

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees

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

I am Tyson Cheek, Level 3 Fire fighter at Mildura Fire Station. I have been a Career fire fighter for 2 and half years and was a volunteer fire fighter for CFA for 12 years. I was also a volunteer in the Western Australian Volunteer Fire & Rescue. I have been awarded a CFA 10 Year Service award and a national Medal, which represents 15 years of diligent service to Emergency services within Australia.

I am writing this submission in support of the proposed reform of the fire services.

The Fire services reform is long overdue and is a required necessity for the safety of Victorians living in Melbourne and our regional cities. The current model is outdated and does not take into account for the change in urban growth, community expectations, safety of fire fighters, volunteer response abilities and today's work/life balance. I urge all committee members to consider the facts as to why this reform is needed and to leave out the bitter social media disputes witnessed from all parties arguing their point of view.

Fire Services reform is not new to Victoria; we can go back to 1890 when the first fully professional Melbourne fire service was legislated. In the lead up to this bill, there was a bitter turf war between the Insurance funded brigades and the fully volunteer brigades. The brigades had different ideas on how things should be done and both parties had strong political ties. The government proposed a bill to put control of all fire fighters under the one board, the volunteer association lobbied against this. Eventually the Fire Brigades Act was passed, setting up two boards, Metropolitan Fire Brigades Board and the Country Fire Brigades Board. The Country Fire Brigades Board looked after the country area of Victoria outside the 10 mile radius of Melbourne and was fully volunteer. 127 years later and we have a very similar story, fighting over turf and pride, rather than considering what is best for the people of Victoria.

The current CFA act was legislated in 1958, creating the existing border between the CFA and MFB. At the time Melbourne population was under 2 Million people, along the border, places like Dandenong North was just farms. A very different view from today where the population of Melbourne has doubled and is the fastest growing city in Australia. In Victoria's large rural cities, the situation is worse. Where I live in Mildura the population has increased over 4 times the size. With one of the busiest airports outside of Melbourne, the area is thriving on people looking for a sea change to the country. Having a model that remains in 1958 endangers Victorians living in urban fringes and larger regional cities. The fire Services reform offers the ability review the level of fire service provided to the community on a continuous basis, allowing change with growth, keeping the most at-risk safe with a rapid response fire service.

Being born and raised in country towns, I am well attuned to the layback country approach," *What's the rush?*" These are the different expectations from the country folk to the city folk. In the country, we do what we can, with what we have. We know if we don't do it, who will. What the community expects from a fire service in rural Victoria is different from those in highly urbanised areas. Greater the population, more the community expects of services provided. As the population of Melbourne

sprawls out and regional cities get larger, there is more of a demand for more schools, public transport, hospitals and a faster and better fire response.

The time it takes for a house to fully involved in fire and be unsupportive for life, has drastically decreased since the 1960's due to the change in materials used in manufacture of carpets, lounges, furniture, toys etc. Every minute counts in saving a life. Our volunteers do a great job in keeping Victorians safe, but can only do so much. As times change and towns get bigger, it gets harder to respond a fire appliance in adequate time. At an urban station going to a house fire within its urban area, the aim is 4 minutes out the door, 8 minutes on scene. So, in that 4 minutes, as a volunteer, you need to get out of bed at home, drive to the station, get dressed in turnout gear and get into the truck. Keeping in mind that the drive to the station is to be done following all road traffic rules. I challenge you to see how far you can drive in 2 – 3 minutes in places like Scoresby, Keysborough, and Werribee. With more traffic on the road, roundabouts, traffic lights, and speed restrictions, it's getting more difficult. This can't be changed by the volunteers, it is what it is. The service delivery standard could be changed to help them meet the target, but how does this help the person that is trapped in a house fire.

