

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

Summary

- I support the presumptive rights compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017
- What was once “Country Area of Victoria” is now highly urbanised and high risk.
- Volunteerism will benefit from a volunteer only CFA that can focus on arresting the decline in volunteer numbers
- Victoria’s population will reach 10.1 million by 2051. It is imperative that changes to fire services are made now to ensure we address future risks and meet community expectations.

Fire Service Reform

My name is Senior Station Officer Stuart Walker based at Frankston Fire Station. I have been a member of the Country Fire Authority for approximately 22 years. I support the creation of Fire Rescue Victoria as it will create a safer Victoria.

As a Senior Station Officer at Frankston, my primary fire ground function is that of an Incident Controller. I am a Level 2 Incident Controller, Level 3 Operations Officer, High Angle Rescue Technician and hold a Bachelor of Science Degree and Graduate Certificate in Business Administration. My awards include:

- 20 year CFA service medal
- National Emergency Medal
- Chief Officers Commendation for the rescue of elderly residents from a nursing home

Risk Analysis - Frankston

Frankston is no longer “Country”. According to the 2011 Frankston Fire Management Plan, the city of Frankston has a population of about 130,450 and is broadly categorised as a suburban municipality, with the majority of the population within suburban settlements. Interestingly this is greater than the combined populations of the municipalities of Alpine, Benalla, Indigo, Mansfield, Towong, Wangaratta and Wodonga.

The emergency risks within the municipality require a modern fire service response as outlined in the Fire Services Reform Bill. Frankston is the major retail, employment, cultural, professional and administrative services centre for Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs and the Mornington Peninsula. Major risks include:

- Monash University,
- Chisholm Institute of TAFE
- Frankston Campus of Mornington Peninsula Hospital
- Frankston Hospital
- St John of God Frankston Rehabilitation Hospital
- Frankston Rail line
- Peninsula Link Freeway

Frankston also contains numerous residential fire risks. It is accepted that there is a link between vulnerability to emergencies and socio-economic status. As a Station Officer at Frankston, I am keenly aware that part of my area of responsibility includes Frankston North which is one of Victoria's most disadvantaged suburbs

Fire Service Response

Given the emergency management risks associated with the municipality of Frankston, it is remarkable that Frankston integrated station has only five staff rostered on shift at any time. Indeed, if Frankston Fire Station were located within the MFB fire district, it would likely have upwards of ten staff per shift.

Frankston Fire Station is supported by a small group of volunteers. Both Integrated and Volunteer only fire stations provide support to fire calls in Frankston. Those stations which are volunteer only, are unable to guarantee that they will be able to respond or when they do respond, they cannot guarantee an appropriate skill mix on the fire-ground.

As a former volunteer, I understand the response challenges facing Volunteer firefighters. Work, study, and family life mean that people are rushed and pressed for time. Furthermore, in built up areas, road network congestion makes it increasingly difficult for volunteers to drive to a fire

station and respond a fire truck. Contrast this with the response that my staff crew provided to a recent Emergency Medical Callout where we were on scene within 1 minute 45 seconds after leaving the station. I am pleased to report the patient survived.

The difficulty in attracting volunteer firefighters is a nationwide issue. McLennan and Birch (2005)¹ noted that:

“All fire services report a common set of current difficulties associated with volunteer numbers:

- In many rural communities, volunteer brigade member numbers have dropped and those remaining are ageing.
- In some new housing developments on urban/rural fringes, brigade memberships remain low, notwithstanding increased protection level needs.
- For many brigades on urban/rural fringes, it is difficult to find crews 9-5 weekdays”.

How will the reform bill impact on fire service delivery across Victoria?

The fire service reform bill will improve fire service delivery across Victoria by ensuring that fire service can adapt in line with the requirements of the Victorian population. Indeed, according to “Victoria in Future 2016 Population and household projections to 2051”, Victoria’s population will reach 10.1 million by 2051. Furthermore, the same report states that “*Greater Melbourne is projected to have almost 85 percent of the state’s growth up to 2051*”. By changing the structure of the fire services, we can ensure that the service delivery model can move with the risk. The fire service reform bill will provide a more agile service by allowing governments to locate career firefighters based on risk.

Effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery

The fire service reform will improve Volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery. The fire service reform only affects the 35 integrated brigades. CFA’s 1,220 volunteer brigades will continue to serve and protect their communities in the same way that they always

¹ McLennan, J. & Birch, A (2005) Recruiting and Retaining Australia’s Volunteer Firefighters (La Trobe University). Accessed 6/7/2017

<http://www.bushfirecrc.com/sites/default/files/managed/resource/enhancingvolunteerism.pdf>

have. Volunteer engagement will not be reduced and participation in fire service delivery at integrated stations will remain unchanged. Importantly the volunteers will play the same fire-ground role.

The changes will allow the volunteers at the former 35 integrated brigades more autonomy by allowing these brigades to adopt a total volunteer brigade management structure. This will likely strengthen the volunteer cohort by improving achievement, recognition for accomplishment and satisfaction. Indeed, I hypothesise the changes will support the motivation factors of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization as identified by Maslow².

It is widely accepted that the level of volunteering in the community is declining. However, a volunteer only CFA has the potential to arrest this decline as CFA will be able to further focus its efforts on identifying strategies to make volunteering more attractive to the population.

Short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision

In my work, I often see numerous areas of overlap and redundancy between CFA and MFESB, this is particularly true when it comes to procurement of assets and also Human Resource services. The Creation of Fire Rescue Victoria and the Emergency Services Infrastructure Authority can reduce costs in the following ways:

- By creating economies of scale. This occurs when a larger firm with increased output can reduce average costs.
- Reducing duplication of effort.
- Sharing corporate services (e.g. procurement, finance, IT, human resources)

The major impact on the cost of fire service provision will be population growth and aging. In my experience, firefighters mostly respond to emergencies involving elderly patients. Indeed, the elderly are almost four times more likely to die in a preventable house fire than the rest of the population. So too, the elderly appears to represent the high rate of Emergency Medical Response calls. These issues have been highlighted by other emergency services. Ambulance Victoria 2013-2014 Annual Report states “Strong demand growth for emergency ambulance services continues across the community, particularly among the ageing population. As a result, our ability to continue to provide an appropriate, timely response to the present broad range of medical emergencies remains challenging”³. New South Wales Fire and Rescue also recognise aging as a challenge, the report, titled Future Outlook Future Directions for Fire & Rescue NSW

² Maslow, A. H. (1954). Motivation and personality. New York: Harper and Row.

³ Ambulance Victoria 2013-2014 Annual Report, Accessed on 6 July 2017

http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/file_uploads/Ambulance_Victoria_Annual_Report_2013-2014_kBVjHWhv.pdf

Towards 2033 highlights that “The growing number of older people living in our community means an increasing number of people are vulnerable in emergencies”⁴.

Underlying policy rationale

My understanding of the underlying policy rationale is that “Victoria’s fire services are being reformed to meet the needs of our rapidly changing state - now and into the future”. While I have covered this above in the discussion on population, the Independent Fire District Review Panel will be paramount in achieving the policy outcome as it will advise on future changes to the boundaries between fire services.

⁴ State of New South Wales 2013 Future Outlook Future Directions for Fire & Rescue NSW Towards 2033, Accessed on 6/July/17
<https://www.fire.nsw.gov.au/gallery/files/pdf/publications/futureoutlook.pdf>