

Monday 31st July 2017

Updated Submission

Assistant Clerk Committees
Department of the Legislative Council
Fire Services Bill Select Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Sent via email: LCSC@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Fire Services Bill Select Committee Chair

I am taking this opportunity to write a personal submission to you addressing the terms of reference as listed on the 21st June 2017.

I am providing you information on my background and other relevant details to assist you in absorbing my experiences and opinions. I will where possible provide facts to support my submission.

I will also be addressing the first three terms of reference because they require the most detail for you to make an informed and calculated decision on the Fire Services Bill.

The entire basis of my submission is on the premise of "What is best for the community" and CFA's current mission of the "Protection of Life and Property".

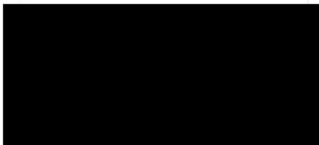
Emotions and self-interest of organisations and individuals must not be taken into account when reviewing submissions into the committee.

I implore you not to squander the opportunity to make significant and long lasting changes to the fire services in Victoria.

The Fire Services Bill must proceed for the good of the community or not at all.

It is my clear indication to you, that my personal details is confidential to the select committee. My actual submission is to be considered by the select committee.

Yours Sincerely



Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria

Community Expectations

The reforms will ensure that the communities' expectation for a modern, professional and appropriate response to fires and emergencies from career firefighters within Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) and volunteer firefighters from the County Fire Authority (CFA) is delivered.

In a crisis, the community requires and expects that those who are able to provide assistance will be there to do so as quickly as possible. **Source: Drawing a line, building stronger services, Page 14.**

Risk Assessment

The risk assessment for urban areas requiring an increase in fire services has been in place within CFA for many years. The modernisation of the fire services along with the creation of the Fire District Review Panel will ensure the community receives the best possible fire service in their time of need.

Service delivery must be appropriate for the community that is being served. While current service delivery models are still valid, new ones need to be added to the mix to provide the fire services with the range of options they need to respond in new and evolving contexts. **Source: Drawing the line, building stronger services, Page 18.**

It is my opinion that as part of the fire services reforms and also using the Fire and Rescue NSW model, that a retained fire service will be needed in townships and larger urban areas where the risk assessment shows additional resourcing is required.

Service Delivery Standards

The CFA's service delivery standards have been set in place for many years; however I am seeing across many volunteer Brigades an on-going issue of not being able to achieve the minimum standards. This is due to a number of reasons:

- Ability for people to volunteer and leave employment or home
- Declining and aging rural communities

The service delivery standard is designed to ensure an appropriate and timely response to the community. It is not the fault of the volunteer firefighters; it is the changes in the community needing more support from the fire services. The fire services reform will improve this and will allow CFA to modernise their service delivery standards to the community, based on risk and volunteer dynamics.

Many smaller rural towns are in decline as the traditional structure of agriculture changes and as people move to the cities and larger towns in search of employment. Their departure poses a challenge not just for local fire brigades, but a whole range of community groups. **Source: EMV Submission to 2015 Fire Services Review Page 31.**

Urban / Rural Communities

Communities in urban townships have an expectation regarding timely response by the fire services. Communities in rural areas understand that they are supported by a volunteer fire service. As communities and townships grow there is a need to improve and modernise the fire service. This reform Bill allows for modernising and also continuing risk assessments and updating the fire services to these communities. It is great to see that increased community growth will align with increased fire services to those communities.

Right response for the right risk

A well-used term in the fire services is the "right response for the right risk". The creation of FRV and the affirmation of the CFA as respective career and volunteer fire fighting services ensure that the right response for the right risk is a priority and is not based on outdated legislation, organisational protectionism or self-interest.

Fire Services Levy

The fire services levy is a significant piece in the modernisation of the fire services through the reforms within the Bill.

