

FSBSC Submission 1200

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

Dear Assistant Clerk Committees,

My name is Brennan Walsh, I reside in Beaconsfield and I have been a professional firefighter in the CFA since July 2015. I am currently based at Pakenham Fire Station and during my short career in the CFA I have also worked at Fire Stations in Sunbury, Greenvale and Morwell.

I am in support of the proposed Fire Service Reform and through this submission I intend to express my point of view by citing personal examples of why reform is required. My submission will focus on the Pakenham response area as most of my experience has been in this area however I can ensure you that the examples that I identify are not isolated to Pakenham but are actually occurring CFA wide.

Through this submission I will address following reasons why reform is required:

- Community and Fire Fighter Safety
- Increased capability of career staff with no reduction of volunteer support or capacity
- Efficiency and effectiveness of career staff under FRV
- Cessation of current industrial environment

## **Community and Fire Fighter Safety**

At Pakenham we responded to 938 incidents in the 2016/2017 financial year. Our primary response area extends 4km to our North, 10km to our South, 1km West and 6km East. We face an extreme Bushfire risk as we heavily vegetated, undulating terrain to our North and significant expanses of Grasslands to our South incorporating the following:

- 27 Alarmed Premises
- 12 Non-Alarmed Premises
- 5 Retirement Villages\*
- 12 Kindergartens\*
- 12 Child Care Centres\*
- 10 Primary Schools\*
- 9 Secondary Schools\*
- 3 Train Stations\*
- 2 Freeway / Highways
- 3 Exit ramps from the Monash Freeway
- 7 Shopping Centres
- 45,244 Residents
- 11,773 Households
- 2,312 Businesses
- 32,942 Registered Motor Vehicles

*\*Includes Officer*

The above area seems like a manageable and simple area to cover but our response area covers a far greater area as we support the entire Cardinia Shire. Our approximate response area and travel times from the Pakenham Fire Station are as follows:

- Northern Boundary: 30km, travel time 30 minutes
- Western Boundary: 10km, travel time 10 minutes
- Eastern Boundary: 30km, travel time 25 minutes
- Southern Boundary: 15km, travel time 15 minutes

From Pakenham our closest CFA integrated stations are Hallam (approximately 20km West) and Cranbourne (approximately 25km South West). Therefore, unless specialist response is required we are the only staff appliance to respond within our response area which also means that we are the *only* guaranteed response. Considering the risks present in our entire response area and the ever growing population we should be able to provide a better guaranteed service to the community.

With Fire Service reform we will be able to guarantee that two appliances with at least 7 firefighters will be dispatched within 8 minutes.

This is critical for both community and firefighter safety. This guarantee will increase our ability to protect life and property as we will have sufficient man power and equipment to initially deal with any emergency we are responded to. Additionally, I will know that I have support coming so that I have no hesitations when it comes to responding to any scenario as I know I will have guaranteed response of career professional firefighters; this is vital as I need to know I have support in order to mitigate the risks present on the fireground in order to effectively complete my duties.

Some people will argue that, within the Pakenham response area, there is a guaranteed response from Volunteer Brigades; I regret to inform you that there is not. I am not out to slander volunteer brigades but the fact of the matter is that there is no guarantee of volunteer response which increases the risk within our response area. On numerous occasions I have been to incidents where volunteer response has been sufficient and our response has not been required. However, on numerous occasions I have responded to incidents where volunteer response has been insufficient and luckily we have been able to handle the incident.

One such example was incident number 627051 on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2017. At this incident we received a support call for a Smoke Alarm operating at Club Officer which consists of a Bistro, Children's play area, café, TAB and gaming area. We responded in Pakenham Pumper with four career professional firefighters and were responding into Officer Volunteer Brigade's primary area. The worst case scenario that we faced at this incident was to locate and extinguish a fire, evacuate patrons and staff, conduct first aid on casualties and conduct overhaul and salvage tasks. To this incident the response was one volunteer in an appliance not designed for structural fire response. Luckily for us it was a false alarm. There are numerous examples of similar scenarios and the table attached at annex A is a snapshot of incidents where response has been insufficient within my response area.

My assessment is that if the current model continues we are accepting the risk of a day where everything goes wrong and lack of guaranteed response will result in the loss of life and property.

### **Increased capability of career staff with no reduction of volunteer support or capacity**

Fire service reform will bring with it an increased capability as career professional firefighters within FRV will be trained, equipped and available to respond to a wider range of incidents, for example road rescue. This increased capability of the career professional fire fighters is a positive for the community as every incident that we are equipped to respond to means guaranteed response.

There are people telling you that reform will devastate CFA Volunteers and will impact their turnout and surge capacity. While I can't speak from a volunteer's perspective, I can provide the facts on what fire service reform will mean to volunteers:

- Employing all career firefighters in one fire service will not affect volunteer turnout or surge capacity. We will be restructuring currently manned resources under one service and volunteers will continue to respond as they currently do.
- Volunteer support will be maintained with operational firefighters. Operations Officers and Operations Managers will be employed by FRV but will continuing their roles providing support to volunteers through an arrangement with CFA.
- That the reform areas will be restricted to the 35 integrated station's primary response areas and will have no effect on other volunteer brigades or bushfire response.
- The reform will benefit volunteers as it has included a package to assist with volunteer recruitment and retention and includes funding for volunteer station upgrades.

If these reforms would negatively impact volunteer capacity I would be against them. My wife, 18 month old daughter, my wife's business and my home are in a Volunteer primary response area. The closest responding fire station is Beaconsfield Volunteer Brigade and personally I want them in the best position to be able to any incident that may involve my family.

