

Fire Services Bill Select Committee Submission

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To the Fire Services Bill Select Committee:

1. Background

My name is Damien Powell and I am a Leading Firefighter with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. I have been a firefighter with the MFB going on 15 years now, 9 of those years at my current rank of Leading Firefighter. I am currently located in the MFB's Northern Zone, though have previously been stationed in the MFB Central and Western Zones. I am also a qualified Road Accident Rescue operator, a qualification I have held now for the last 7 years. I have additional qualifications in Emergency Medical Response, Aerial Appliance operations and hold Wildfire qualifications.

2. Support of Fire Service Reform

I unequivocally support the Fire Services Reform Bill and personally feel that such a reform is long overdue. The Metropolitan Fire Service borders have remained unchanged in over 60 years and in that time what is considered to be Metropolitan Melbourne has grown significantly. Heavily urbanised areas of current Melbourne are still labelled as "Country Areas" under the current fire services model and thus often receive a less dynamic service.

3. Response Experience

During my time as a career firefighter attending numerous incidents both in MFB areas, CFA areas and areas that border both services, I can attest to the importance of a rapid dispatch and on-scene arrival is when defending life and property. This is no more critical than when discussing heavily urbanised environments where buildings and housing is located in a closer proximity to one another when compared to rural environments.

In heavily urbanised environments, an on-scene arrival in less than 8 minutes is critical in containing a fire to its origin whilst being able to effectively protect adjoining properties. In many new estates the distance between properties has become negligible and without rapid intervention from fire services, multiple buildings can be impacted.

Having career firefighters located in such heavily urban environments is a distinct advantage. Being that we are stationed in a particular location in which we remain for the entirety of our shifts allows us to respond to any emergency call out within 2 minutes of receiving the call. This allows a faster response for potentially time critical incidents in urban areas.

Volunteer firefighters on the other hand have to firstly be available for a response, and then have to make their way to their designated station from either their home or workplace prior to being able to respond. This is in no way a criticism of such volunteer firefighters, who provide a great service within the constraints of being a voluntary service. It is however a statement of the logistical facts of the differences in response between career and volunteer firefighters.

4. Mernda/Doreen Example

The area in which I live is an example of a rapidly growing environment that is quickly becoming heavily urbanised. Mernda and Doreen is a rapidly growing area with multiple estates being built simultaneously. Mernda and Doreen are located in a rapidly growing corridor north of Melbourne which is currently growing at 1000 new residents per week.

Until recently this high density urban area has been covered by the volunteer brigades of Mernda, Doreen and South Morang (who only recently became a staffed location). Even though South Morang is now fully staffed, they have a very large response area to respond to with no guaranteed response by further fire crews.

Prior to South Morang becoming staffed, I had to call 000 for fire response to our household in Mernda (and previously Doreen) on a number of occasions and the response has generally been greater than 10 minutes. Whilst these incidents have not been overly time critical, I have concerns with the ability to service such a highly populated and constantly growing urban environment.

These current proposed Fire Service reforms allow for a more dynamic Fire Service. As areas grow to certain population densities fire coverage can be easily adapted to reflect the needs of that area more effectively. The current model of the Victorian fire services does not allow for growth, adaption and reflection of areas of growth within Melbourne and large Victorian regional centres. It is an outdated and antiquated approach that has left our fire services stagnant and not effective in its response to current urban environments

5. Firefighter Safety

The safety of firefighters should always be of paramount concern when considering such Fire Service reforms. In the MFB we have always followed the acknowledged best practice of a minimum of 2 fire appliances, crewed by a minimum of 7 breathing apparatus qualified

firefighters to respond to emergency calls. This practice is a critical one to provide firefighters with safety in what is all too often an extremely dangerous profession.

2 fire appliances are almost always responded from opposing directions of an incident to ensure that at least one of those appliances will arrive within the time critical 8 minute response mark. I have been too many calls during my career where a fire appliance has been delayed due to unforeseen circumstances such as boom gates being down on train tracks. This is unavoidable at times and by having 2 appliances responding from opposing directions, a timely response is still maintained in the event that one of the appliances gets delayed on route.

The minimum of 7 breathing apparatus trained firefighters is critical to firefighter safety. The reason for this is that it allows for 1 officer in charge to run the logistics of fire operations, including being able to have an overview of the scene should it become dangerous to firefighters who have entered a dwelling involved in fire. 2 firefighters drive the appliances and are required at all times to supply water to firefighters who are performing firefighter operations, as water is often our only protection and lifeline in internal fire fights. Often water sources are not close to the scene of firefighting operations, and the additional driver of a second appliance can be freed to find sources of water nearby the incident. Firefighters always work in pairs when entering a structure which ensures crew safety. Should something happen to one of the crew, they always have their partner to pull them to safety and provide an additional set of eyes to look for potential dangers and hazards during the fire fight. 2 additional breathing apparatus firefighters are always required to be fully equipped and ready to enter an incident should something unforeseen happen, such as structural collapse, to be able to enter to rescue firefighters already engaged in this incident.

