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To Consultation/DTF@DTF
cc
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Subject Fire Services Bill Inquiry Submission

My name is Saviour Saliba and I am employed by the MFB as a full time firefighter stationed at Broadmeadows Fire Station within the Northern zone of the metropolitan fire district. I hold the rank of Qualified Firefighter and have been a firefighter for almost five years.

I live at [REDACTED] and my contact number is [REDACTED]

It is with sadness that I have seen the issue of fire reform in Victoria being misrepresented by so many disparate groups, many of which are either ill-informed or unaffected by the reforms that will have a positive impact on the safety and confidence of the Victorian community as a whole.

At the centre of the debate as it stands is the argument that any changes to our fire services will alienate many of the hard working and dedicated volunteers who have continued to support our state in times of need over decades. In fact, the vast majority of volunteers across the state currently respond to emergencies from brigades that are located some distance away from those permanently staffed MFB and CFA stations within the metropolitan fire district and across urbanised district centres across the state such Geelong or Springvale. In every case across the state where rural brigades are the only source of firefighters, it will continue to be the volunteers who respond to emergencies without any response from full time firefighters from MFB or CFA. In this way, the volunteers will continue to do the good work that they do, supported as always by other agencies as required such as SES and Ambulance Victoria.

In the case of CFA integrated stations, those being stations where both permanent full time firefighters co-locate with volunteers, any emergency will always be responded to by a minimum of seven full time firefighters and any number of volunteers from the associated or adjoining brigades. In this situation, the response of seven full time firefighters as a minimum to an emergency such as a house fire ensures that there are enough fully trained firefighters capable of making entry to the burning structure using breathing apparatus to both fight the fire and to perform a search of the premises and possibly one or more rescues. To break this down, it is important to understand why seven firefighters is the minimum.

In the case of a house fire, the first appliance (fire truck) on scene may have three or four firefighters on board. In many cases it will be an appliance of only three. In this case, there will be an officer who is responsible for ensuring safe operation on the fire ground as well as liaising with civilians on scene and to provide communications with both the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority and oncoming appliances.

This first appliance is required to be on scene within 7.7 minutes and is often on scene far sooner than this. The second firefighter from the first appliance is responsible for establishing the appliance as a firefighting resource, that is to say that they must quickly ensure that the firefighting pumps mounted on the appliances are engaged and that water supply is established from a fire hydrant that in many cases can be as far as 200m away from the site of the house fire. The third firefighter from the first appliance on scene has a duty to don (or get dressed into) their breathing apparatus and full complement of structural firefighting personal protective clothing (PPC) and ready themselves to make entry into the structure to perform an initial search for any persons not accounted for and to contain and extinguish the fire but not before a second firefighter is on scene and available to make entry alongside them.

At this stage, when an alarm of fire is raised in an integrated CFA station, a second appliance from an adjoining full time CFA or MFB station will also be responded. This second appliance will have the four firefighters on board to ensure the full complement of seven breathing apparatus training firefighters have been dispatched to the fire within 90 seconds of the call to triple 0. When the second appliance arrives on scene, the officer will be responsible for some of the tasks that were initially being carried out by the first officer on scene. One of the firefighters from this second appliance will quickly don their breathing apparatus and all PPC to enable entry with the firefighter from the first appliance. This is a crucial aspect of safe firefighting operations and cannot be left to chance nor can it be understated. In short, entry to a structure cannot and will never be made by one firefighter on their own and explains the importance of getting two full time staffed fire appliances to the scene of a building fire within 7.7 minutes. This leaves the driver and the fourth firefighter from the second appliance to ready themselves in breathing apparatus and PPC to be available to relieve the first two firefighters upon their exit from the building.

The above explanation is simply to provide the relevant background and understanding to those not familiar with our safe operating procedures as full time firefighters and hopefully breaks down any mis-information that may have led you to believe that firefighting operations by volunteers in rural areas would be compromised in any way by a change to our fire services structures covering urbanised areas of the state.

Most importantly, it should be noted that if a volunteer happens to arrive on scene before a full time appliance (as unlikely as this might be due to them having to drop what they may be doing, commute to their brigade, change into firefighting apparel and then turn out) then they are in no way restricted from commencing firefighting operations (the likely actions of which would be to attempt to ascertain information regarding any occupants and perhaps get water onto exposures such as other structures in close proximity to the building on fire to mitigate the risk of these structures also igniting).

Underwriting the importance of understanding this scenario is the recognition of the fact that this scenario is becoming more and more likely in areas which have now built up

around Victoria in areas that were only a short number of years ago deemed as rural due to the majority of residences being spread across predominately large tracks of open space. However in recent years, areas such as Mernda to the north of Melbourne or Scoresby to the south-east have experienced an explosion in populations and hence are now highly and densely built up areas in the mould of a typical outer suburb of Melbourne such as Broadmeadows or Camberwell.

As you can imagine, the time critical nature of an emergency that may involve a person or multiple persons trapped in a burning building means that a response by two or more full time staffed appliances at any time of any day of any year is not negotiable and must be seen by any reasonable member of our community as the minimum standard of fire services coverage for any built up urban area. The fact that our fire services boundaries have not been reviewed for half a century should be seen as nothing short of negligent in our state's duty of care to its citizens.

The restructure of our fire services is long overdue. Providing one full time fire services that is designed to provide both the minimum level of expected fire fighting response as well as safe firefighting operational practices for us as firefighters is paramount. The response times that are demanded from and delivered by us as full time firefighters also extends to emergency medical response. In the event that a person presents as not breathing and not conscious, full time emergency medical response (EMR) trained firefighters such as myself are dispatched with the same 90 second urgency as required for an alarm of fire. This means that early emergency medical intervention including CPR and defibrillation will be provided by trained firefighters often before the arrival of Ambulance Victoria officers, improving the patient's chances of revival, survival and recovery by exponential proportions. In areas that have become densely populated urban environments still covered by volunteer response, this early life saving intervention cannot be guaranteed.

In all my evidence to this inquiry, I stress that it is appropriate emergency response to the public that is important, not the historical conditions of a romantic past that some seem unable to detach themselves from. The time has come to ensure that we not only start to correct some of the oversights in our fire services coverage model in recent decades but to provide the foundations for expanding a world class fire service to an ever expanding urbanised Victoria for generations to come. In saying this, providing the freedom to volunteers to steer their own course into the future when developing rural firefighting strategies and operations can only genuinely be realised by the implementation of these reforms.

I trust you will consider my submission thoughtfully and positively.

Sincerely,

Saviour Saliba

Qualified Firefighter - Metropolitan Fire Brigade