

My name is Ben Morris. I am currently stationed at Nunawading fire station and hold the rank of Station Officer. I have been a fire-fighter for 11 years, and have spent a large proportion of those years in the urban interface between MFB and CFA.

I have, on numerous occasions responded to emergencies with volunteers from surrounding stations. I live in a suburb covered fully by volunteer stations. My suburb actually has the same population density as some of the areas already covered by permanent fire-fighters.

There has been a large amount of political rhetoric and 'fake news' in regards to the proposed fire services reform, and for some time before that. This has been to the detriment of the morale and temperament of career fire fighters throughout Victoria. I have seen this first hand. Reports in various newspapers and social media posts have constantly vilified career fire-fighters as lazy, sexist union thugs only looking for control of fire services.

The truth is that career fire-fighters decided to become fire-fighters to protect the community. We are focused on helping people and protecting life and property. We are normal, everyday, people with families who work hard for the community, and the denigration that we have received has hurt.

Volunteers have served a specific purpose, in an organisation that hasn't received any reform for in excess of 50 years. The concept of brigades of local men and women banding together to protect their community from fire is one that has performed well for many years, but Victoria has changed significantly. Urban sprawl, increased heavy industrial and manufacturing in outlying areas and a denser population means places that were referred to as 'country' are no less dense than the metropolitan areas. Therefore they deserve an increase in the protection they receive from their local fire authority.

This is not a denigration of volunteers. The plain truth is that volunteers are busy. They conduct everyday activities such as their normal employment, and they can't be expected to continually provide a time critical service to a larger population. Their community deserves better.

The facts which you are presented during this committee should detail to you the change that Melbourne has undergone since the inception of the volunteer based model, and it should be seen as common sense that these facts represent the need for reform. I am not a facts man, and I don't claim to know all the data and facts for the arguments. I do however see logic.

In social media and in various newspapers we have seen threats of mass walkouts by volunteers, of a loss of morale in volunteer brigades and a loss of surge capacity because volunteers leave brigades. These same stories fail to describe one thing. That is the effect this reform will have on the community.

I ask you these simple questions to consider throughout your committee deliberations.

- How does this legislation improve the service delivery and protection of the community that we as a public safety organisation strive to achieve?
- How will volunteer fire-fighters in stations, including and other than integrated stations be affected by the reform?
- The volunteer organisations have spoken of a large negative impact to volunteers. Whilst this is to be debated, are there any other interested parties who will be negatively impacted by the reform?
- The most important question is this: Is the community better protected by the reform?

I hope that you will receive all the facts to make an informed decision on this reform and that you can see the benefits to the community, the stakeholder that seems to have been overlooked by a number of the negative arguments throughout this process.

Please, as we as career fire-fighters do, keep the community and their interests in your minds when making any recommendations.

Regards,

Ben Morris