

**Dear Assistant Clerk Committees**

Re: *“INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS’ PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017”*.

My name is Steven PITCHER and I am the CFA (Country Fire Authority) Operations Manager for Foundation Learning (Recruit and Continuation) Training at the Victorian Emergency Management (VEMTC) Centre, Craigieburn.

My service with CFA spans over 25 years of service to date, commencing 1990 as a volunteer, and transitioned into employment as a Career Firefighter in 2000 as a recruit firefighter. Throughout continuation training and promotional assessments over the past 17 years, I have been able to progress through the ranks of Qualified Firefighter, Leading Firefighter, Station Officer, Senior Station Officer, Operations Officer and now Operations Manager.

Prior to CFA Career Employment I was employed as a Aviation Firefighter and between 2008 and 2012 I was a sworn Victorian Police Officer, returning to CFA in 2012.

As a Firefighter in the CFA, and as a Police Officer supporting Emergency Management have responded to thousands of incidents and have gained significant operational exposure to provide an efficient and effective incident management response to the Victorian community.

I am currently involved in a number of consultative committees with the CFA including but not limited to Learning and Development, workforce planning and growth programs.

I fully support the reform that is proposed for the Fire Services in Victoria, and believe the only way forward to support the Victorian community is to cease the duplicity of two career services, streamline processes and coordinate, maintain and develop a contemporary service and structure that reflects the ever changing needs and requirements in this volatile , uncertain and challenging environment

**Impact on Fire Service Delivery across Victoria**

From my experience, the major problem that exists under the current structure of CFA is that it has reached the point where it needed, but *did not want* professional firefighters. The CFA purveyed, and espoused an intent and undercurrent that said “that if we didn’t need career firefighters, we wouldn’t have any”. This highlighted and provided protection to volunteers and the protection of what I deem a “broken” and non-sustainable service delivery model. This is not what the community of Victoria want, need or deserve.

In my professional opinion I truly believe the new legislation will enable the government to put in place a framework that has a focus on the rural risk to Victoria and at the same time develop the larger urban risks that have evolved in what has been traditionally been the

Country Area of Victoria. The current statistics show that CFA attends more urban incidents than rural incidents which highlights the change in demographic and call type.

As staff we see the constantly increasing reliance from Volunteer Brigades within our District for Career Staff to ensure their communities are protected further highlights the current model is broken, and in fact the “career firefighters and integrated stations” provide a first aid kit to the issues without CFA addressing and fixing the needs due to declining volunteerism and the solid growth of our Victorian Communities, mainly in the growth corridors and regional cities of Victoria.

This positive piece of legislation myself, my fellow professional firefighters and the community I truly hope we will see the reform delivered so that I know when we are at an incident we will have back up on the way and those who attend will have the necessary sk

### **Effect on Volunteer Engagement and Participation in fire service delivery**

CFA responds to different types of incidents and keeps data about those incidents. However it is important to note that the data collected is not readily released or available to the general public

Response types are recorded by CFA as follows:

Those that do not require a lights and sirens response include: “washaways” as a result of motor vehicle accidents, “lockouts”, bin fires, powerlines down, non urgent calls to children locked in car, some non structure fires.

Those that do require a lights and sirens response (Primary SDS Incidents) include: structure fires, smoke alarms, road accident rescues, rail and aircraft rescues, grass and bush fires, hazardous materials incidents, confined space trench rescue, high angle rescue and many other less common scenarios.

Across the state approximately 2.6% of CFA operation firefighters are career employees and they attend 42% of CFA primary calls.

While I do not support that CFA should restrict the community from available data I do understand that over time a CFA board can develop a culture to focus on volunteerism rather than on the job at hand of protecting the community, in effect conflicting objectives. Having said that I do believe that there is an overwhelming view by firefighters both career and volunteer that it is all about the community. My understanding is that the proposed legislation if accepted will result in an objective overview of service delivery to the Victorian communities.

Whilst there will be some who will claim that the reform would impact Volunteer engagement and participation I wonder why that claim is made. The reform provides a new and comprehensive funding model for the CFA that would enable the organisation to properly focus on the needs of the volunteers in a way that has not been done before. Given this increased capacity to engage, recruit, retain and support volunteers there is no grounds to suggest the volunteers would be diminished in any way. It is my view that the majority of volunteers whose aim is to provide a service to the community would benefit and thrive in

this new environment. To suggest otherwise is simply misrepresenting the facts and I believe is being used to scare the community to influence the outcome of the proposed legislation.

While I am extremely supportive of a way of business supporting volunteerism, in my view it is unreasonable and beyond community expectation to rely solely on volunteers to deliver service in larger populated areas. There are some volunteer brigades that deliver service very well, however there are others brigades that suffer with availability of time for volunteers due to work, family and other commitments. As an organisation I believe that we (CFA) have failed those brigades and those communities, and further more need to accept that if a standard is not met, good intent or not it needs direct and immediate intervention so as not to fail the community in the our obligations.

While there is a progressive and positive effort to get emergency services in Victoria to be more interoperable, there still exists a divide between Metropolitan Melbourne and Country Victoria. The proposed legislation will have positive influence in focusing all firefighters in Victoria on service delivery rather than on historical areas of responsibility. In the absence of the political/industrial fight the natural focus is on firefighting and the community.

### **Short term and long term cost impact on the fire service provision**

The dual response of professional and volunteer firefighters in integrated areas impacts resources and is not a cost effective system. The introduction of this reform will enable a single and transparent response system to be established for all professional firefighters. This will also benefit volunteer responses as volunteer brigades will be able to focus on their own areas and on surge capacity as required.

There will also be important cost benefits from the reduction and stopping of duplicate spending and budgeting with appliances, training, equipment, PPC, research, technology and payroll, just to name a few key areas of significant spending.

Volunteers will be consulted on issues that affect them and career firefighters will be consulted on their issues, reducing the duplication and difficulty in reaching mutually suitable outcomes.

VFBV has for many years now advocated that the UFU is "taking over the CFA" and that the Operational Staff Enterprise Agreements struck with the UFU and CFA have resulted in a "veto" of the Chief Officer's powers. This argument continues and is advocated to this day by ill-informed and self-serving politicians and Senior VFBV delegates and volunteers. The conflict that has resulted has led to significant stress on firefighters, and the community. This comes at a personal cost with litigation fees and dues to support this worthwhile cause and legislation.

Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation is a fundamental right for firefighters that are exposed to carcinogenetic products .The evidence is overwhelming in support of this legislation and as in many states and countries around the world, similar legislation provides firefighters (both professional and volunteer) and their families.

The reform will support volunteers and career staff, ensuring we build and provide the best service for the community of Victoria. Our communities deserve this change and will be the benefactors of this, in my opinion needed legislation.

Yours sincerely,

Steve PITCHER  
CFA Employee 25110

