



Richard Cuthbert-Sayers

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To Consultation/DTF@DTF
cc "[REDACTED]"
bcc [REDACTED]
Subject Fire Services Reform

1 attachment



fireselectcommittee.pdf

To whom it may concern,

Please find attached my submission for your consideration in relation to the proposed 'Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (reforms) Bill 2017'.

I hope my submission can assist the honorable members on the select committee make an informed decision. Should they have any queries, or questions, I make myself fully available to explain my experiences further.

Sincerely,

Richard Cuthbert-Sayers
Leading Firefighter
Richmond Fire Station
[REDACTED]

Wednesday, July 5, 2017

Richard Cuthbert-Sayers
Leading Firefighter (MFB)

Assistant Clerk Committees
Department of the Legislative Council
Fire Service Bill Select Committee
Parliament House,
Sprint Street East Melbourne VIC 3002

Dear honorable members of the Fire Service Bill Select Committee,

I am a Leading Firefighter at Richmond Fire Station on C platoon. Richmond Fire Station is part of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. I have recently achieved nine years of proud service with the brigade. Richmond is a busy urban brigade. It has a very mixed demographic within its turnout area, ranging from some of Melbourne's wealthiest people to some of the lowest socio economic groupings. There are various high risk properties within Richmond, from hospital and high rise commission housing, to biological laboratories and hundred year old (plus) warehouses heavily laden with combustibles and often hazardous materials. Richmond is also a very culturally diverse area with many ethnicities represented within the community.

My role at Richmond Fire Station is to protect life, property, and the environment when responding to any call of fire. A call of fire is not only a response to a structural fire, it might also include road accident rescue, hazardous materials incidents, non-structure fires, high angle (rope) and confined space rescues, emergency medical response (in support of Ambulance Victoria), urban search and rescue, marine rescue, and a range of other more non-classifiable calls for assistance. The role of the modern firefighter requires a broad and highly skilled, resilient work force.

Along with the usual skills maintenance training, I have undertaken specialist training within the MFB to become a High Angle Rescue Technician and Confined Space Rescue operator. I have also been awarded the National Emergency Medal for my service provided to Victorians during the 2009 Black Saturday fires. Prior to being a Professional Career Firefighter with the MFB I was also a volunteer with the CFA. I served in this capacity for 5 years at the Warrandyte Fire Brigade.

I believe my experience of serving in both services (CFA and MFB) as a professional career firefighter and a volunteer has given me a valuable insight into why reform in the fire service is truly needed.

I write to the committee to support the restructuring of Victoria's fire services as contemplated by the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017.

As the recent findings from the latest Australian census highlighted, Melbourne is a rapidly expanding city. Melbourne is on track to become Australia's biggest, and most populated city by 2048. The boundaries between 'Country' and 'Metropolitan' fire districts have not changed in around 60 years to reflect the massive and continual change to Melbourne's urban sprawl, increased population, and new developments. There is an increased risk in the urban fringes of Melbourne and without supporting the above mentioned bill we are simply ignoring it.

The residents of those areas on the urban fringes pay the same, if not more, in fire service levies and yet they receive a non-guaranteed response in the event that they call on the fire brigade to respond.

During my time at the CFA as a volunteer I can recall a number of occasions that the brigade failed to turn out when a call for assistance was made. On one particular occasion, 3 members attended the station to respond to a reported structure fire in the Doncaster East area, which is a suburban residential area. Of these 3 members, none were qualified to drive the fire appliance under emergency road conditions, and there was no member with qualifications in internal or external structural firefighting and no breathing apparatus qualified firefighters. So even though a response was possible (albeit a slow one due to having to proceed to the call by normal road conditions) once they arrived on scene, they would not have had the skills required to perform their tasks safely or efficiently.

On this particular occasion, it was elected to not respond to the call. This was of course, no fault of the members that attended the station that day. They were all new members (within 12 months) to the brigade, and eager to respond. As training is not run for volunteers as frequently, it takes quite some time to gain the qualifications required to undertake structural firefighting. And if a course does come up, it may not be suitable for the candidate to attend due to work and family commitments, because after all, volunteers are exactly that. They do a fantastic job in serving the community with what they have and with understandable limitations.

