

Darren Wallace

Ex Captain Trafalgar Fire Brigade

Members of LSCS
Fire Services Bill Select Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne VIC 3002

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Dear Members

As a volunteer firefighter with CFA for over 25 years, it breaks my heart to see what is currently being done to unravel the value and good will CFA volunteers have donated to Victoria since its inception in 1944.

I am an Ex-Captain of the Trafalgar fire brigade located in Gippsland, and a Deputy Group Officer with Baw Baw Group. I have qualifications as a crew leader, strike team leader, sector commander and mapping officer. I have received a National Medal for 15 years of diligent service and National Emergency Service Medal for my services during Black Saturday on the Bunyip Ridge fire in Gippsland.

I will address the four questioned posed, give my answers in broad terms as to not waste your time and I hope that my messages will be listened too.

a. Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria

Loss of experienced volunteers in Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) areas as there will be no role for them to play based on the impacts of the legislation. No land for stations, no community education programs, no funding source through Fire Equipment Maintenance (FEM). No role means no volunteers.

Loss of surge capacity from FRV areas, due to the reduced number of volunteers in outer metropolitan Melbourne and Regional centres. During summer, CFA depends on this human mass to support major fire operations. It is much easier to support elsewhere when your area is covered by permanent fire fighters. This is their purpose, Section 6F CFA Act "CFA is a volunteer based organisation supported by employees in a fully integrated manner".

Loss of support to volunteer brigades by FRV brigades particularly in the rural interface. FRV will be an urban based fire service only. They won't have the capacity to support volunteer brigades in a rural context which they currently do. Pumpers only, not tankers.

b. Effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery

There has been no consultation with volunteers through the Volunteers Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) so far. The current Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of CFA should hang her head in shame for the way she has treated volunteers.

A kick in the guts to volunteers that the Volunteer Charter has been ignored. It's as if we don't exist to Government. There only concern is pleasing the United Firefighters Union (UFU) secretary.

Volunteers are starting to withdraw their services. Volunteers are no longer prepared to engage in strike team activities and are remaining to service their communities only. This will have a direct impact on surge capacity from regional Victoria. This is happening now, I have experienced this first hand.

A future mix of FRV trained firefighters and volunteers will not have a desired outcome. A FRV firefighter who has spent their entire career in an urban context among FRV employees will suddenly be sent to the regions. They will have to manage volunteers that they're not trained to do, and manage rural fire operations. This will not go down well with experienced volunteers and I can see only major resentment. If CFA were able to employ Operations Managers and Operations Officers laterally (i.e. experienced volunteers) and pick the "cream of the crop" from FRV, this would be more palatable.

During the past twelve months, the effort to recruit volunteers has suffered. I personally know experienced volunteers that have resigned. CFA should have numbers on resignations versus recruitment and the current mean ages of volunteers. This uncertainty, and the lack of respect shown to volunteers by the current Government is a disgrace.

c. Short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision

The legislation proposes to co-locate volunteer brigades in FRV areas. I'm sure there are major cost implications in maintaining two fire services covering one area. The only way to remove this cost duplication is to remove CFA from FRV areas. There goes many thousands of volunteers and Victoria's surge capacity during major events.

With the removal of CFA brigades from FRV areas, and this will happen, more FRV brigades will need to be created to service the area. More FRV means greater expenditure for State Governments which means higher Fire Services Levy. Good luck selling that at any future State Election.

Does State Government have any idea the amount volunteers save your bottom line?

d. Underlying policy rationale

Victoria is one of the most fire prone areas in the world. This policy change does not come from any Royal Commission as such, it is driven by an industrial dispute. One of the worlds most fire prone areas and Government are “just winging it” with an organisation that has served this state since 1944.

Who is going to take responsibility for the next Black Saturday? Who in Government is going to be the next Christine Nixon?

Where is the analysis that this change is necessary? Show me a report that states that this change is necessary. This change is based on an embarrassing State Government industrial dispute.

This Legislation does not address the underlying issue of an EBA that has been written to both veto the Chief Officer and discriminate against volunteers. If passed, FRV employees will be covered by an EBA controlled by the UFU and sub-contract to the CFA. They won't be controlled by the CFA Chief Officer, rather the EBA, and will have little or no respect for volunteers.

Presumptive legislation is not the same for FRV and volunteers, full stop.

If it was the same, you could remove individual references to FRV and volunteers and replace with firefighter. Firefighter would mean both an employee of FRV and a volunteer.

Summary

I don't believe what is proposed by this Legislation has any long term benefits to the State of Victoria, rather a short term fix to an industrial dispute.

The combination of the Fire Services Review and Presumptive Cancer Legislation is an absolute disgrace and treats us volunteers with utter contempt.

These two pieces of change of legislation need to be separated.

Until this issue is resolved to the satisfaction of volunteers and the VFBV, I will be withdrawing my services for any future strike team deployment duties and will be continuing to serve my community with my volunteer firefighting services only.

What makes me the saddest thought, is the way in which Government has reduced the office of the Chief Officer to a laughing stock. The Chief Officer should be concentrating on “Protecting Life and Property”, instead he is running around the state “putting lipstick on your pig”. Legislation that ultimately discriminates against the volunteer firefighters that he commands.

I pose this question, “how can the Emergency Services Minister, CFA Board, CFA CEO, Chief Officer and volunteers get this issue so wrong, yet the secretary of the UFU could get it so right?”

Yours sincerely

Ex Captain Darren Wallace

Trafalgar Fire Brigade