Fire service reform will increase the capability of career professional firefighters and will not negatively impact volunteers; as both of these points directly decrease the risks to my family how can I not be in support of the reforms?

### **Efficiency and effectiveness of career staff under FRV**

Prior to becoming a firefighter I was a Cavalry Officer in the Australian Army for 8 years which included a tour of Afghanistan from 2010-2011 with the 2nd Mentoring Task Force. From my time in the Army I have seen the best and the worst functional organisations operating in a war zone so I believe that I am in a position to provide you a ground truth on the efficiency and effectiveness of an organisation and in my opinion the fire service within Victoria is neither effective nor efficient.

There are many areas which need improvement however three stand-out inefficiencies are as follows:

- We are running 3 different training schemes with 3 different standards.
- We have two different career professional firefighting entities which have different equipment.
- And worst of all there is an every growing feeling of us against them with the CFA resulting in the misuse / underutilisation of resources.

I do not want to focus on the negatives in this space but instead give you a glimpse of how we can achieve efficiencies which will ultimately result in a more effective fire service.

The fire service reform will incorporate the standardisation of career training, specialist response, response standards and equipment. This is essential to increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of our fire service as you will have a single pool of trained, equipped and available personnel which can be assembled and shuffled as required to complete a task. Not only will our output be more effective but our resource usage will be significantly more efficient. Being able to run training to cover both entities, having a single set of equipment and having a single full time workforce will reduce expenditure. I understand that a significant outlay will be required to get to a position where these efficiencies can be reached however it is better than our current wastage.

Not only will the fire service reforms increase our efficiency and effectiveness as a career professional firefighting entity, it will also increase efficiency within government. We will reduce the number of bargaining agreements required for career professional firefighters. The CFA EBA has been a major drain on the efficiency and effectiveness of the CFA and government; imagine the time, money and resources wasted since 2010. Surely in this instance having one would be much better than two.

### **Cessation of current industrial environment**

I have been in the CFA for nearly two years and in that short time I have seen enough to note that the wedge driven between the different stakeholders has caused irreversible damage to the culture of the organisation. One party feels that they are having their organisation taken away from them, another feels that they are having their safety, equipment and work conditions taken away from them; all the while the people of Victoria are not receiving the best fire service delivery that they require.

At the end of the day we are the same team and we should be pulling in the same direction to Protect Life and Property. I personally have no dramas working with anyone who is willing to get on the fireground with me and do just that Protect Life and Property. The problem I face in my response area is that unfortunately that sentiment is not shared by all personnel within the CFA and individual beliefs and actions have created unnecessary tensions and reduced capability on the fireground. There have been instances of professional career firefighters being prematurely downgraded or turned around from incidents as an attempt to keep them away from the incident even though no appliances have been on scene. This is unacceptable and dangerous.

Respect within the Fire Services is essential to its effectiveness. Professional firefighters should all respect the volunteers as they have a wealth of experience, they commit a lot of time and put themselves in the same situations staff do. Volunteer firefighters should also respect the professional firefighters as we have a wealth of experience, are highly trained and pursue professional mastery of our trade. With these qualities, mutual respect will allow us to value add to each other and produce the best service delivery available to the state. Unfortunately, a few bad eggs have created pockets of disrespect and unfortunately disrespect spreads fast.

This disrespect has come from a game of political football that has played both sides off against each other. A game which has been played at federal and state level. A game that has resulted in the denigration of a once highly respected profession. A game that needs to stop because it is missing the big picture; a safer Victoria.

It is not the fault of an individual stakeholder but instead a systematic issue. And it is an issue that I need to face on a daily basis at my place of work and when asked what I do for a living. An issue that I am faced with as I leave my family and drive to work only to see bumper stickers which directly oppose my employment conditions. It is an issue that has resulted in career firefighters being targeted by members of the public; the same people that we put ourselves at risk to protect. While I did not experience any of the following personally I heard of multiple accounts where firefighters were spat on, threatened and verbally vilified. My assessment is that current industrial environment needs to change otherwise the negative impacts will result in a decline to morale and effectiveness.

## **Conclusion**

During my time in the Army, the Army as a whole was forced to restructure in order to keep up with the global threat environment, technological advancements, resource efficiency and battlefield effectiveness. The population of Victoria is expanding, the threats relating to fire and emergencies are increasing; yet the Fire Services in Victoria are not adapting and have not done so for some 60 years. We are being left behind as we are adverse to change and holding on too tight to old structures.

One example which highlights this is the boundary of the Pakenham Primary response area. Directly in front of the Pakenham Fire Station is the Princes Highway, on the other side of the Highway is a complex of factories including Bunnings, Masters, Office Works, Gyms, Barbecues Galore, Pet store, Automotive shops as well as cafes and fast food stores. We are directly across the road and have a Pumper which has equipment and capacity to effectively respond to an incident in such a complex. However instead of altering the boundaries the complex remains within the primary area of Toomuc Volunteer Brigade who are 7 minutes away (not including volunteer turn out time) and only have a Tanker and Ultra-Light both of which are designed to respond to wildfire. These boundaries are old, outdated and blatantly ineffective; however we are still tied to them.

If you do something the same way because that is the way you have always done it or because you don't have the courage to fix a fault; you will soon find that you have lost the initiative and your output will decline. Fire Service Reform is required to improve our service delivery to the people of Victoria.

Yours sincerely,

Brennan Walsh

