



Richard Geluk [REDACTED]

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To Consultation/DTF@DTF  
cc  
bcc  
Subject Fire Services Bill Select Committee  
2017 - Submission

1 attachment



RGeluk-Submission.doc

To whom it may concern,  
Please find attached my submission in favour of fire services reform in Victoria.  
Sincerely,  
Leading Firefighter Richard Geluk (MFB)

Leading Firefighter Richard Geluk - Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB)

6th July, 2017

Fire Services Bill Select Committee

To the Committee,

I have been a professional firefighter in the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) for almost seven years. I have worked in the inner city for some years but have spent the majority of my career working in the MFB fire stations close to the MFB/CFA boundary. In this capacity, I have worked alongside CFA professional firefighters and CFA volunteer firefighters.

I am writing this submission to the Fire Services Bill Select Committee 2017 because there is an urgent need for reform in the fire services. I have seen the failings of a broken system first hand during my firefighting career. I have colleagues with over thirty years of service in the MFB who have witnessed these failings from the start of their careers.

Volunteerism is a vital part of emergency service response, including firefighting, in Victoria. But there are limits to the effectiveness of this form of service delivery. In rural areas, volunteer firefighting makes sense. Volunteers often live and work close to the fire station, aiding faster response times. The populations are small, congestion is less than urban areas and the motivation for volunteering is also sound—I'll help to protect your property and loved ones and you help to protect mine.

The MFB has been in existence in Melbourne for 125 years. Over that time, it has seen many changes. Unfortunately, the boundaries between the MFB and the rest of Victoria (covered by the CFA) haven't changed in roughly sixty years. To put that in perspective, parts of North Melbourne didn't even have running water in the 1950s. Many of today's urban fringe suburbs were placed outside the MFB boundary the last time the boundary was set because they were country areas. I live in the urban fringe on the east side of Melbourne in Croydon Hills. Places near me, like Lilydale and Bayswater and Mooroolbark, were fields and orchards the last time the MFB boundary was set.

Times have changed dramatically. Bayswater boasts many industrial businesses. Lilydale is a densely populated suburb. Mooroolbark is not only a densely populated residential suburb but a walk through the suburb reveals that many of the properties, the majority in some areas, are subdivisions, further increasing population density. On top of all this, high density living in the form of apartment buildings are becoming increasingly popular in the outer suburbs. Recent census statistics will show that former orchards and farms are now suburbs with tens of thousands of people.

Volunteer firefighting has not been effective in areas like this for a long time. A professional firefighting response is required.

I am not endeavouring to disparage volunteer firefighters here. There are many who's motivation and efforts are commendable. But great effort and attitude do not guarantee successful outcomes.

Professional firefighters have a goal of getting to a job in under 7.7 minutes. There is a reason for this. Shorter response times than this 7.7 minutes means that firefighters can contain a fire to the room of origin at least ninety percent of the time. Longer response times than this mean that the likelihood of losing the entire structure, such as a house, exponentially increases. This is exacerbated these days by the many synthetic materials that are used in manufacturing that combust more quickly. This was recognised a long time ago and is why insurance companies charged higher premiums in volunteer protected areas. This has carried through to today's fire service levies which cost more in CFA areas than the MFB fire district, despite providing less service. A professional response results in less loss of property and life; human lives being also at stake.

When a call is dispatched in a CFA area where volunteers provide coverage, an allowance has to be made to give the volunteers time to make their way to the fire station. At least four minutes can expire before a volunteer response is deemed to have failed. Then the process is restarted for another crew elsewhere and, after the time taken to do this, the four minutes starts again. That crew may also fail to respond and the process resets again. These delays can mean the difference between the loss of a bedroom or the entire house; time spent recovering in hospital or bleeding out trapped in a car wreck on the street; a hiccup in production or the loss of an entire business. In contrast, professional firefighters are standing by their trucks every minute of every day, all year round. There is never a failure of crew availability.

