

Ben Connolly

Qualified Fire-fighter

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Assistant Clerk Committees,
Dept. of the Legislative Council
Fire Service Bill Select Committee

RE: Fire Services Reform & Restructure

Dear Sir/ Madam,

I write this letter in the hope it will provide some clarification & insight into the current state of Victoria's fire services & its need for immediate attention through reform & restructure for modernisation.

My name is Ben Connolly, I have been employed by the CFA as a Career Fire-fighter for the past 3 years & I currently hold the rank of Qualified Fire-fighter. Previous to my time in the CFA I was employed by DFES (Dept. Fire & Emergency Services of Western Australia) as a Career Fire-fighter in WA for a term of 3 years. I currently live in Mornington, am married to my childhood sweetheart & we have 6 month old daughter named Lacey who grows bigger and wiser every day. Mornington is not only where my family and I have decided to live but also the station an brigade at which I work within.

Prior to fire brigade life I volunteered my time within a number of organisations; I worked within an organisation called 'SCISCO Pathways' whereby I worked one on one & in a team environment with at risk teens within the education system to help provide mentoring, strategies & solutions for troubled youths that were falling behind in the schooling network & whom otherwise had very little hope & outlook for their working futures. Additionally, I volunteered for a not-for-profit company called SCOPE that provided resources such as rehabilitation, transport & logistics for adults that had suffered from an acquired brain injury (ABI) Having a background in fitness my role was as part of the rehabilitation department whereby once a week I would work in a one on one capacity simply stretching an assisting in improving basic motor function an control.

I write all this not to bore you with my work history or life story, but to impress upon you that I'm sure like you, want to be able to come to work, do my job to the best of my ability in a manner that is as safe an proficient as possible so I can go home to my family each night an watch my little girl grow up. Additionally, my volunteer background in numerous roles gives me a platform to speak from being I understand why people volunteer and I see how having people of sound judgement an training is good for any collective community.

I strongly support the proposed reforms of Victorian fire services; not only so we can move from an out dated, archaic model of running such a service, but additionally for the reasons denoted below:

- Operational Safety: having come from a very progressive fire service in the west which guaranteed a two truck response to any structure fire (standard house fire) with a contingent of 7 fire-fighters that were all trained, qualified an most importantly highly

competent in breathing apparatus & road crash rescue operations. This allowed maximal efficiency in achieving scene safety and in mitigating the emergency. Conversely here at Mornington under the current model, we have a guaranteed 3 fire-fighters and a Station Officer on the fire ground but in context of the above scenario we have no guarantee of a second truck response from our volunteers- if we do get additional response support it may only be from 2 or 3 of our volunteer fire-fighters so not even a full truck. Added to which doesn't take into account crew competency, meaning we may have been caught several times where the supporting crew are not breathing apparatus qualified; thus meaning the staff have to do all the grunt work which opens up numerous OH & S issues stemming from fatigue, heavy lifting, manual handling, etc. The reforms would see a change in this system which would make my job safer, would make big jobs easier to bring under control through greater shared work load and in the management of fatigue, heat stress and physical labour upon the active fire-fighters on the fire ground.

- **Standardisation of Training/ Equipment:** These reforms will see a universal standard of operation and protocol across the state of Victoria. At the moment, the MFB have vastly different equipment to us in the CFA. Our standard heavy pumpers are fitted out so differently and with such varying degrees of equipment even though we attend the exact same emergencies. This spans further more to the way we conduct training, the manner in which courses are conducted for rank progressions and the way each organisation facilitates specialist equipment training. It makes no sense, to have two entities operating in such close proximity to one another but having an ensemble of procedures and equipment that are completely unique to the other. These reforms would enhance not only the collective Victorian Fire-fighters resourcing and training across the state but aligning them as one is logical moving forward to the future if Victoria wants to be taken seriously as a progressive fire service within the community. The manner in which the service stands at the moment honestly stinks; this can be seen and is reflected in staff morale and in the horrific incidence of suicides within both organisations over the past 24 months. People have just had enough of being in the paper, being exploited, being blindsided by untruths and fictional stories without substance. This is supposed to be the best job in the world- the average member historically doing more than 30 years in the job; however this climate has taken its toll and has a lot of people soul searching as they are disenfranchised with its current state. How do I know this to be true because I am one of those people looking at outside notions and moving on.
- **Mental Health/ Wellbeing:** The strain that this conflict has caused for me personally and my family alike cannot be conveyed or summed up in a letter but I will try my best to give you an understanding. In the last 6 months I have reached out to my fellow team members as I have been in a bind over my own disarray of the fire services- coming from a mighty professional brigade in the west that I was proud to be a part of to this shambles of a fire service which I could happily take or leave tomorrow in its current state. I worked my ass off to get in the job as most people have- hours of preparation, coaching, resume and interview training etc. I was proud to be a fire-fighter when I finally got in and graduated. Fast forward only a few years and I have taken 10 plus sick days in the past few months alone for mental health days, I have spoken with members from our own internal 'CFA Peer Support' program for help and have had several meetings with a Psychologist to try and clear my head and get above the current debacle that is Victorian fire-services. The current state of play is unhealthy not only on myself, the team around me and my family, but to every fire-fighter out there that is just trying to make a living helping those within their communities. Keep in mind that I am not the extreme end of the mental health spectrum, as I'm sure you are aware and I made mention too above- several of our brothers have reached the point of no return

an been so low they have taken their lives over the past 24 months. I remember before starting here at Mornington whilst stationed at Frankston Fire Station, we literally went to one of the other Fire-fighters from another shifts house for a welfare check as he was in such a bad place, he hadn't showed up to work an wouldn't answer his phone so we got in the truck and physically went an knocked on his door to see he was ok. Can you imagine this in your workplace, receiving a call from your boss to go visit a staff member for a welfare check, thinking that he may have taken his own life? This is the environment we are in at the moment. Its raw, it's bad for morale and its unacceptable; these reforms need to take place to solidify what we were all so proud to be apart of when we started in the job but the 'service' has lost its way. Reforms are a start to getting back on track.

- **Volunteers Benefit:** The reforms will benefit the current and future volunteers of the CFA hands down. As has been discussed an I'm sure your well aware of, the proposed package will see funding for volunteer station upgrades and upgrades to old equipment an old trucks that should be out of commission due to age and nominal wear and tear over the years. There will be an emphasis on programs to assist with volunteer recruitment and retention. As has been said over and over but the media seem to manipulate the fact, the CFA and its volunteers will get everything they have wanted and been pushing for over the past few years. Every second car I seem to drive past at the moment has the 'Hands of CFA' sticker on it. This reform is giving the CFA an its volunteers complete control, it is a win-win scenario for staff and for the volunteers where we can all co-exist in co-located areas like Mornington for example but allow the political faction that has been steam rolling morale an relationships across most if not all brigades to pass an we can go about getting on with business and go back to being out of sight an out of mind of the hearts and minds of the public an just being there at the time of peoples greatest need... that is what I wish for in these reforms so I can just get on with the job that use to provide so much happiness an joy to my soul!

Thanks for taking the time to read.

Yours Sincerely,

Benjamin Connolly

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