All property owners contribute to funding Victoria's fire services, not just those with adequate insurance. **Source: Fire Services Levy webpage, Page <http://www.firelevy.vic.gov.au/what-has-changed>**

The changes contained within the Bill will ensure FRV and CFA improve their standards, responses and training to the Victorian community. This is a major benefit to the communities that will be served by both organisations. The funding model is secured and doesn't cause any additional funding requirements on the Victorian rate payers.

The Fire Services Property Levy funds vital services provided by the Country Fire Authority and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This includes personnel, training, infrastructure and equipment. **Source: Fire Services Levy webpage, Page <http://www.firelevy.vic.gov.au/what-does-the-levy-fund.html>**

Emergency Management Victoria

Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) and its predecessor, Fire Services Commissioner Victoria have been advocating for change for a long time.

The future model of fire-rescue services in Victoria must include volunteer and paid personnel, men and women, who are trained and competent to work as one to provide the highest level of service possible to the Victorian community. **Source: EMV Submission to 2015 Fire Services Review Page 5**

EMV is leading emergency management in Victoria by working with communities, government, agencies and business to strengthen their capacity to withstand, plan for, respond to and recover from emergencies. The Commissioner is aware of the need for reform and has stated this in his submission. Therefore I believe that the Bill will support EMV, along with FRV and CFA in meeting the needs of the community.

The future model of fire-rescue services in Victoria must reflect community need, current and future challenges (environmental, social and economic) and the integrated nature of our emergency management workforce, which comprises both volunteer and paid personnel. **Source: EMV Submission to 2015 Fire Services Review, Page 7**

Best Model for Readiness and Response

Service delivery to the community must be, above all else, the main reason for ensuring these reforms are completed successfully on time and within the framework set out. The best model for readiness and response is where it is risk based and proportioned to the requirements of the community. In large urban or populated areas, the readiness and response needs to be a service that can be guaranteed due to the risk. Staffing those areas across the State of Victoria under a unified organisation such as FRV makes a lot of sense as it is logical and practical.

Service delivery must be appropriate for the community that is being served. **Source: Drawing a line, building stronger services, Page 14.**

In a crisis, the community requires and expects that those who are able to provide assistance will be there to do so as quickly as possible. It is blind to the badge on the truck or the uniform of those who come to help it. When the crisis is major, the community requires and expects that many actors will join forces, working together cohesively to limit the damage and loss. **Source: EMV Submission to 2015 Fire Services Review, Page 1.**

Effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery

Volunteering

Volunteers continue to have a proud part in the fire services in Victoria. Volunteers should play a part in the overall solution to fire service readiness and response. The nature of volunteering in CFA has changed within the community due to limitations in availability and commitment. This means that staffing levels must be increased to fill the void and improve the response to the community when the volunteers can no longer meet the standards set.

Victoria will still need CFA volunteers in areas that have low volume calls and can be utilised as an escalated response or in major fire campaigns. It is currently too hard to rely on volunteers in high volume call areas or where risk has increased. As a result of everyone paying the fire service levy, the community expects more from their fire services providing a timely and measured response to their triple zero calls. There is also an expectation that paying for the fire service will lead to continual improvement within that operational delivery.

There are some fundamental challenges to the future of volunteer fire fighting in Victoria, just as there are elsewhere. These challenges are as much external as they are internal to the fire services. At the forefront are social and demographic shifts over which the fire services themselves have little control but to which they must adjust in order to serve the community effectively. **Source: EMV Submission to 2015 Fire Services Review Page 31.**

Volunteer's priorities

The priorities for volunteers in CFA have changed over the 13 years I have been involved with the organisation. It has been evolving for a lot longer than that. Volunteers do not have the time available to them like they did in the past. This puts constraints on their ability to attend CFA activities such as training, community safety and leadership. In some cases, this can even impair call out attendance.

