

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

1. I am Patrick Geary, Operations Officer with CFA in District 7, Geelong. I am the Officer in Charge of the Corio Integrated Brigade and have been a part of CFA for over 31 years, 29 as a career fire fighter.

2. I live in Geelong and work in District 7.

3. Corio has a large risk profile and is the busiest structural fire fighting brigade in CFA, if not the State. Corio's risk profile includes a refinery, 3 other Major Hazard Facilities, the Port of Geelong, major and light industry, major rail and road networks, numerous schools and nursing homes and a large DHS housing area. It also supports both career and volunteer brigades across District 7. Corio also responds a Heavy Hazmat/CBR unit across Western Victoria and a BA van that supports a number of Districts. Corio does this with a staff minimum crew of 7 per. platoon and a volunteer base of 40, of which only 7 are operationally active to varying degrees.

4. I am writing this submission in support of the proposed reform of the fire services for the following reasons:

### **a. impact on fire service delivery across Victoria**

As OIC of the Corio Integrated Brigade I believe that the Fire Service Reform will only have a positive impact on fire service delivery across Victoria. It will enable the community in heavily populated areas to receive an appropriate level of response whether this response is in Melbourne or an urban area like Geelong. It will ensure that an appropriate number of appropriately qualified fire fighters are responded in a heavy urbanised area to ensure the best and safest result for fire fighters and the community. The 1958 model of not knowing the numbers or qualifications of volunteer members, who may or may not respond, until it's often too late, is no longer acceptable to the expectations of the modern community.

I believe that splitting the services and ensuring the urban areas are adequately protected by FRV and allowing CFA to continue to provide the service that it has become renowned for in country and smaller urban areas. It will enable CFA to concentrate on its core business of rural fire fighting.

### **b. effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery**

The splitting of the fire services will not have a negative impact on volunteer response for surge capacity. The integrated brigades will become their own entities and undertake the role as they do now. The Corio Brigade is looking at this as a positive step and is considering the role that they want to implement going forward. It is seen as a 'Greenfields' approach because they can decide on their own direction and role. Some of the options that they are considering is to provide the same service they now provide, decide to take on a niche role for the services they may want to provide or just provide a bushfire surge capacity role.

It is my understanding that this decision is purely theirs to make and they are quietly excited about the possibilities. The current system, due to the volume and variation of work that Corio undertakes makes it extremely hard for volunteers with employment and families to stay engaged. Corio only has 7

volunteers that are actively engaged in operations. The struggle for response is not the fault of the volunteers as they are placed under pressure by CFA and the community. For example at Corio, all the operational volunteers are employed and many find it difficult to be released from their work. Many have partners and families and other competing interests. In the Geelong area, the rapid growth, traffic congestion and the cost of fuel inhibits their attendance. The Lieutenants of the Brigade and I believe that an acceptable and fair response number for the year for any volunteer would be 60 fire calls, remembering that Corio attends between 1400 and 1500 calls per year.

There will be no reason why the Corio CFA could not continue with any other role that they are undertaking now (e.g. Community Safety) and would work hand in hand with Corio FRV as they work with the staff now.

### **c. short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision**

I do believe that there will be a short term cost associated with these reforms but I believe that over time the reforms will save the community money. I believe that the cost of full time fire fighters, which is often quoted as a barrier to reform, would be offset by the real cost to the community of a volunteer service in an dense urban area. By this I mean that the community and insurance companies bear the cost of the extra fire damage that is the result of slower and often inadequate response of volunteer brigades and the non response of some brigades. It is proven that the rapid response of career fighters lessens the damage in fires and this has never been recognised by Governments, Brigade managers nor the public.

I would strongly argue that having career staff covering large urban areas will save the community money.

### **d. underlying policy rationale .**

Seven on the fire ground can only be guaranteed by responding career fire fighters who have the acceptable skill level and qualifications. Seven properly qualified fire fighters enable the crews to safely attack a fire, giving the community the best service possible. The volunteer system may achieve this at times but it cannot be consistently relied upon. Volunteers can only be considered as extras to the bare safe minimum, as 'cream on the cake' as the saying goes.

As Victoria grows there is an increase on resources required. Volunteer Brigades struggle when the fire calls reach around the 350 calls mark and it is unfair for the community to expect more from volunteers. Many brigade members feel that they have failed when they start to fail to respond and there needs to be a system in place to ensure that this burnout doesn't occur. This in fact ensures that volunteers will stay with CFA and the huge workload is removed from them, allowing them to spend more time with families and work.

Volunteer brigades that do not accept that they are failing are often doing so to protect their own turf and egos. Surely brigades that are failing must realise that in the best interests of community safety they need to accept valid change and this change may be in the form of career staff when the data and evidence dictates this.

