



[REDACTED]
06/07/2017 09:48 PM

To Consultation/DTF@DTF
cc
bcc
Subject fire services reform submission

Dear Fire Services Reform Select Committee,

Please find attached my submission into the fire Services reform.

I request that my name and identity remains confidential

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this submission.

Regards

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

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fire services reform submission.docx

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees,

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

I am [REDACTED].

I have over 40 year's operational service as a fire fighter with 9 years in UK Fire service and 32 years with Country Fire Authority.

I joined the West Sussex Fire brigade in UK in 1972 until 1981 when I emigrated to Australia. I joined Country Fire Authority in 1985 where I have 32 years' service. Since 2002, I have been an Operations Officer originally at Hallam Fire brigade and Casey group of brigades and for the last 5 years as Officer In Charge of Patterson River Fire brigade (an integrated brigade of staff and volunteers) and also Catchment Officer for South East Group of brigades (Dandenong, Carrum Downs, Edithvale, Frankston, Keysborough, Mount Eliza, Noble Park, Patterson River, Skye and Springvale)

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

Safety on the fire ground is vitally important and for too long our response has been unsafe for fire fighters and community. With a volunteer response there is no certainty of who are attending, the crew numbers and make up of crew skills. This means that important safety aspects are ignored by fire fighters wearing breathing apparatus and entering burning or smoke logged structures knowing there is no back up or safety considerations for them. Therefore it is important to have guaranteed backup - guaranteed that two trucks with at least 7 fire fighters will be dispatched within 8 minutes. The important point here is any incident controller (Staff or Volunteer) can cancel or return this response if it is not required. The notion that it is 7 on the fire ground is not correct it is 7 responded.

The idea that this is new is not correct as I know Edithvale (CFA volunteer brigade), are supported by MFB staff and there is no issue with this response or indeed any management issues of who is in charge of the incident, they work together. Those that say the opposite or it will destroy volunteerism are wrong and I would say scare mongering.

I can advise that similar arrangements with CFA career fire fighters occur at Carrum Downs, Keysborough, Noble Park and Skye volunteer brigades.

There is no issue between the brigades or about the management so the evolution to this response has been occurring for some time and is well accepted by those brigades as the best service delivery to the community, after all that's what it is all about - The best service delivery to the community and safety to all fire fighters on the fire ground.

This level of response is much better for the community in their time of need, not only to minimise damage due to timely and efficient response, it also affords the safety that fire fighters have in the past forgone.

Having all career fire fighters in one fire service will not affect volunteer surge capacity, as volunteers turn out now to major campaign and locally big fires sometimes with staff attending and also where staff do not attend, so I see no reason why surge capacity will be affected. What I do see is that the number of operational volunteer fire fighters in CFA has reduced (given the way brigades keep records the actual numbers are not known, but, believed to be in the order of 28000) from the 60000 when I joined. The reason for this is the urbanisation of Victoria and the necessity for volunteers to leave their homes to go where work is available to them. Work being further away means they are not available for fire calls unless they have a very understanding employer which is getting rare to find today. This is an ongoing issue for CFA moving forward particularly in metropolitan and regional areas but now in the growth corridors of Victoria.

That CFA remains a volunteer operational fire fighting organisation must fit well with its stated vision which is "CFA is a volunteer and community-based fire and emergency services organisation. Our vision is to work together with communities to keep Victorians safe from fire and other emergencies." (CFA website page).

That experienced Operations Officers and Operations managers remain to administer CFA would be I believe the outcome that volunteers are seeking, self-determination and no workplace agreements to worry about.

As indicated the reforms are around the 35 integrated stations primary response areas, with these areas being highly urbanised and high risk the response into these areas over time has increased. In CFA speak generally a response is a B response to code 1 emergency calls, that is 2 brigades responding, nowadays more and more responses are a C response being 3 brigades. In the bushfire setting we have for years had hot day responses to increase the normal response by another brigade and for the last few years we have an E response being 5 brigades to a code 1 grass and scrub fire.

The reform will assist with standardisation of career training/specialist response/response standards and equipment etc. This will of course be desirable as skills are transferable and with joint training with CFA brigades can also serve to better skill volunteers.

Whilst personally I have not been attacked by doing my job I am aware of my staff and volunteers having been subject to derogatory comments from public and in social media, this has had a detrimental effect on their esteem and the criticism has had a negative and worrying impact on the relationship between staff and volunteers. One only has to see the vitriol involved in social media, so it's not surprising that staff and volunteers want separation to do their roles without harassment or walking on eggshells if a comment or action is taken as attacking one side or the other.

Recent events where volunteers have involved themselves in a staff EBA have broken completely the cooperation and respect needed for a healthy CFA. Unfortunately the damage is too great and in my opinion not able to be recovered. The levels of view held are similar to the views I experienced during the UK fire service strike in 1977. Family members (Fathers and sons, Brothers) and friends were split apart, grief and hatred was the result within families and friendships were destroyed.

I do give great credit to the majority that have tried to do the right thing unfortunately the mud has been thrown and now it sticks and in my view a separation of the staff and volunteers is now the only way to move forward.

Importantly the reform will benefit CFA as it has included a package to assist with volunteer recruitment and retention across the CFA; and includes funding for volunteer station upgrades etc, this is a good thing as I have worked hard over the last 15 years in particular to obtain funding for stations and equipment and I know how hard it is to come by so the news of the funding is most welcome and deserved.

I initiated a response I called the Casey Hub model in 2008 to utilise the staff at Hallam and Cranbourne as the primary support brigades to neighbouring volunteer brigades. Whilst not the same as the reforms that are now proposed it certainly was designed to better service the community needs and ensure a timely and efficient response. There was resistance at the time from some volunteer brigades, but, when they saw how the model worked, it was accepted and I understand still in use today.

Similar models are used by staff at Pakenham and Rosebud brigades, both stations staff support into neighbouring brigades and in Pakenham's case the entire group area.

To my mind the proposed reforms are not the reforms that Victorian community requires. Victoria Police can police the state with a single organisation as does Ambulance Victoria. Whilst not within the brief of submission I would offer for investigation a model where the Emergency Management commissioner sat overarching a single fire brigade with a Deputy commissioner Urban (Metro Melbourne and regional centres) and a Deputy Commissioner Rural (Areas outside Metro Melbourne and regional centres) and also a Deputy Commissioner Storm and Tempest would be a much more stable and strong structure that will serve Victoria for decades to come.

It will bring interoperability, uniform standards and reduce duplication of services and I suggest as a more acceptable model than what is being proposed. We really need to have a service of standards and accountability not a service where individual beliefs are held in higher stead than those of the community requirements.

I request that this submission is treated confidentially

Yours sincerely,



Reluctant submitter to the inquiry