This is one example of why reform is needed. I know for a fact that this scenario and other similar scenarios play out on a daily basis throughout greater Melbourne. Doncaster East is a suburb that adjoins Templestowe. Templestowe has a staffed fire station, crewed with professional career firefighters 24 hours 7 days a week, with a guaranteed response time of 2 fire appliance on scene within 8 minutes. Each one of those firefighters has completed an intensive recruit training course giving them the skills required across a broad range of areas to combat all manner of emergencies. East Doncaster residents live in a similarly built up, urban, residential area, with numerous nursing homes, shopping centers, and other high risk properties, and rely on primarily volunteer response from the CFA. The residents of East Doncaster MAY get a response within 8 minutes, but there is a likely chance they will have to wait longer. There is no guarantee that more than one firefighter or appliance will respond to their call for assistance, and what level of training that firefighter has undertaken. This distinct difference in services received and increased risk for some citizens is due to the simple fact that the residents of East Doncaster live on the wrong side of a line drawn on a map 60 years ago. Residents all across the outer suburbs of Melbourne get a non-guaranteed response and this puts them, their families, and their properties at risk.

A lesser known responsibility that the MFB has taken on in more recent years is Emergency Medical Response. EMR is a response by fire crews to act in support of Ambulance Victoria as the turnout times from these stations are often quicker than ambulance response. The professional career staff of the MFB and CFA have been trained to provide lifesaving airway management, defibrillation and first aid. These interventions, if carried out early can greatly change the outcome for the patient, and reduce the costs to the public health system, for people that have suffered cardiac arrest. The Fire brigade is able to arrive on scene before Ambulance Victoria in most instances, particularly in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. The EMR program has been a very successful since the early 1990's and is directly responsible for hundreds of lives saved. Residents served by volunteer brigades in the urban fringe areas of Melbourne do not have the benefit of this service. How is it reasonable for people of Templestowe to receive the potentially life-saving benefits of this service but those residents of East Doncaster miss out because they live on the wrong side of the road? They pay the exact same amount of Fire Service Levies, yet receive less service for their dollar.

Areas that were deemed 'country' 60 years ago have undergone significant change. Some of these areas are fully built up residential areas now, yet still rely on volunteers to respond in the event of a fire call.

Volunteers do a fantastic job and often go above and beyond in providing the best possible fire coverage they are capable of for their local communities. However, the reality is that they cannot and should not be expected to continue to stretch themselves to provide fire coverage for areas that are in need of a modern fire service, with a guaranteed response of 7 firefighters in fewer than 8 minutes with specialist qualifications and training. On many occasions volunteers are unable to respond to emergencies due to commitments such as work and family and this can lead to extended and blown out response times. Depending on a volunteer fire service in these areas that have changed dramatically over the last 60 years puts lives and property at risk. It also puts undue stress on volunteers. The simple fact is, and through no fault of their own, volunteer firefighters cannot deliver a guaranteed response to meet these essential requirements. It is for this reason that drastic reform is required.

The proposed reforms in the fire service is not about getting rid of volunteers because they are unable to deliver the service; rather it's about giving Victorians the best possible fire coverage in the event of an emergency. It is about providing a fire service to reflect the modern needs of a changing community with a guaranteed response. 7 Firefighters on the fire ground in under 8 Minutes is the globally accepted standard to both minimize the loss of life and damage to property, but also to allow firefighting tasks to be carried out with a minimum level of safety. My workplace is an inherently risky one. I rely on the firefighter standing next to me to be my lifeline should anything unexpected happen. Ensuring there are 7 firefighters on the fire ground means that I can operate confidently with the security of that lifeline. Those professional career staff from both the MFB and CFA operating in the urban fringe areas does not have that security. They may need to make a choice between waiting an unknown amount of time before the next appliance arrives on scene with suitably trained firefighters on board to back them up, or risking their life and entering a dangerous and unpredictable environment to attempt a rescue and possibly becoming a victim themselves. That is an unthinkable decision to make, but it's the decision that is being made at the moment.

The time to change is now. This reform is about responding to an increased risk to our changing community. It is about providing a guaranteed and highly qualified response to our citizens in an emergency. It is also about providing those who put themselves at risk in these emergencies with the safest possible working environment.

In the interest of providing the best fire and emergency coverage for all Victorians I urge you to please support the restructuring of Victoria's fire services as contemplated by the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017.

Sincerely

Richard Cuthbert-Sayers
Leading Firefighter – Richmond Fire Station – Metropolitan Fire Brigade