

CORRECTED VERSION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUTER SUBURBAN/INTERFACE SERVICES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Marine Rescue Services in Victoria

Inverloch — 9 April 2014

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Volunteer Marine Rescue Mornington

Mr Daniel Knapp, President

Mr Tim Warner, Past President and Operational Member

Mr Col Strawbridge, Immediate Past President and Training Officer

The CHAIR — This is an all-party parliamentary committee hearing evidence today on the inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria. Welcome to the hearing of the Economic Development, Infrastructure and Outer Suburban/Interface Services Committee inquiry into marine rescue services in Victoria. All evidence taken and given in this room today will be protected by parliamentary privilege. However, any comments you make outside this room will not have the same protection. I ask each of you to state your full name, address and whether you are appearing on behalf of an organisation.

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — Col Strawbridge, representing VMR Mornington. I am the immediate past president of VMR Mornington and current training officer.

Mr KNAPP — I am Daniel Knapp. I am the current president of VMR Mornington.

Mr WARNER — Tim Warner. I am a past president of VMR Mornington and am appearing as a representative of VMR.

The CHAIR — You are all members of the organisation that you are here to represent? Fine. The evidence you are about to give will also become part of a public document and be publicly available. I invite you now to make your oral submission.

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — VMR Mornington is supportive of a comprehensive review of marine search and rescue arrangements in Victoria. VMR is solely focused on one aim: the protection of life at sea. This is represented in the organisation's mission statement: 'To serve our community in the protection of life at sea'. It is our position that any improvements that directly go to improving marine emergency response capability in the state and that lead directly to timely, professional and safe responses for those in desperate need of assistance out on the water are indeed positive steps forward for the boating public and all marine users.

VMR has acquired a high level of organisational and operational competence, which has developed over the past 34 years of operation. In the 2012–13 financial year, VMR was the busiest single volunteer marine search and rescue unit in the state, responding to 203 marine search and rescue incidents under the direction of the Victorian Water Police. VMR is very proud of the fact that in our 34 years of operating we have never once been unable to respond to a call for assistance, regardless of time of day or the location of the incident.

VMR was created by the community for the community after the tragic death of a local fisherman. Local police were on the scene quickly on the cliff tops, but due to a lack of a marine-based ready response unit, one fisherman drowned. The community and local police all rallied together to create what is now VMR. Due to this core guiding principle, all of the operational members at VMR, including all the associates who actively support the service, have never lost sight of why we do what we do. The volunteers never do this for themselves. It is not about wearing uniforms or gaining a higher rank. It is not driven by personalities or personal or political motives. It is about serving the community. We believe that VMR's professionalism is unquestionable. It has been awarded the Boating Industry Association's award for the best safety initiative in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009 and 2011.

We were the first organisation to voluntarily move to having all three of our vessels to a survey standard and then maintaining them to that standard. Whilst others have been unwilling to adopt this approach, we believe it provides the safest outcomes for our volunteers and therefore all marine users. We were the first to require our organisation to have all skippers trained to a minimum of commercial qualification before undertaking a rigorous and purpose-built training package specific to marine search and rescue operations.

In summary, over the last decade we have moved past this minimum standard that we set for ourselves. We use it as a benchmark, and now our operations include purpose-built, in-water rescue and spinal care of patients on every vessel, with specific marine first aid training. Our operations also include: conducting in-water sea survival training annually, based upon known competency packages for all volunteers; having our training officer formally hold training and assessment qualifications; having military-grade FLIR systems on our vessel rather than the recreational models that other organisations use; partnering with external training organisations to ensure everything is competency based; having members train in the AIMS incident management system; and having members undertake formal qualifications to improve our systems, such as occupational health and safety.

After all, this has always been about being the most professional, the safest and the most expedient marine search and rescue organisation we can be with the funds we have available. We have served the community and will continue to focus on one thing only: the protection of life at sea. We urge this committee when considering its recommendations to put them to this test. Will the recommendation lead directly to improving the marine emergency response capability and ultimately protect lives at sea? Will this recommendation do this at 2 o'clock in the morning? Will this go to improving the response 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days per year?

The CHAIR — You were speaking on behalf of everyone, Col?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — Yes.

The CHAIR — That is really impressive. I think we probably knew most of those things, but it is nice to sit here and hear you go back over them again. There are some significant differences between your organisation and others. I would be interested to hear where you think your organisation could improve.

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — I speak on behalf of the VMR Mornington, not other organisations around the state. I believe there are some opportunities to improve the administration we are required to do externally, from a government perspective. We report to a number of masters. We are required to do normal business systems and report to the Department of Justice, and there are other administrative functions, such as seeking fuel claims for reimbursement from agencies. We are required to submit multiple paperwork in that process.

The CHAIR — For your fuel claims?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — That is right. There are a number of fundraising requirements that we have to meet each year. The administrative burden probably accounts, in the height of summer, to about 40 hours per week.

