



**James Kefalas** [REDACTED]  
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To Consultation/DTF@DTF  
cc  
bcc  
Subject Fire services reform select committee submission

To whom it may concern

Attached is my submission regarding the

INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017.

Regards



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Dear Assistant Clerk Committees

Re:-

INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017

My name is James Kefalas and I am a CFA (Country Fire Authority) Operations Officer for recruit training at the Victorian Emergency Management Centre, Craigieburn.

My employment with CFA commenced in 2001 as a recruit firefighter and through continuation training and promotional assessments over the past 17years, I have been able to progress through the ranks of Qualified Firefighter, Leading Firefighter, Station Officer and Senior Station Officer.

As a Firefighter in the CFA, I have responded to over 3000 incidents and have gained significant operational exposure to provide an efficient and effective incident management response to the Victorian community.

I hold the specialist qualifications in Heavy Rescue, Bronto Ladder Platform, Teleboom, Breathing Apparatus Support, Hazmat, Hazardous detection vehicle, CBR Awareness and CBR specialist technician (involving 2.14 Atmospheric Monitoring, PID, Bruker and Radiation dosimeter specialist training ) and Trench rescue.

I am heavily involved in a number of consultative committees with the CFA including but not limited to:

Enterprise Bargaining implementation, Learning and development, Emergency medical response, infrastructure, appliances, Personal protective equipment, workforce planning and growth programs.

I fully support the reform that is proposed for the Fire Services in Victoria and believe it is highly overdue if we truly want the emergency response of the fire brigade to reflect and respond to the needs of the community and perform to its full capability. Presently this is not the case and despite professional firefighters simply wanting to be able to provide the highest standard and level of protection to the community we are currently held back from doing so due to the politics that have developed over the life of the CFA.

I believe that the vast majority of firefighters (volunteer and career) are community minded with a can do philosophy of making a bad situation better, whether that be an incident, house or bushfire. In my view a reform as proposed will enable those good people to refocus onto the important issues facing the community rather than the political games that that have driven fire services since about 1995.

**Impact on Fire Service Delivery across Victoria (specifically District 7 – Geelong)**

From my experience, the major problem that exists under the current structure of CFA is that it has reached the point where it needed, but *did not want* professional firefighters. In short it is representative of a structure intent on protecting volunteerism at all costs and in my view at the expense of health and safety of firefighters and the best service delivery available to the public of Victoria.

In contrast the new legislation will enable the government to put in place a framework that has a focus on the rural risk to Victoria and at the same time develop the larger urban risks that have evolved in what has been traditionally the Country Area of Victoria. The current statistics show that CFA attends more urban incidents than rural incidents which is a good indication of what CFA has evolved to.

As staff we see the constantly increasing reliance from Volunteer Brigades within our District for Career Staff to ensure their communities are protected. This consequently results in reduced service delivery being provided elsewhere, impacting on community safety. It is inevitable that with increased community need there is an increased reliance on emergency services and it is simply unrealistic to expect this need to be fulfilled by volunteers. But the resulting requirement to increase staff into some of these areas has historically been resisted and even stopped altogether to placate a small but vocal and influential group of VFBV aligned volunteers and brigades. This is an insult to the community who have no capacity to understand the complexities and consequences of the current fire services arrangements.

The combining of the MFB and CFA Career Staff into one Career Service will provide a properly responsive and far more flexible workforce to support metropolitan, outer-metro and regional cities. It will also ensure the ability for surge capacity with the required specialist skills, knowledge and equipment to provide safer communities and a more fit for service model. This has been shown to be needed for many years and we are at the point where it must be progressed if we are to have a fire service in this state that truly reflects the community's needs.

For myself, my fellow professional firefighters and the community I truly hope we will see the reform delivered so that I know when we are at an incident we will have back up on the way and those who attend will have the necessary skills and training to respond appropriately and manage the risks that present.

### **Effect on Volunteer Engagement and Participation in fire service delivery**

CFA responds to different types of incidents and keeps data about those incidents. However it is important to note that the data collected is not readily released or available to the general public

Response types are recorded by CFA as follows:

Those that do not require a lights and sirens response include: “washaways” as a result of motor vehicle accidents, “lockouts”, bin fires, powerlines down, non urgent calls to children locked in car, some non structure fires.