I have seen that even callouts get prioritised by volunteers, such as alarm calls to protected premises. Some volunteers only want to attend a going fire, which is not how CFA operates. Every incident paged to a Brigade requires a response regardless of the call information. When volunteers choose if they respond to calls, this causes issues with responding in a timely manner and meeting service delivery standards. Increasingly we are seeing additional Brigades being responded to callouts due to the primary Brigades failing to respond within the time specified. Family, work and other commitments also limit volunteer availability to respond to CFA events. The fire service reforms will allow for expanding the staffing model into larger townships to ensure community safety and improve service delivery standards.

The Review received a range of information on the challenges faced by some volunteer brigades to maintain service delivery standards at all times of the day and night. These included: commuting to work outside the brigade area, increased external demands on volunteer time, such as family commitments and involvement with other organisations, increase in residential population and urban development placing greater service demands on the brigade and economic pressures making it more difficult for employers to release employees for emergency response. **Source: Drawing a line, building stronger services, Page 18.**

Post 2009

Since the 2009 Royal Commission, I have noticed a decrease in volunteer capacity with the broadening requirements of CFA volunteers in readiness and response planning. This tempo has been increasing ever since. The majority of volunteers I have interaction with do not want to be involved with standby in readiness and response modes. They want to go to a fire, do the job and go home. However, the community, government and CFA expectations do not allow for this anymore.

Traditional volunteer roles in readiness and response planning are increasing being completed by operational and non-operational staff. Additional staff are required to continue to fill the roles previous completed by volunteers. Volunteers must decide on committing to their CFA role, it is not about picking and choosing what they want to do. Volunteers cannot complain when the operational staff supports them.

Community Expectations

Since the disastrous fires of 2009 and subsequent Royal Commission findings, the community have placed significantly more expectations on the fire services. The fire service reforms are not about condemning the volunteers or pushing the volunteers out, it's about providing the best possible service to the community within policy and budget.

Service delivery models in a particular location must be designed to match the needs of that location and meet the community's expectation. Service delivery models must support the community contributing to its own safety. **Source: Drawing a line, building stronger services, Page 58.**

FRV and CFA must have the ability to provide the most appropriate service delivery to the community. The community are not in a position to understand what service is best for them. The community expects the government and the agencies who are fire and emergency experts to implement productive changes to ensure comprehensive service delivery. In a lot of cases, volunteers cannot meet these expectations and standards. It's an evolving area that will continue to change. We must not let past practices dictate future progress.

Service delivery must be appropriate for the community that is being served. While current service delivery models are still valid, new ones need to be added to the mix to provide the fire services with the range of options they need to respond in new and evolving contexts. **Source: Drawing a line, building stronger services, Page 18.**

Volunteering for the right reasons

Volunteers in the CFA should be focusing on providing a volunteer based fire service to their communities. If they are volunteering for any other reason, they should resign. Previously, a lot of damage has occurred internally and externally to CFA staff and volunteers due to people having personal agendas and seeking their own gratification. Volunteers should understand that if the capacity and capability of the volunteer response is overwhelmed by risk and requirement, then a staffing model needs to be implemented. In some cases, this has been embraced however unfortunately in the majority of cases, the reason for volunteering changes and self-interest prevails.

Strained relationships between volunteer and paid firefighters do not produce the best outcome for the community and have a demoralising effect on those offended or excluded. **Source: Drawing a line, building stronger services, Page 28.**

Both staff and volunteer firefighters should be respected equally. The fire service reforms will ensure FRV and CFA firefighters are respected for commitment and courage to their profession.

Firefighters face the most daunting of circumstances and assist the community in their greatest need. Above all else, they need to be respected for their skills and experience, their commitment and their courage. **Source: Drawing a line, building stronger services, Page 28.**

Surge Capacity

Surge capacity is extremely fluid in its ability to provide surge in rapid and sustained deployment situations. Since 2009, I have seen the surge capacity decrease at an alarming rate. Volunteers surge capacity is only evident when there are operational fires to attack. When we need surge capacity for long duration events such as readiness staging or specialised functions, there is little to no surge available.

