

## Submission on the restructuring of Victoria's fire services as contemplated by the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation and Fire Services Legislation Amendment (Reform) Bill 2017

### Background:

Up until January 2017, I was a volunteer at Hallam CFA. After 12 years (4.5 as 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant) and over 2000 turnouts (including Back Saturday) I resigned. Hallam Station was receiving about 2000 per call outs per year, of which about 1/3 (600) were received by volunteers. The additional calls that were received on the staff pager circuit were calls to support neighbouring brigades, low priority (usually referred to as code 3 calls) and Emergency Medical Response (EMR) calls.

At the time of my resignation I held the following qualifications:

- Wildfire Crew Leader
- Endorsed driver/operator on the Scania Type 4 Heavy Pumper
- Endorsed Code 1 Driver the brigade pumper, tanker, ultralight and car
- Endorsed 4wd driver
- Endorsed Workplace Trainer and Assessor
  - Trained and Assessed minimum skills
  - Trained and Assessed Hazmat Awareness
  - Trained members of the Hallam and surrounding brigades in Heavy Hazmat Operation
- Level 2 First Aid

When I joined Hallam it was often cited as the example of how integration should work and this continued up until about the time the last EBA campaign began in earnest. Volunteer members often travelled on the appliances with staff - an experience that greatly enhanced the operational capabilities of the volunteers. Staff and volunteers trained together and often volunteer "over achievers" would receive additional training and encouragement from the staff. There were composite crews (staff and volunteer) that operated before, during and after Black Saturday – despite the losses of that event, staff and volunteers worked seamlessly and tirelessly to protect the people and property of Victoria. In lesser publicised events, volunteers stepped up and operated the pumper freeing up staff to take on command and control roles to manage large numbers of volunteer crews. Staff and volunteers often worked together on Hazardous Materials events with staff and volunteers trained to an identical levels of service.

Long before I started at Hallam there had been a number of EBAs that had gotten quite nasty and the brigade members had formed the opinion that the volunteers would be "interested but not involved" in the EBA process. During my time as a member of the Brigade Management Team (BMT), we continued to press this view with the members of the brigade as we believed it would shield the brigade from attack by both volunteers in other brigades and UFU members. This time the staff became quite agitated that the volunteers would not "take a side" actively support them in their campaign for a deep reaching changes to the EBA. They convinced a small number of volunteers to

actively and publicly support the UFU campaign as well as undertook a program of diminishing the roles and responsibilities of volunteers both at Hallam and other brigades. This campaign has gone unchecked by CFA management and has resulted in the morale of volunteers to be almost non-existent. Many members have resigned and others withdrawn to a position where they do the least amount of work to ensure they do not draw attention to themselves. The call statistics over the last 3 years for the volunteers at Hallam will quantify this situation.

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

There was a time (see background above) where staff and volunteers worked together and CFA management showed leadership and ensured the organisation worked as a cohesive unit and the community was well served. The separation of the staff and volunteers will create an environment where this cohesion is lost. It will create uncertainty around “who is in charge” – currently staff and volunteers all operate under the CFA act which bestows powers on the Chief Officer and these powers are delegated down to the incident controller – under the new model with two separate organisations it will be difficult to a continuity of powers. With separate organisations and appliances the opportunity for cross-crewing (volunteers and staff sharing appliances) will be lost – volunteer experience on urban appliances (pumpers) and staff experience in operating rural appliances (tankers) will be lost. In the ever increasing urban and rural fringe there we can expect different and competing command structures and tactics being employed on the urban side of the fire front that the rural side of the fire front.

Co-location seems to have different ramifications for different integrated brigades.

I’ve heard stories of :-

- Volunteers preparing to migrate their members to other stations and distribute the brigade owned assets to other brigades.
- Volunteers moving out of the current station to a new station in the same response area
- Volunteers winding down involvement but remaining at the current station
- Volunteers insisting that the staff relocate to a new station and leave the volunteers in place

With such a wide range of solutions being considered, and no single solution being proposed there will be much uncertainty around the CFA which will lead to poor performance.

In all, I would expect a negative impact on the fire service delivery across Victoria.

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

The last 12 – 18 months has seen an active campaign by some members of the UFU to diminish the role of volunteers in the CFA. Volunteers are being turned around even when there is work to be done, appliances on scene sidelined while the staff actively work the job and eager members being targeted. This has led to many members either resigning or disengaging with the organisation. I believe the proposed changes will accelerate this situation as more volunteers are sidelined and come to the conclusion that they are essentially wasting their time and will look for other ways to serve their community. I made the decision to leave the CFA earlier this year, since then I’ve become aware of many other members who have either resigned or are preparing to resign – there appears to be a loss of quality firefighters and I think this gap will become very obvious as older members retire and there are no members to step in and take their place.

### Short term and long term cost impact on fire service provision:

Discussions I've had with various staff has highlighted their lack of understanding of cost impacts of their demands – they seem to think the State of Victoria has bottomless bag of cash – and the government is keeping it from them. I believe this separation of the fire services is the first step in their plan to drastically increase the number of paid fire fighters. I think they will continue to discourage volunteer participation and use that as the rationale to increase the number of paid staff instead of engaging with volunteers and keeping costs at a controlled level. The current plan (separate the organisations, then decide how they will operate) will delay the cost impacts for at least 2 years, possibly 5 years, as the two organisations re-establish their operations.

It think the short term cost impacts can be easily identified by looking at promises made by the current government. The long term cost impact will not be known for many years.

### Underlying policy rationale:

I find it very interesting the new CFA EBA was heralded as “having no impact on volunteers”, but can only move forward if the staff are removed from the CFA. Clearly it would have had an impact on volunteers and the only way to give the UFU what they want is to move them away from the CFA. This policy does not create a stronger fire service, it dismantles one which is going through a bad patch of poor leadership instead of providing the strong leadership that is required. The policy is driven by a government wishing to appease the UFU at the cost of public safety.

### Conclusion:

I believe the communities serviced by Hallam CFA are now less safe than they were prior to the situation that confronts us today, and the community safety will be in decline for decades to come if the proposed changes come into effect. The staff will insist that their 90 second response time and 7 on fire ground will increase community safety, this is true for the first call the brigade responds to, but at 2000 calls per year (and slowly rising), the opportunity for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> calls to come in while the staff are committed will increase and without strong volunteer support the community safety will be compromised. The staff are eager to highlight the shortcomings (fail to respond) of volunteer response but unwilling to work with volunteers to increase participation and level of experience – the failure of volunteers to be engaged in the CFA is a result of the failure of staff to support them, and moving the staff out into a separate organisation will only make this situation worse.

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