by at the same job, and he was left to perform CPR on a six year old female by himself for over 20min as resources were so depleted dealing with the complexities of the job. While I'm sure the captain was under an enormous level of pressure at the time, it gives evidence to the toxic 'defend our territory' at all cost mentality that has been allowed to entrench its self into some of our urban fringe volunteer brigades. I don't think that those individuals who prioritise their own interests over that of the community's, should have the opportunity to make decisions that hamper the emergency response for the people who reside in their area.

I feel that the fire service reform is not only imperative for the urban areas of areas of Victoria, but is also essential for the regional areas that will remain serviced by the CFA volunteers. Our Volunteers desperately need an organisation that will focus purely on its Volunteers and therefore adequately provides them with the training a resources they need to improve on the service that they deliver to the community.

Whilst I have only been an operational fire fighter for approximately three years I feel I have a broad perspective over the organisational scope of CFA, with my father being a long-time Volunteer member. I grew up and lived until the age of 18 in the small rural town of Stratford, Victoria. Stratford has a population of approximately 2000 people and is 68km from the closest integrated CFA station with career staff on duty, being Traralgon Fire Station. I have both immediate and extended family who still live in Stratford and there is no way that I would support this reform if I felt that it would disadvantage the emergency services in the area.

Through my father I have regular insight in to life as an active CFA volunteer and the challenges that he faces in his desire to serve our local community. Under the current model I have concerns with both his welfare, as well as the level of service that is provided to the community in which my family reside. Firsthand I have seen the toll that being a CFA member has had on my father, I have seen the vast differences between our training and support despite being under the same banner of CFA, and I believe that the fire service reform has the potential to address and potentially elevate some of those issues.

Just recently my father at age 68 has had to undergo major hand surgery meaning that he would not be operationally fit to respond to emergency calls for a number of months. Within 5 days of his surgery, and in the very early stages of his recovery he received a call from a fellow brigade member, not to check on his welfare, but to see how long until he could “turn out” again. The issue being, that in the previous three days the brigade had been paged to two events and the fellow member had been the only person to turn up to the station and therefore the appliance had turned out with one operational member after a considerable wait time. I say this not as another example of volunteer brigades failing to respond, but an example of how the CFA in its current model places undue stress and pressure on a dedicated few to deliver any sort of service delivery, let alone a sufficient one. In 2017 this not the fire service our community deserves and it is not the burden our CFA volunteers deserve to carry. The time of Fire Service Reform in Victoria is well overdue, however the opportunity for us to build a leading emergency service for our state is here right now.