

Submission to Fire Services Bill Select Committee 2017

To whom it may concern,

Please be advised that I request my submission remain unidentified online.

My name is Tim Landells and I have been a full time professional firefighter for 21 years. I am currently employed by a state fire service in Victoria and have been so for the last 19 years. Prior to this I worked for 2 years for the federal government as a firefighter.

I have a Graduate Certificate in Applied Management, Bachelor of Emergency Management, Advanced Diploma in Firefighting Management, and am a graduate member of the Institution of Fire Engineers.

I'm currently a manager in my fire service. I have previously worked in operational roles at all ranks at various locations, including 3 years at an outer metropolitan fire station where I regularly responded to emergencies with paid full time and volunteer firefighters from MFB and CFA.

I write to express my support for the proposed fire services reform.

Metropolitan Melbourne has grown in population, density and geographic sprawl over the decades; with significant increases in the numbers of homes, businesses, industry, high rise buildings, and numerous public and commercial properties of mass gathering. The work volume and technical expertise required of the fire services has also increased over this time in line with the increasing complexity of urban life and technology. However, the fire service model that protects this urban spread has not changed at the same at a rate, putting it out of step with contemporary demands. Urban areas that have been part of greater metropolitan Melbourne for many years are still classified as 'country' areas, so are covered by the CFA fire service model of both professional and volunteer firefighters. The likes of Dandenong, Frankston, Cranbourne, Boronia, Craigieburn, Melton and Hoppers Crossing are highly urbanised areas, and the citizens living and working in these areas deserve the same reliable and skilled fire service that middle and inner Melbourne enjoys; which includes the added community benefit on Emergency Medical Response.

A 1998 report from the UK Home Office on modernising the standards of fire cover found that the time of response, along with the weight and type of response, are critical factors for fire service response. In Victoria, the preferred minimum standard of fire service response in highly urbanised areas is 7 fully trained firefighters on 2 fire trucks on scene within 8 minutes. This standard leads to better community outcomes in terms of reducing property damage and occupant injury. From a firefighter perspective, this standard provides the minimum resources required to commence safe fire fighting operations, particularly when firefighters enter a building in breathing apparatus to undertake search and rescue.

There are areas in outer metro Melbourne and larger regional centres with high urbanisation that do not currently have this minimum standard, which puts the firefighters and the communities they serve at higher risk from urban fire. In these areas professional firefighters respond with volunteers firefighters, and through no fault of their own, the volunteers do not possess the same skill level or have the same rapid and reliable response as professional firefighters.

The reality is that most people work for a living, which impacts on volunteer firefighter availability for emergency response, and availability to acquire and maintain numerous firefighter skills. As it's their job, professional firefighters provide a 90 second response to emergencies 24/7, and undertake comprehensive initial and ongoing training as part of their employment. Volunteer firefighters do their very best to be available for emergency response and training around the responsibilities of work, family and personal life. The effect of this is volunteer firefighters have varying levels of skill and availability in comparison to professional firefighters, with volunteer response potentially less reliable and less skilled in a highly urbanised environment. At its worst there can be situations which have the potential to jeopardise the safety of firefighters and the community. An example is a bank fire in CFA area in Springvale in late 2016 where 36 people were injured. In this case a volunteer fire truck allocated to the fire didn't respond for 40 minutes. This wouldn't meet the expectations of the local community, and resulted in less resources assisting in the critical early stages of the emergency. This emergency occurred during business hours so presumably many volunteer firefighters were at their own work and unavailable to respond. In another example, I worked at the Latrobe Valley Hazelwood mine fire in CFA's in 2014. During the early stages of my deployment some volunteer firefighters had to leave duty early so they could go to their own work, or were not trained to wear breathing apparatus. This reduced the number of firefighters available to perform critical tasks, at a time when the risk to firefighters and potential community consequences were both very high.

I have had discussions with volunteer firefighters who describe periodically either conducting their paid work or sleeping at their volunteer fire station, in an effort to achieve a fast and reliable emergency response. This is very dedicated behaviour, but also manifestly unfair on the volunteers, their families and employers, as well as the community they are serving. This situation also demonstrates that the current system is at breaking point, if not already broken. Ironically, the actions of these dedicated volunteers firefighters somewhat tried to replicate the role of professional firefighters. The proposed fire service reform could lead to improved fire service coverage and relieve volunteers of unfair expectations placed upon them.

Volunteer firefighters will always be a vital part of the CFA. This will continue under the proposed fire service reform as volunteers provide an important resource capacity, particularly during bushfire season and surge events. There will be no negative impact on volunteer firefighters or the community in areas where the fire service reform would apply. These urban areas would have an appropriate number of highly skilled professional firefighters to respond to emergencies more reliably and faster, leading to better community outcomes. A positive effect for volunteer firefighters in highly urbanised areas is the reduced burden of high volume emergency response impacting upon their jobs and families. Fire service reform could make volunteer firefighting in highly urban areas more sustainable, with volunteer workload restored to a manageable level. Professional firefighters would manage day to day emergencies, so volunteer firefighters in highly urbanised areas would be less fatigued and remain available for event and seasonal surges.

From a financial perspective there are efficiencies to be gained from the proposed fire services reform. With all professional firefighters working for the same organisation, firefighters could be allocated wherever needed across metro Melbourne and regional centres in a way that is not currently possible. For example, at present if the MFB had extra firefighters rostered on duty and the CFA were short staffed of firefighters, the MFB

firefighters cannot be sent to fill the gap at a CFA fire station. The same works vice versa and is not the best use of resources. The same applies for fire trucks, where MFB & CFA have a limited number of specialised response trucks. At present the two fire services build additional specialised vehicles for redundancy within their own services, however a merger of the full time firefighters into Fire Rescue Victoria could lead to the sharing of resources and reduce duplication.

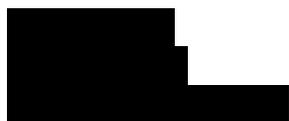
There is great desire amongst my colleagues for the long running industrial dispute to end. Professional firefighters are proud civic minded people who want to do their best for the community they serve and the negative aspects of this dispute are continually demoralising, even for the most resilient people.

The proposed fire services reform would re-focus and re-energise professional and volunteer firefighters, with the opportunity to make the fire services better for the benefit of all Victorians.

The last major reform of the fire services in Victoria was around the same time that World War 2 ended, over 70 years ago. These chances don't come along often.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in support of fire service reform.

Regards

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature and name of the author.