These reforms will only affect the 35 integrated stations initially and then will only affect volunteer brigades who are struggling under the activity

level in the growth areas of Victoria. Rural volunteers and smaller urban brigades will still have the strong support from the Operations Managers and the Operations Officers, the only difference will be that their pay will be coming from FRV. To say that these members will lessen their service to the volunteers because they are paid by another organisations is scaremongering and is totally insulting to the dedicated Operation Officers and Operations Managers.

The reforms will assist with standardisation of service delivery in similar areas. In other words, the good people of Geelong will have the same standard as the good people of Melbourne.

The damage this disputation in the workplace has been devastating and I have never seen morale in the Fire Services so low. For the 29.5 years that I have been employed I have been working in an unhappy and mostly adversarial environment. I have lost friends and many strong associations with volunteers through the constant attacks and misinformation being peddled to the public. As I near my retiring years I now understand that I no longer wish to work under the current fire service structure. Once I was proud to be a fire fighter, now I just want change. I genially believe that irreparable damage has been inflicted upon CFA and the disputation will only increase in the future if the reforms are not implemented. I do fear for the future.

5. Below are examples from my experiences which demonstrate the failures of the current structure:

Over the many years that I have been involved in fire fighting with CFA I have observed many fails to respond of Brigades. I have also witnessed many volunteer fire fighters who are unsuitable due to fitness, age, mental health and commitment to be considered as appropriate urban fire fighters.

I will provide some specific examples;

- 1) 3 years ago at my last response as a Senior Station Officer I was responded to a house fire to support a volunteer area (in Geelong) and as the responding Officer and knowing the issues that the volunteer brigade had in responding, I responded two vehicles from the station that I was attached to (Geelong City). This enabled me to have a crew of 4 responded and leave enough crew to deal with any issue in the Geelong area. On arrival I found that the house was involved in fire and not knowing if anyone was home, I directed two of the 4 fire fighters to start an internal search as I was expecting the volunteer brigade would soon respond. With two fire fighters inside the house, myself as Incident Controller and the fourth fire fighter operating the pump, I had no backup crew to enact a rescue of the two internal fire fighters if required. This is an unsafe situation and the reason we require 7 fully trained fire fighters on the fire ground. The volunteer brigade did respond after time in their urban pumper and as I needed the backup crew I desperately tried to contact them on their radio. The fact that they didn't acknowledge me on the radio was of concern. When they finally arrived there were two fire fighters who were dressed in wildfire gear and were unable to wear BA or to conduct any internal fire fighting to enact any rescue. This is not an unusual situation and highlights the fact that with the volunteer system I never know who or what skills are going to arrive and very often the numbers and skill level is less than satisfactory.

- 2) Corio consistently responds into a neighbouring volunteer brigade area and over the past 12 months I have had it reported to me in writing that on 3 occasions when the Corio vehicles have arrived at structure fires that the volunteer brigade that were on scene were not able to operate their pumper and didn't have any water deployed onto the fire. It was also reported to me that on one occasion that the volunteer member who was operating the pump lost water to the Corio crews inside the fire. This is a very serious safety concern. I have been so concerned for the safety of the Corio crews that I directed a 'work around' be implemented that no Corio fire fighter was to enter a burning building unless a Corio staff member was operating the pump or at least monitoring the pump operations.
- 3) Less than 2 months ago, Corio was requested to respond to another volunteer brigade area (in Geelong) to a structure fire with a person reported inside, to support another career brigade on scene due to the fact the volunteer brigade was only able to respond 1 person in their brigade car. This was an unsafe situation for the original staff crews who were on scene with a crew of five and were conducting an internal attack.
- 4) As OIC of Corio I was advised that a brigade that Corio supports recently attended two incidents in quick succession where the volunteer crew consisted of 3, aged crew (all believed to be over 65 years old). At the first call the RDO (Rostered Duty Officer) for District 7 was unable to contact the Incident Controller by radio, he just didn't answer. At the next call, a going shed fire, the Incident Controller advised a Corio Officer that he needed to go home as he had forgotten his hearing aids! At this call the pump operator was unable to get water from his pump, moving his pump from the fire as he had parked too close and backed over his own helmet. Water was placed onto the fire when the Corio pump arrived and the Corio pump operator engaged the volunteer pump. The owners watched the woeful effort and wrote a scathing letter to the Brigade and to CFA.
- 5) The above is just a small number of incidents that I have witnessed or been advised off over the years. It is a small sample of a sometimes unprofessional service that CFA provide in urban areas.

**I would ask the question of why should the people of Geelong, who pay more with the FSL, endure a lesser service than their Melbourne counter parts?**

6. I can supply various documents to support my examples.

Yours sincerely,