Those that do require a lights and sirens response (Primary SDS Incidents) include: structure fires, smoke alarms, road accident rescues, rail and aircraft rescues, grass and bush fires, hazardous materials incidents, confined space trench rescue, high angle rescue and many other less common scenarios.

Across the state approximately 2.6% of CFA operation firefighters are career employees and they attend 42% of CFA primary calls.

Many years of my work for CFA has been undertaken in District 7 where about 10% of the operational firefighters are career employees. In District 7 that 10% career staff respond to 63% of the primary calls and it is estimated that those career firefighters respond to 85% of all calls in the District. The District 7 example is a good representation that the CFA philosophy of a volunteer organisation supported by career staff is in fact false when overlaid across the busy urban areas. Again it is my view that a failure of the CFA to recognise the changing response environment has been negative to service delivery in Country Victoria.

While I do not support that CFA should restrict the community from available data I do understand that over time a CFA board can develop a culture to focus on volunteerism rather than on the job at hand of protecting the community, in effect conflicting objectives. Having said that I do believe that there is an overwhelming view by firefighters both career and volunteer that it is all about the community. My understanding is that the proposed legislation if accepted will result in an objective overview of service delivery to the Victorian communities.

Whilst there will be some who will claim that the reform would impact Volunteer engagement and participation I wonder why that claim is made. The reform provides a new and comprehensive funding model for the CFA that would enable the organisation to properly focus on the needs of the volunteers in a way that has not been done before. Given this increased capacity to engage, recruit, retain and support volunteers there is no grounds to suggest the volunteers would be diminished in any way. It is my view that the majority of volunteers whose aim is to provide a service to the community would benefit and thrive in this new environment. To suggest otherwise is simply misrepresenting the facts and I believe is being used to scare the community to influence the outcome of the proposed legislation.

Likewise, the ability for volunteers to be able to focus on their own communities and reducing the reliance on them in the busy urban environments will surely result in a system that provides an increased service standard for both volunteer brigades as well as professional firefighters. It is not uncommon for volunteers to express the pressure they feel at having to juggle their personal

responsibilities, including their own work requirements, and their relief for the knowledge that the staff are there to respond to jobs they know they cannot respond to.

While I am extremely supportive of a way of business supporting volunteerism, in my view it is unreasonable and beyond community expectation to rely solely on volunteers to deliver service in larger populated areas. There are some volunteer brigades that deliver service very well, however there are others brigades that suffer with availability of time for volunteers due to work, family and other commitments. As an organisation I believe that we (CFA) have failed those brigades and those communities.

While there has been a progressive effort to get emergency services in Victoria to be more interoperable and those efforts have been positive, there still exists a divide between Metropolitan Melbourne and Country Victoria. The proposed legislation will have positive influence in focusing all firefighters in Victoria on service delivery rather than on historical areas of responsibility. In the absence of the political/industrial fight the natural focus is on firefighting and the community.

**Short term and long term cost impact on the fire service provision**

The dual response of professional and volunteer firefighters in integrated areas impacts resources and is not a cost effective system. The introduction of this reform will enable a single and transparent response system to be established for all professional firefighters. This will also benefit volunteer responses as volunteer brigades will be able to focus on their own areas and on surge capacity as required.

There will also be important cost benefits from the reduction and elimination of duplication that currently occurs. Eg: appliances, training, equipment, PPC, research, technology.

Volunteers will be consulted on issues that affect them and career firefighters will be consulted on their issues, reducing the duplication and difficulty in reaching mutually suitable outcomes.

VFBV has for many years now advocated that the UFU is “taking over the CFA” and that the Operational Staff Enterprise Agreements struck with the UFU and CFA have resulted in a “veto” of the Chief Officer’s powers. This argument has continued to be made despite it never proving to have any validity. The conflict that has resulted has led to significant stress on firefighters and to increased sick leave and workers compensation claims. It has also lead to huge litigation costs. This needs to end.

Firefighters’ Presumptive Rights Compensation is a fundamental right for firefighters that are exposed to carcinogenetic products .The evidence is overwhelming in support of this legislation and as in many states and countries around the world, similar legislation provides firefighters (both professional and volunteer) and their families important piece of mind that they will not have to spend the years in which they are fighting an illness, also fighting for their right to compensation for that illness.

The reform will support the volunteers and staff to ensure we build and provide the best possible service. Our communities will benefit with a safe, consistent and effective force, particularly in urban and industrial areas and where technical/ specialised skills are needed.

Yours Sincerely  
James Kefalas