The CHAIR — So they are ways that others can improve for you. Are there any ways that your organisation could improve itself?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — We have a five-year business plan, and we look very introspectively on a separate basis at how we are performing and how we are doing. Particularly after being the busiest rescue unit in 2012–13, we had a good, hard look at ourselves. Referring to the graph that you have got in our submission of the number of MIRs we have responded to over the years, we recognise that there is a real opportunity to grow our membership base and improve the utilisation of others in the community to do some functions rather than just relying on the core group of members. In 2012–13 we had about 30 operational members, and that has substantially increased over the last two years.

The CHAIR — With the fuel claims, we have heard conflicting evidence on that. Some have suggested that they are required to submit those fuel reimbursement claims online and some have claimed that they need to do them by fax, otherwise they will not be accepted. What is the situation with your organisation?

Mr KNAPP — I will answer that, being a former treasurer as well. Our system is to do it via the fax, so we have sheets that we fill in after every single MIR. We fill those sheets in; they get faxed off. In the past we have inquired to see if there is another process — to see if it can be done electronically. We have been given no indication that it could.

The CHAIR — Did you get a response to your inquiry?

Mr KNAPP — I would say not an official one, no.

The CHAIR — And the unofficial one was not what you wanted?

Mr KNAPP — Yes. The unofficial one was that we continue doing what we are currently doing.

Mr WARNER — We had a verbal that there was an electronic version of the MIR form being worked on.

The CHAIR — How long ago was that, Tim?

Mr WARNER — Probably started three years ago. We have not seen anything yet, and we have made inquiries from time to time.

The CHAIR — They were working on an electronic version three years ago. Okay.

Mr KNAPP — One of the complications with us is that we have got our vessel over in Hastings and obviously we do not have an office on that boat, so the handling of paperwork does get a little bit complicated in that regard. It would be pretty beneficial if we could change that and streamline it, for sure.

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — Certainly moving to an online system would I think benefit the administrative process considerably.

The CHAIR — So you never lose sight of why you do what you do, and it is all about protecting life. How many callouts have you had in the last 12 months?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — Without going on record, we are circa about 140, I believe, for this financial year. We would be prepared to give you some written evidence of that at a further time.

The CHAIR — Sure. It was quite obvious when we visited Hastings that there were two boats. Do we have complete duplication or is there overlap or are the other organisations fulfilling different purposes?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — I suggest that like attracts like. When you are dealing with volunteer organisations it is a certain type of personality that will fit into a certain type of organisation. I am not suggesting one is right and one is wrong, but simply we have a different type of person that volunteers for us as opposed to the other agency that is there. I would like to remind the committee that that vessel was the busiest volunteer marine searching vessel in the whole of Victoria in the last financial year.

The CHAIR — So are different services addressed through the two different organisations?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — It is exactly the same service. Both are tasked by the Victoria Water Police, through the RCC, to do exactly the same job. The only difference in capability perhaps is that our vessel carries a tender on board with its own outboard. The area of operations at Hastings requires us to get into some very shallow water up around the northern end with the mud banks, and our vessel has that capability to deploy that tender.

The CHAIR — How does the Victoria Water Police make the decision of who gets tasked?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — That is not a decision for us, that is a matter for the RCC.

The CHAIR — Do you know how they make it?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — No.

The CHAIR — Does it appear to be turnabout?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — For example, we have had sinking vessels in the port of Hastings before; they will deploy all assets, depending on the tier of emergency. If it is the most severe type of emergency or potential emergency, they will deploy both assets. If it is a fundamental tow job or a breakdown where there is no life-threatening emergency, they may choose to deploy only one vessel. How they do that is a matter for the RCC.

The CHAIR — And how that happens is not apparent to you?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — No, I do not know.

The CHAIR — Have you ever asked that question?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — Not officially, no.

The CHAIR — You would rather not go any further on record with that?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — No. I do not think that is going to serve a purpose.

The CHAIR — Sure.

Mr EIDEH — I have a question. The committee has heard evidence on black spots in Victorian coastal VHF coverage. Is it a significant issue over the areas monitored by your flotillas?

Mr STRAWBRIDGE — I think it would be fair to say that Port Phillip Bay has good coverage. In Western Port I believe the coverage is quite good. The issues may be around usability — that is, the user perhaps not being able to use the equipment correctly. Certainly we have had no issues with VHF black spots coverage in our vessel — noting that our vessel does carry an HF radio, so we are able to talk internationally with it for maintaining clear communications with our vessel over there.

Mr EIDEH — That is fair enough.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. We really appreciate your time — when the committee came to see you in Hastings as well, but also today — and your patience, as with everybody else in the room. They have shown a great deal of patience today. We do appreciate you being here, and the evidence is obviously quite important to us going forward to make recommendations. You will receive a copy of the transcript within about two weeks. Feel free to point out where you think there might be any grammatical errors, but do not make any changes to the document itself — the substance of it.

Witnesses withdrew.