



Jason [REDACTED]

06/07/2017 03:16 PM

To Consultation/DTF@DTF
cc
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Subject Fwd: Fire Service Reform Submission

1 attachment



Fire Service Reform submission.docx

Please find attached my submission to the Fire Service Reform committee

Kind Regards

Jason Richardson

MFB Fire Fighter

To the honourable members of the Fire Service Bill select committee,

My name is Jason Richardson, and I am a career fire fighter with the MFB. I am currently stationed at Fire Station 28, Vermont South, a suburb that shares its borders with both paid and volunteer CFA stations and brigades.

When you need the fire brigade, you call 000. Within seconds, fire fighters are alerted of the need to respond. What happens next depends on where you live.

In the area of metropolitan Melbourne covered by the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB), within 90 seconds at least two fire trucks are out the door and headed your way. Speed is crucial - every second counts. Within a few minutes the first truck arrives, let's say at a house fire. A pair of fire fighters will immediately prepare to enter the building, search for anyone who might need rescuing, and begin controlling the fire. The truck also carries an officer in charge of the response, and a fire fighter tasked with securing a water supply and operating the pump. Obviously, entering a burning building poses numerous risks. As such, for safety reasons, a second pair of fire fighters (if available) will stand by, fully kitted up and ready to assist if needed. This is generally no issue as the second truck was dispatched at the same time and is only minutes (or even seconds) away.

This type of response happens like clockwork every day in the MFB area. It's so effective that most building fires will not make media, because they are put out quickly, before they can spread beyond the room/point of origin - which can happen in a matter of minutes.

In the Country Fire Authority (CFA) area, the response to 000 calls is very different. As you would be aware the "Country" Fire Authority, the CFA is responsible for 60% of metropolitan Melbourne, and all regional cities.

The CFA's response model relies on volunteers. When you call 000, two brigades are paged, which may consist of two volunteer brigades, one volunteer and one professionally staffed, or two professionally staffed brigades. When the pager sounds, those volunteers who are available, will endeavour to make their way to the fire station. The hope is that, within four minutes the truck is ready to go, carrying a crew of four with the necessary qualifications to fight the house fire, and hopefully arrives on-scene within 8 minutes.

In reality, we know it often doesn't pan out this way. All too often, fire trucks take far longer than the crucial 8 minutes to arrive on-scene - and when they do, they aren't carrying enough appropriately qualified volunteers. It's easy to understand why as not all volunteers have the necessary qualifications, moreover, driving a private vehicle, without lights and sirens, through suburban traffic to the fire station, putting on a uniform and getting out the

door in four minutes is a very tough ask for anyone, let alone for the four people needed. When every second counts, delays of many minutes can cost lives. If the truck hasn't left the station within four minutes, it is deemed to have failed to respond, and after a further few minutes of leeway another brigade is paged, and the clock starts again.

None of this is meant to disrespect volunteers. I was a Volunteer with the Mt Evelyn CFA brigade for 4 years from 2004 to 2008. I can testify first hand that they do their very best, with the tools and resources they are given to work with, but I also know how difficult it can be to get to the fire station in normal/peak traffic, get the fire fighting gear on and respond in an appliance. In a densely populated urban areas, (having experience from both sides) it's my opinion that the volunteer model is not suited to these urban areas who have (and will) experience further growth.

People living in CFA territory in metropolitan Melbourne can't take for granted that they will receive the same time critical response that their neighbours, living in MFB areas are guaranteed. This not only compromises public safety, it also has the potential to place fire fighters at risk. All too often a truck arrives at a fire on time, to find the second brigade has failed to respond. These fire fighters are then placed in the very difficult situation of performing a rescue/ fire fight, without the reassurance of back up on scene or on the way. ABSOLUTELY NO Emergency Service worker should be placed in this situation, it is a risk to their physical and psychological wellbeing and it places members of the public at unnecessary risk.

This is one of the major problems the CFA Enterprise Bargaining Agreement was meant to address, at least partially, by stipulating that two staffed trucks are sent to any fires in the areas served by 32 of the busiest CFA stations. But the EBA was bitterly disputed, and now appears to be dead in the water, thanks to the Turnbull government's legislative intervention in the Fair Work Commission. Meanwhile, morale within the paid fire fighters has taken a heavy blow, and they also find themselves at loggerheads with many volunteer fire fighters/brigades.

What is the cause and how can we fix it?

The structure of our fire service is broken. Practicality and economics dictates that we have a volunteer fire service for the bush and a professional fire service for busy urban areas. The CFA has attempted to meet the challenges of Melbourne's rapid urban sprawl into "country" areas by turning itself into a flawed mixture of professional and volunteer response, with a different set of rules for both parties. People living in our suburbs and regional cities deserve better.

The CFA should be allowed to focus on its legislated role as a volunteer-based fire service for

country areas of Victoria, while urban areas needing a professional response should have it, through a separate agency.

Those volunteers demanding that professionals take their "Hands Off the CFA" will get what they want. Volunteers and professionals alike will enjoy lasting protection from being used as political footballs. The CFA volunteers will remain in every one of the Stations in which they are presently located. They will be supported and managed through the existing CFA which will retain their board, management structure, and support staff.

The creating of Fire Rescue Victoria will separate the full time fire fighters from the volunteer CFA while still allowing interoperability on the fire ground and in emergency incidents. They can and will work together just as they have in the past but they will also have clearly defined organisational structures and budgets. CFA brigades will remain staffed by volunteers. Volunteers will be able to address their priorities and press the CFA for long needed improvements in equipment, training and resourcing.

There may be those who want to continue to stir the pot, who are not yet satisfied with the damage done over the last few years, who would seek to continue to divide fire fighters and foster hate, and unfortunately some opinions will never be changed, regardless of how things progress. But this is not about that, it is about providing a working model for Professional fire fighters to follow, and a separate model for the Volunteers to follow. Victoria needs both, to continue to thrive, and provide for a safe community. It benefits no one for professional and volunteer fire fighters to be at odds with each other (least of all the community they serve) so it's now time to stop all the politics and get on with making things right.

Give CFA its fundamental role of being a volunteer only organisation, specialising and managing volunteers. Then all the professional fire fighters can align under a Fire Rescue Victoria, and continue to manage the densely populated areas of Victoria. Both services can then be the envy of and a model for fire services around the world.

Kind Regards

Jason Richardson

MFB Fire Fighter