Another factor in the ability for volunteer brigades to respond in sufficient time is the change in the employment culture within the community. Today's average household finds both two parents working with two kids and a mortgage, very different from the 60's where women only accounted to 34% of the workforce and the public sector didn't allow married women until 1966. Our work/life balance has changed dramatically, we are working longer hours to help pay off our larger debts. Volunteering has become harder and less desirable. There is a strain on families, financially and socially. For many people, every dollar counts, to leave work to attend a fire call can hurt the employee and the employer. During my 15 years of volunteering, I witnessed employers becoming more reluctant in letting employees leaving work for fire calls. And as a volunteer, I had to decline Strike team duties as I could not afford 3 days unpaid from work. The state can't afford to keep relying on a model that worked 50 years ago, society has changed.

Every Victorian has the right to work in a safe environment and go home safely. As a former electrician, the state enforced rules under the Electricity Safety Act 1998, which enforced electricians to not expose themselves to unnecessary risks, ensure adequate precautions have been made to reduce electric shock. Now as a fire fighter, Myself, my wife and my kids expect that all necessary precautions have been made to ensure that I make it home safely after each shift. To fight a typical house fire, a minimum of 7 fire fighters on the fire ground is required to perform the task safely. A fire fighter with breathing apparatus that enters the structure is required to enter in teams of at least two, and backup of at least two waiting outside. In an MFB area this happens, at least two appliances are responded within 90 seconds, putting the minimum of 7 on a fire ground. Within a CFA area, a staffed station is paged responding a crew of 4 on an appliance within 90 seconds and one volunteer brigade paged. That volunteer brigade might fail to respond, it's not until 6 minutes from the first 000 call that a replacement brigade is paged. Time is adding up, time that fire fighters are working unsafe on fire grounds, putting their lives and the lives of the community at risk.

After all the delays of the volunteer appliance arriving at the scene, I now wonder what qualifications have come with these fire fighters. There is no requirement on the qualification level on a volunteer fire appliance, apart from minimum skills. The truck might arrive with no breathing

apparatus operators, I still can't enter the structure safely. This is a daily occurrence problem within the CFA. My first fire call as a career fire fighter was to the Mildura Base Hospital, on arrival we noticed smoke within the corridors. On inspection, we found a faulty air conditioner; we isolated the unit preventing further damage and cleared the hospital of smoke. What sounds like a small job, could have been much worse. Luckily on that day we had two staffed appliances; as the only volunteer response was 25 minutes later, 1 volunteer in a Ute. If this job was outside the Mildura catchment area, we would have only sent one appliance with a crew of 3.

Since becoming a career fire fighter in 2015, I have had to battle then ongoing media bashing on union member fire fighters. There has been countless front pages and news articles against the union power. The Fire Services Reform is about changing the fire services to adapt to the community needs of today, not union power. Many of the CFA career fire fighters have been volunteers, or still are. We have the communities best interest at heart and are proud to be working for the community. As a volunteer, I did it because I enjoyed it, the community needed it, it's all we had. Any increase in fire service would be advantages to the community, a community shouldn't suffer because a volunteer believes its their right to volunteer. The campaign led by the Liberal party has hurt many relationships across the state, many mistruths were said that has created a divide that will never be fixed. Many of my friends from the Swan Hill Fire Brigade have turned their back on me, simply because of my union membership. This is a station that the closest career fire fighter is over 200kms away, the Fire Services reform would have no effect on them.

It's time for change and well overdue. The committee needs to take emotion, party policy, union hatred, and empathy out of the verdict and just consider the facts. Put the entire Victorian community interest first, consider how this affects the majority of Victorians living in Melbourne and larger regional cities. This is not time to trade deals for a vote, this reform helps save lives, protect everyday Victorians property and bring the Victorian Fire Service in line with community expectations. The volunteers can once again have a 100% volunteer fire fighter service, without union influence in their decision making. The government will have better control of the career staff under one banner, Fire Rescue Victoria, and we can all work towards making Victoria a safer place.

I thank the committee for this opportunity to express my views of support for the Fire Service Reform, and thank you for taking the time in reading my submission.

Kind Regards

Tyson Cheek
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