Duty Officers in the CFA spend an inordinate amount of time trying to get capacity from volunteers. Complaints from volunteers about readiness, staging, standing by or providing support to fires are a frequent struggle. Volunteers don't comprehend the role they play outside of fighting fires. An example is the Hazelwood Mine Fire, the firefighting wasn't exciting enough so volunteers didn't volunteer, and the majority of the firefighting was conducted by career firefighters from the MFB and CFA.

It is a huge misnomer that there is a large surge capacity in the CFA. It is a fabrication spread by organisations and individuals to scare the community.

The state's surge capacity is dependent on there being a trained, fit and ready pool of volunteers available throughout the state. Being trained, fit and ready requires on going skills maintenance and involvement in responding to real events. **Source: Drawing a line, building stronger services, Page 20.**

Short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision

Short Term

There will be some additional expenditure to re-badge and re-issue uniforms, equipment, stationary and alike. This is a single initial cost and will not be on-going. This initial costing is no different to departments changing names every cycle of government. The CFA has not updated any branding since the implementation of the corporate logo twenty years ago.

Restructuring of the Fire Services

There will be cost savings by restructuring the fire services especially in outside budgeted areas. The largest will be the overtime spend; currently about \$26million per year within the CFA. The creation of FRV will better utilise career firefighters from the CFA and MFB in reducing the overtime bill.

Implementation Committee

Ex- Fire & Rescue NSW Commissioner Greg Mullins AFSM has a unique opportunity to ensure the implementation committee achieves significant fire service changes. The creation of FRV and bringing the operational staff under one organisation is a great step forward. It will ensure the fire services can move positively into the future. It allows for the structure and culture to grow in FRV and CFA to benefit the community. The implementation committee needs to take best practices from either CFA or MFB and utilise it as FRV policy. It is vital that the committee achieves the changes as soon as possible. Dynamic and decisive decisions need to be made by this committee.

Long Term

Long term cost impacts can only be imagined or dreamed up by individuals. There is not enough regulatory and Department of Treasury and Finance oversight within the fire services to ensure cost impacts do not adversely affect the community.

Fire Services Levy

The government has committed to ensuring the levy stays the same for the next two years.

The reforms outlined in the Fire Services Statement will take a number of years to fully implement. Any costs associated with implementing the reforms will not be met through the Fire Services Property Levy. In addition, the amount collected through the Fire Services Property Levy in the next two years will not exceed the amount collected in 2016/17. Once the new fire services have been implemented, the Government will consider how to streamline and align the Fire Services Property Levy to these new arrangements. **Source: Fire Services Levy webpage, Page <http://www.firelevy.vic.gov.au/next-steps>**

CONCLUSION

Over the past three years, irreversible damage has been inflicted on the operational staff and volunteers of the Country Fire Authority.

The Country Fire Authority has become a political football. The organisations and individuals involved with its demise should be held accountable for their actions in destroying a highly distinguished institution.

There have been eight different reviews into Victoria's fire services in the last ten years. The staff and volunteers are tired of reviews, reports and recommendations that do not get implemented. This is a unique opportunity to start afresh.

If the Fire Services Bill does not pass through Government and become Law, the ongoing operation of the Country Fire Authority is in serious doubt. The continued internal divisions, lack of integrity and professional conduct by staff and volunteers will continue to decline. Ongoing mental health issues, bullying & harassment investigations and legal arguments will increase and continue to cause more damage.

Significant change is required; particularly in terms of morale, governance and effort.

The title of the 2015 Fire Services Review was "Drawing a line, building stronger services". This statement reflects what the select committee needs to act upon.

I implore you to pass the Fire Services Bill to allow for the Government, organisations, staff and volunteers to move forward. The changes will ensure the community starts regaining the trust and credibility of the Country Fire Authority and Fire Rescue Victoria.

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