

Assistant Clerk Committees  
Department of the Legislative Council  
Fire Services Bill Select Committee  
Parliament house, Spring Street  
East Melbourne Vic 3002

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Dear Committee Members

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission regarding the proposed restructure of Victoria's fire services as set out in the *firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017*.

I am an **unpaid firefighter** with the Dumbalk Rural Fire Brigade and in that role for 19 years, have **volunteered my time and services**, attending many local incidents; grass and scrub fires, house fires, chemical spills and motor vehicle, as well as giving participating in number of campaigns, including NSW, East Gippsland, Gippsland and Black Saturday, for which I earned a National Emergency Medal.

I have also taken on leadership roles including, Brigade Captain and Lieutenant, Group Officer and Deputy Group Officer and incident management roles.

In addition I have given up considerable time **training for and maintaining** skills; firefighter, both wildfire and structural, breathing apparatus operator, crew leader, striketeam leader, sector commander and divisional commander; it should be noted that even as unpaid firefighters we must meet the same competencies as paid firefighters.

For the sake of addressing the Committee's criteria, I will expand on each point specifically.

#### *Impact on fire service delivery across Victoria*

Rural and peri-urban Victoria has been served by a force of paid and unpaid firefighters for many years in one of the most fire prone environments in the world. These men and women have risked their own well-being and income to try to keep others safe. Their efforts have been reviewed by Royal Commissions, Coroners Inquests, criminal and civil actions, governmental review, the media and by the populace that they seek to protect. This amount of review has enabled the fire services to face challenges and adapt in a continual effort to create a safer Victoria. However, this Fire Services Legislation Amendment Bill has been developed without consultation with the paid staff or volunteers of the Country Fire Authority (CFA).

The ability of the Country Fire Authority to function will be impacted when the state is most vulnerable. At times of major incidents, eg fire, flood and storm, the Country Fire Authority has the ability to provide surge capacity of operationally ready volunteers and paid staff.

The ability to put hundreds of fresh, trained and experienced firefighters into an extended campaign is vital. Such a response is not limited by factors of location. The volunteers from the peri-urban fringe are an integral part of the ability to respond with great strength. The treatment of volunteers in the outer urban areas of Melbourne and Geelong is likely to impact severely upon these numbers.

The underlying assumption in the statements by the industrial organisations of the paid firefighters is that these communities can only be served by paid firefighters. Such a campaign will disenfranchise volunteers and a wealth of skills and manpower will be lost to the state.

While it is hard to see the specifics of the impact of the changes, as a result of the lack of detail, with little mention on a number of issues:

- resource allocation and budget transparency
- staff selection processes and criteria, especially in relation to the skill set needed to work with highly trained volunteers
- incident management – it should be noted that MFB incidents are managed through a regimented chain of command, whereas Country Fire Authority incidents work to an AIIMS system
- training and trainer recruitment

When there are many details to be determined, the ability of the parties involved to resolve issues expeditiously and with the best of intentions, does not bode well; as the paid firefighters' industrial body is not renowned for its conciliatory negotiations. When there is ambiguity, there is the opportunity for confusion and we cannot afford that when lives and property are at stake.

#### *Effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery*

The provision of proper support for volunteers is the only way that members can be recruited and retained. The support required occurs in many forms and legislative guarantees are a small consideration for most volunteer members.

One of the key factors that influences the engagement and participation of Country Fire Authority volunteers is the support they get from the staff, in particular the Operations Managers, operations Officers and Brigade Administration Support Officers, the suggestion seems to be that Operations Managers and Operations Officers will be recruited and technically stay employees of another organisation, who's industrial representative body has, in recent years, expressed a great deal of disrespect for volunteers and indeed has attempted to write this into its EBA with the Government. The skills set, as written in the current MFB EBA and the proposed Country Fire Authority EBA does not address 'people skills' a 'key performance indicator' for staff, hence the potential pool of recruits to these roles. This does not engender confidence.

The Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation Bill in its current form indicates that unpaid firefighters do not automatically qualify for the protections accessible to paid staff. As the bill reads now, volunteers must qualify for cover, but the bill does not specify the criteria for coverage of volunteers. This lack of detail is critical and this inequality does not make sense. If a paid firefighter is covered from his or her first day of training, how much toxic smoke must a volunteer inhale before they qualify?

In its earliest incarnations, the industrial arm of the paid firefighters demanded that all volunteers must be subservient to any paid firefighter regardless of experience. It is only with continual pressure from affected parties that rules such as this are rejected. Such agitation for paid staff to be superior has to have a negative effect upon volunteers. Although this demand has been removed from the current Bill, I believe that it is at the very core of the nature of the dispute that led to this legislation being proposed.

The determination of budget allocation and the transparency of any deliberation processes is vital to the continued effectiveness of the whole of the Victorian fire services. In the legislation, there is no attempt to define the budget allocation process and nothing to indicate its distribution across sectors, localities and without influence beyond what is fair and based upon needs. If this matter is not specified in legislation, the number and quality of volunteers will suffer as any perception of inferiority will impact upon morale.

#### *Short term and long-term cost impact on fire service provision*

I believe that there is not enough detail in the legislation to make informed assumptions about the financial cost of the Bill as it is now understood. As with any proposal, initiative or restructure, the success or failure of a change is in the specific details of the implementation and the engagement of those affected. There is not enough detail to determine the costs involved. By making promises which entail the spending of \$100 million to implement this reform, the government has made a substantial commitment and only specified the funding for the immediate future. What happens after that money runs out? When there are few details in the legislation, the actual cost of the changes is approximate at best, and reckless at worst. The manner in which the endowment offered by the Fire Services Levy is distributed within Victoria is the very basis for the success or failure of the Bill and there is not enough detail to ensure a safe and world leading fire service delivery model.

#### *Underlying policy rationale*

There is a need to review the boundaries of the rural and urban interface around suburban Melbourne. The extension of the range of paid firefighters is necessary to service growing areas. However, the model of service delivery promulgated in this legislation does not show evidence of other delivery models being considered at all. The doing away with integrated fire stations to be replaced with stations staffed with paid firefighters and little or no indication as how these should relate to stations with unpaid firefighters is deeply worrying. One can only wonder as why there has been no consultation and no evidence that other models or solutions have been explored.

#### *Summary*

Regular review of legislation is an essential part of governing; however this Bill with the lack of detail regarding its implementation and impacts gives one serious concern. I urge the Select Committee to send this piece of legislation back to have the details specified so that actual impacts can be quantified.

When parties which are impacted by this bill in its present form are not consulted in its design, the volunteer Country Fire Authority members and their communities will feel

unvalued and disenfranchised. The population of Victoria generally regards its fire services highly. It does not take the efforts of volunteers who serve the community in many different ways, lightly. Victoria is not unique and could not function without volunteers in many fields: sporting, social, cultural and educational, to mention a few. To treat one group with this level of disrespect is to disrespect all.

*Aside*

I have recently returned from a trip to Portugal and though I did not experience it directly, I am aware of the devastating fires that have just happened there. The reports describe conditions very similar to those of Black Saturday, with significant loss of life and property. The causes of death described were also very similar to those on Black Saturday, ie people fleeing at the last minute being overtaken by the fire front and lethal radiation from the fire front. The reports also noted the contribution of unpaid firefighters as well as support from neighbouring countries in bringing the fires under control. Will we continue to have the capacity to protect our communities in the future?

*Unpaid firefighters and other Country Fire Authority volunteers do not get paid – they are priceless...*

I thank you for the opportunity to address my concerns to the Committee. I am happy for this submission to be on the public record and am prepared to attend a public hearing.

Yours sincerely

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Walter Aich