

Kirra Vanzetti

From: Chris Tempest [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, 5 July 2017 9:06 AM
To: LCSC
Subject: Fire Services Reform Submission

Department of the Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne
Victoria, 3002

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees,

I am writing this letter in regard to the inquiry into the firefighters' presumptive rights compensation and fire services legislation amendment (reform) bill 2017.

For the past nine years, I have worked for the Country Fire Authority (CFA) in various roles at different locations throughout Victoria. I am currently a Station Officer based at the Rowville Fire Station.

During my time in the CFA there have been a number of changes to working conditions and the services CFA members provide to the community. While these changes have been imperative to ensure the continued safety of the community, the legislation surrounding the operation of the CFA and working conditions of its staff have not kept pace.

The recent proposed reform of the fire services is a welcomed change, and I fully support the restructuring. The main reasons for my support are detailed below.

- Within the current system implemented by the CFA, both career and volunteer firefighters are called to respond in the event of an emergency. Although the differences between the two states of employment are vast, in general, career firefighters are guaranteed to turn-out, with a response time of 8 minutes, while volunteer members may choose to respond. It is worth pointing out that many volunteer members, especially those residing in urban locations have occupations which limit their capacity to respond. A guaranteed response from career firefighters is always going to be more superior than one from volunteers.
- The risks involved with being a firefighter are quite complex, however the current regulations regarding the response of career and volunteer staff to potentially life-threatening incidents dramatically increase the likelihood of injury or death for career firefighters due to the lack of guaranteed backup when combating an incident. In this matter, both public and firefighter safety is being compromised. The best work practises have been ignored for too long and the proposed reform to the Victorian Fire Services addresses the fundamental failures that threaten firefighter and community safety. Any revised legislation should include a minimum number of career firefighters to be dispatched, to ensure public and firefighter safety is prioritised.
- What was "country" Victoria is no longer considered to be country. These areas are now built-up, urbanised areas, housing large populations of individuals. Fire burns the same whether it is burning in Melbourne CBD or within the outer suburbs. As such, the community deserves the same standard of protection no matter where they reside, which is not currently covered within

the previous legislation of 1890's. These arrangements are out-dated and putting lives and property at risk.

- Every three years when the enterprising bargaining agreement (EBA) is being negotiated, the CFA has to fight for appropriate working conditions of career and volunteer staff. I have seen it time and time again, career staff and volunteers fighting, and every three years it seems to get worse. The relationship between staff become so tarnished that they cannot be repaired. Some key attributes I believe are important as a firefighter, both professional and volunteer, include being a team player, comradeship, honesty, mateship, loyalty and trust. All these attributes seem to go out the window during EBA negotiations. The moral of all staff is significantly affected and it creates a toxic relationship on the fire-ground. The toxicity is so severe in some instances that staff do not work together at incidents and community safety is compromised. A history of these terrible working relationships is manifested though out the ranks (professional and volunteer) and the main people that suffer are the community.

I use the example below, from my personal experience, to demonstrate the failures of the current structure.

- I was a young firefighter, only 22 years old, and it was my first month on station out of recruits. I was stationed at Mildura Fire Station where there were only three career firefighters on duty at any one time, as per protocol.
- During nightshift, we were paged to a house fire at roughly 2 am. Multiple calls were received and it was established that persons were trapped. As we arrived on scene, the house was complete engulfed in flames and the neighbours indicated that someone was inside. The Station Officer asked me to go inside wearing breathing apparatus (BA) and hose line.
- Within five minutes of being inside the house the roof collapsed on top of me, knocking me to the ground. I had no back up, no one with me and no guaranteed fire truck coming with more firefighters to save me.
- With a struggle, I eventually stood up from the rubble and retreated out of the structure. I recall being in pain with burn marks up my neck and shoulders. Outside, there were two volunteer firefighters and the officer was asking them to put on BA and help. They refused, having not worn one for a long period of time and stating that the situation looked "very dangerous". The officer came to me and said, "you are all we have at the moment".
- Having not completed and primary search and given one person was unaccounted for, I went back inside the house.
- While I was successfully able to put the fire out and confirm no one was trapped, I remember being in a completed state of fight or flight response, the roof could the roof could fall on me, I could be trapped, will anyone there to help me?

For years this scenario played on my mind. Every day I went to work knowing the system was set up to fail me. I may be injured, or worse still, perish in a fire and never see my family again due to an outdated fire services model, this is only one example of many.

Now, as Station Officer myself, it is my turn to make the decisions which determine wither a fellow firefighter goes home or not. While I do understand that the staffing levels in many stations have increased since my time in Mildura, stations like Rowville are still having these issues when responding to fire calls to the east. Only three weeks ago I was the incident controller at a car/house fire in Belgrave South, and I had to request crew from four brigades before I got one that turned out, both Narre Warren east & Clematis brigade failed to turnout. Every day as an officer I have to deal with the burden of a system that forces us to work under out-dated and unsafe conditions. It does truly worry me that is just a matter of time before a life is lost due to this outdated system.

Yours sincerely,

Christopher Tempest

Chris Tempest – Station Officer

Rowville Fire Brigade 1063 Wellington Rd Rowville Vic 3178

T [REDACTED] Fax [REDACTED] Mobile [REDACTED]
E [REDACTED]

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