There is also an impact on the safety of the firefighters themselves. When professional crews are dispatched, a minimum of two trucks and seven firefighters are turned out within ninety seconds of the call being received. Until a crew gets on scene, the nature and scale of a job cannot be known. If it is a false alarm, the second truck can be turned back while still on the road and the issue can be dealt with by the first attending crew. But if it is a larger or more complex job, then the first crew knows they have back-up arriving hot on their heels and even more trucks and firefighters if the scale of the job demands it. This is vital, for example, for crews going into burning structures in breathing apparatus. Safety standards demand that firefighters work in teams and do not enter dangerous situations solo. Because these situations are dangerous and fluid in nature, backup is vital and could mean the difference between life and death for the firefighters themselves.

I will point out here that turning out a minimum of seven professional firefighters to a job has never meant that the first arriving crew cannot start work until all seven have arrived. And it has never meant that volunteers that might be on scene have to stand around doing nothing until seven professional firefighters arrive. Deliberate propagation of misinformation on this issue has caused much damage to all.

Firefighter and community safety is not only dependent on rapid response and crew numbers, it is also dependent on crew qualifications and training. While there are some very competent volunteer firefighters, there are also many that simply don't have the training or expertise that a particular job may require. At any given job, the officer in charge (OIC) can depend on any professional firefighter to be qualified in breathing apparatus (BA) use, medical response, pump operations and many other skills. There are no guarantees with a volunteer turnout. Not all volunteers are trained in BA (any volunteer with a beard cannot use BA but it's not always so obvious). Volunteers do not receive Emergency Medical Response training. Some volunteers are not trained in the use of ladders. There are no guarantees with a volunteer response.

You could, for example, have a house fire where the volunteer responders are not trained in BA and therefore cannot enter the house to extinguish the fire at the source, which could mean the difference between losing a room or the whole house, or being able to search the house for missing persons, such as someone injured or hurt, overcome by smoke or trapped behind a burning door.

When faced with volunteer crews at a job, the OIC cannot readily assume that they can perform the tasks he or she needs done. In a tense and time sensitive situation, this can be problematic.

Volunteers are not trained in Emergency Medical Response. Fire service reform would mean that the thousands of people living in suburbs like Lilydale, Hoppers Crossing, Sunbury, Craigieburn, Dandenong, Springvale and others would receive a medical response by firefighters for any non-conscious, non-breathing incident, such as cardiac arrests, drug overdoses, major traumas, and the like.

Fire service reform would bring greater accountability to areas of Victoria with growing populations. Professional firefighters do not get the option to choose whether or not to turn out. They are also bound more tightly to adhere to operational procedure, which translates to greater safety for firefighters and for the public.

Fire service reform would also streamline emergency service expenditure. One professional fire service would eliminate the need for multiple boards and upper management positions. Training would be aligned. Differences in equipment between the MFB and the CFA could be merged into a common base for one professional service.

With fire service reform, the problems of service delivery we see today in an expanding Melbourne and Victorian population could be addressed with ongoing population triggers. Periodic reviews would highlight when suburbs grow to the point of requiring the increased services of a professional fire service. These population increases would translate to greater fire service levy intake, thus funding the required changes.

One negative take on fire service reform that has been repeatedly raised is that reform would negatively impact the surge capacity of volunteers. I believe this to be erroneous. There are 1180 volunteer brigades throughout the state of Victoria. Fire service reform will only impact approximately 32 stations in suburbs that have ceased to be country and are now heavily populated urban centres. Professional firefighters will be inserted to better cover the communities needs. Volunteers won't be prevented from turning out. There will not be negative change to volunteerism.

Those who argue against reform need to be reminded that the needs of the community come first. Emergency response is a service, not a club. No volunteer has a right over a professional firefighter to 'see action' at the public's expense when a professional response is required. I believe the recent changes to Fair Work by Federal Liberal forgot this and got things very backward. Fire reform is in the public's interest. Far from putting Victorians at risk, as some are still trying to claim, fire service reform will make Victoria safer, both for the public and the emergency services that serve them.

Sincerely,

Richard Geluk  
Leading Firefighter, MFB.