



**Ben Thorn** [redacted]  
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To Consultation/DTF@DTF  
cc "lcsc@parliament.vic.gov.au"  
<lcsc@parliament.vic.gov.au>  
bcc  
Subject Fire Services Reform Committee -  
Submission

To all,

Please see attached submission to the Fire Services Reform Committee.

This submission is from my own personal experiences and of my own opinions.

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission.

Yours,



**Ben Thorn** Leading Fire Fighter  
Fire & Emergency Management-Specialist Response  
CFA HQ – 8 Lakeside Dve Burwood East Vic 3151



Protecting lives and property



[cfa.vic.gov.au](http://cfa.vic.gov.au)

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Dear Assistant Clerk Committees,

## **INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017**

I Ben Thorn am currently employed by CFA as a Leading Fire fighter stationed at Hallam fire station. I have worked for CFA for 14 years, and over that time have worked at all bar 3 fire stations in CFA. I spent a number of years working at Morwell fire station, before moving back to Melbourne and working at Springvale fire station then moving onto Hallam.

I am a qualified hazardous materials (HAZMAT) technician, who is also involved in instructing HAZMAT at all levels from recruits up all over the state. I am qualified in urban search & rescue (USAR) as a CAT 2 operator, making up part of the state's capability of 220 USAR CAT 2 technicians. I have also recently instructed on USAR CAT 2 skills acquisition courses facilitated by MFB as a multi-agency course.

I am writing this submission in support of the proposed reform of the fire services for the following reasons;

- As fire fighters, our role is to support the community in their time of need. When responding to emergency incidents it is our job to take an uncontrolled incident, apply our skills and knowledge to gain control over that incident thus ensuring it is safe for the community. To be able to do this, fire fighters need to work in a tight team environment to ensure that this outcome is able to be achieved, providing safety for the community but also for each other.

When I first joined CFA the minimum manning on the station I was sent to was two. That meant that only myself and an officer were on duty, and we relied on the support of volunteers. There were a number of times where we attended fires when I would spend upwards of 10 mins fighting a fire on my own before support arrived. Looking back I put myself into some dangerous situations, all so that I could meet the expectations that the community had of fire fighters.

Since then manning has increased across all stations, sadly though we are still putting ourselves into these situations. While the manning has increased, so too has the expectations of the community, and to meet these expectations fire services in Victoria need to move forward. In moving forward we also need to ensure that we are providing a safe environment for our fire fighters by ensuring that at least 7 fire fighters are dispatched within 8 minutes.

- By ensuring that 7 fire fighters are responded in 8 mins this will mean that fire fighting activities can occur in a safe and efficient manner thus providing the service that the Victorian community expects and deserves.

By utilising career fire fighters this will ensure that a guaranteed response is available with a known mix of minimum skills. A volunteer response sadly isn't guaranteed due to different pressures and responsibilities that are faced by volunteer fire fighters, most often due to family and work commitments. There is also the uncertainty of what skills mix a volunteer crew will have.

- There are a number of mistruths out there that talk about how employing career fire fighters under a single banner, and reverting CFA to a volunteer only organisation will have a serious effect on volunteer turnout or surge capacity.

CFA as a volunteer organisation will still respond to the same incidents that a career only organisation will, and as we do now, we will all work together to achieve our objectives. This is because as fire fighters, career or volunteer, we are here to serve the community.

CFA's ability to provide a surge capacity for major emergencies will not be affected, and will still work the same way that it currently does. There is no reduction in the numbers of fire fighters career or volunteer, therefore the states surge capacity will still be there.

- Support of volunteers should be maintained at all times. This will still be the case under these reforms with career fire fighters providing that support by working within CFA, and providing roles that they currently do. This includes catchment officers, district officers and even instructors. This is current practise with CFA at the moment, and should be maintained into the future.

These reforms should also provide support to CFA brigades to help with volunteer training and retention so that they are able to not only provide the response that they currently do, but also improve skill sets to ensure that they are all able to work within a safe environment while attending incidents.

- Reflecting on my 14 years with CFA, I am disappointed to think that there have been only 5 of those years where we haven't been in an industrial dispute. In fact I have fire fighters on my shift whose entire employment has been shrouded by industrial dispute and uncertainty.

With all other organisations an industrial dispute is between employees and the employer, however within CFA there is the third entity who wishes to have

a say in my working conditions being CFA volunteers and their representatives. Interestingly there are no clauses within previous, current or proposed EBA's that volunteers need to work to.

The changes that the federal government made to the fair work act, allowing volunteers to have a say in EBA negotiations have now made working for the CFA quite unstable and there is a large amount of uncertainty looking forward to the future.

By having a volunteer only CFA, and moving career staff to a career only organisation this would negate the issues caused by this legislation. I would also think that it would allow for more meaningful negotiations between employees and employer not having a third party to worry about, and could actually lead to less time in industrial disputes.

- Throughout the times of industrial dispute there is always tension within workplaces, especially when you are in a tight cohesive team like at a fire station. This current dispute is the worst that I have seen for morale and confidence around the fire station.

With the intervention of the volunteers into EBA negotiations it has created another aspect of tension that has to be dealt with on the fire station. There is a feeling of resentment out there towards volunteers for stepping into the industrial arena, especially when the agreement that they are trying to have a say in doesn't actually cover them.

This has taken a real toll on morale on station, and is actually having an effect off station for members. Personally I have found myself having to defend my role as a career fire fighter within CFA against volunteers, members of the public and even family. This is all due to the politicising of fire fighters and more so that blatant mistruths that are spread via media without ramification.

I fully support this bill, in both presumptive rights for cancer & fire service reform. Both are important issues and are something that Victorian fire services need to ensure that we can remain at the forefront of fire fighting, and are able to service the most bushfire prone area in the world, along with the fastest growing capital city in Australia.

Yours Sincerely,

Ben Thorn – Leading Fire Fighter CFA

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