

Kirra Vanzetti

From: Joshua Hawkes [REDACTED]
Sent: Thursday, 6 July 2017 3:28 PM
To: LCSC; consultation@dpc.vic.gov.au
Subject: Submission - Fire Service Reform Parliamentary Committee

To the Chair and fellow members of the Parliamentary Committee,

My name is Josh Hawkes and I have been a professional MFB firefighter for 5 years. I am stationed at Footscray fire station, but based as a member of MFB's Western District, spending time at nearly all of the MFB's western most stations where we often turn out with integrated brigades of the CFA. I also happen to live outside of the Metropolitan area in Ballarat, which gives me a unique perspective on issues pertinent to Victoria's fire services.

In my operational area of Footscray and the greater western suburbs I have attended countless calls where a two appliance response is the minimum. I know that when I step into my appliance there will be a guaranteed number of seven firefighters attending to work together as soon as we arrive. I also know that the skills and certifications are of a set standard and the best quality. However I **do not** know what it is like to respond to an incident with a single truck response (3 or 4 crew) in an urbanised area, and not be guaranteed of the backup that is required should something go wrong - during a rescue inside a burning house, for example. This is the kind of situation that my professional colleagues in the CFA would have to deal with on a very regular basis. These changes ensure an optimised response in densely populated areas similar to metro and outer Melbourne, and also ensure the safe and correct firefighting practices are implemented.

Contrary to public and media belief, it is my experience that vast majorities of brigades, integrated and volunteer-only, work extremely well with CFA/MFB career staff. They do a brilliant and vital job in servicing their communities. My closest uncle is a retired volunteer from the Ballarat area and I grew up seeing his efforts fighting fires and defending his own properties for many years. But now as a firefighter myself, I have a comprehensive understanding of what kind of service I believe is needed in densely populated areas like Ballarat and the outer Melbourne fringes to keep communities safe, and make certain that firefighters are not injured or killed. A volunteer response in dense areas like Ballarat and Melbourne's fringe is not always guaranteed. And when responded, the type and level of qualification is also not guaranteed. In a rescue situation, knowing that backup is not far away is vital, especially in dense urban environments. Melbourne's extremes and the big Victorian centres have outgrown the current model, CFA/MFB boundaries that have been unchanged in decades. Recommendations from the Fire Services review have not been addressed, and communities are confused as to what type of protection they have, and what type of response they will receive in an emergency.

I stated above that the majority of brigades work well with career staff. However, I have experienced a small minority of occasions where career staff were not welcome. This type of behaviour has been fostered by certain groups, claiming that their brigades will be irreversibly affected or even closed under the reforms. In addition, particular groups believe their skills will be no longer valued and work will be taken away from them - this being their number one concern - instead of what response would benefit the safety of growing communities in their area. There has been far too much misinformation and politicising of these issues in place of real effort and genuine concern for what is actually beneficial for the communities that will **truly** be affected under the reforms, 35 brigades out of the 1200 across Victoria having direct change. But why after all this time, do independent brigades well outside of these districts still believe that they will no longer have a role or that they are threatening to cease their volunteerism? Minority groups and select individuals, who place more importance on the protection of their own patch/office/interests rather than see an optimised and truly efficient primary response to protect residents and property in specified areas that are almost identical in makeup to suburbs of Melbourne, have done untold damage to the working relationships of firefighters in this state, volunteer and career.

Finally I would like to outline the toll this dispute has taken on my family, my colleagues and my own wellbeing. The entire duration of my career to date with the MFB has been marred by industrial dispute. It is not a comfortable situation to be in, knowing that your conditions of employment are under threat. I joined the MFB to be part of something great, that helped others and contributed to society. As an employee of many different organisations during my working life, I've never experienced such disrespect and empty support from my

superiors - particularly board members and the senior leadership team of the MFB who have on countless occasions failed to step up and support the MFB's operational staff in times of stress, particularly when attacked in the media. Concurrently, I have witnessed government attacks, taking our conditions of employment to Fair Work, only to fail in their attempts to abolish them. Federal Government has even weighed in with their own unsupportive actions. The constant and concerted effort that both sides of politics have given to putting down the fire services and their workers has been shameful. Treatment of Ambulance Victoria and Victoria Police in recent years has been woeful and this dispute is following trend. It has impacted station morale, interagency relationships, relationships within the organisation, and staff wellbeing at work and home. It has even taken lives, with many recent suicides, the public unaware of the full impact that some emergency services personnel are dealing with.

Personally, I believe these matters are doing far too much damage to the mental health of the people who are charged with protecting their communities. We are expected to perform and undertake the most stressful of tasks at a moments notice, yet the support from government is constantly wavering. My wife and family have continually professed their dismay at the rate of progress or lack thereof in this dispute, and the level at which some will stoop to ensure important issues remain unaddressed and the problems unsolved, to ensure political deadlines are missed and divides remain in place for use as political ammunition.

Emergency services are not pawns. They are vitally essential and it is time that state government, whomever is in power, start supporting them accordingly. I hope that your Committee is able to come to a fruitful conclusion that sees an end to this terrible time in Victorias firefighting history, and allows all involved to get on with the job of protecting Victorias growing communities.

Sincerely,

Qualified Firefighter, Josh Hawkes