By no does this mean that career firefighters must wait for 7 firefighters to be on scene before commencing firefighting operations, as certain political factions and media outlets have falsely asserted during the CFA dispute. Firefighters “get to work” immediately when they arrive on scene. However the knowledge that the additional crew have also been dispatched, are on route, and are only minutes behind, allows for this practice to take place. The safety of the initial crew on scene is guaranteed under this model and best practice.

All career firefighters are breathing apparatus trained and qualified, all are capable and qualified to enter any dwelling in which fire occurs. Unfortunately not all volunteers possess these qualifications and abilities, nor is the number of volunteers responding on an appliance ever guaranteed. Once again this is not a criticism of Volunteer firefighters but rather a statement of fact and the reality of many situations we attend.

Being a firefighter who has worked in many locations that have been on the borders of the MFB districts, I have numerous experiences where the facts mentioned in the above paragraph have taken place. I have been to incidents where there has been no volunteer

response in their own stations area, I have been to incidents where we have only had a crew of two respond as our second appliance, and I have been to incidents where there have been sufficient volunteer firefighters attend but have not had the breathing apparatus qualifications to assist in critical firefighting operations and safe working procedures. This places undue risks and workload demands firefighters in attendance. This new Fire Services Reform Bill allows for this to both be addressed and rectified.

6. EMR Response

Another aspect that is being overlooked in the current Fire Services Reform is the Emergency Medical Response program. This program has been an important aspect of what MFB career firefighters do in their daily roles for almost two decades now. This program has also started rolling out to the CFA firefighters from 2015. This is a great initiative for the community and due to the speed at which career firefighters can be dispatched and on scene, emergency medical response in the fire services has assisted in saving many lives and keeping many others in the community viable until the arrival of Ambulance Victoria.

These medical responses are even more time critical than the required fire response of 8 minutes or less, with many career stations being able to be on scene in 4-6 minutes in many instances. A reform in the state's fire services will see this life saving program be more accessible for those in metropolitan Melbourne and larger regional centres, through having more career firefighters located in highly populated areas. These reforms will also provide the scope for growth of this service by providing a more dynamic fire service that can adjust to population density changes in the community. This evolution is simply not possible under the current stagnant arrangement and outdated fire services model.

Further to these advantages for delivery of the Emergency Medical Response program, I believe it is a good case study as to how two different and separate services can work together effectively for the greater good of the community. When the EMR program was initially introduced, there was an initial apprehension by the state's paramedics of a potential "takeover" – not dissimilar to the grossly misreported "takeover" of the CFA by the MFB and UFU. If one looks at the outcome of this successful partnership between career firefighters and ambulance paramedics, it is evident that two separate firefighting bodies, one that is volunteer and one that is career orientated, will be able to co-exist and work in a mutually beneficial arrangement that greatly improves the services provided to the Victorian community.

7. Presumptive Cancer Legislation

Presumptive cancer legislation is long overdue to protect the firefighters of Victoria. It has long been known internationally that firefighter have higher instances of certain prescribed cancers than members of the public. This is due to the nature of our work and the consistent repeated exposure to carcinogens over an extended period of time.

Such legislation has already been presented to the Victorian parliament on numerous occasions in the past and has been disappointed voted down each time. The research is published in many scientific and firefighting journals all around the world and it is an accepted fact that the role of a firefighter leaves them vulnerable to a markedly higher incidence of 12 specific types of cancer.

Firefighters spend the majority of their lives selflessly protecting others. Currently firefighters are not protected should they develop cancer due to their role as firefighters. This legislation is not only significant to protect our state's brave firefighters but also provides some assurances and protection for our loved ones, families, partners and children who are the innocent and all too often forgotten victims in firefighters developing cancer attributable to their roles protecting the community.

After losing many friends and colleagues to cancer which they undoubtedly developed due to their proud service in firefighting, I ask the Fire Services Bill Select Committee to seriously consider the ramifications to firefighters and their families if this bill is not passed. If it was you son, daughter, father, mother, brother or sister would you not want to see them adequately protected if they develop this devastating disease after many years of proud and noble service?

If this legislation is not adopted now, who knows how many other families and firefighters will be forced to suffer without access to appropriate treatment and compensation for their injuries. I implore passionately the committee to consider this with the upmost respect and importance it deserves.

8. Political "Scare Campaign"

I think the real travesty in this entire CFA industrial dispute is the blatant disregard by political parties and media outlets for the reputations of career firefighters and their chosen representative body the UFU. This has been little more than a vulgar "scare campaign" purported by some on the basis of pure politics and has indeed succeeded creating almost irreparable division and damage to the state's fire services. Firefighters both career and volunteer are proud and courageous people who willingly place their own personal safety for the protection of the Victorian community. To have used both volunteers and career firefighters as little more than political pawns for political leverage and gain is abhorrent. The brave men and women of the state's fire services have deserved far greater respect and recognition than this political power struggle has given them.

One such media outlet has consistently set out to vilify and tarnish the reputations. This media outlet has engaged in printing many false statements and apparent "leaked" documents, all in the name of discrediting the state's career firefighters for their own political interests. The result amongst both me and many of my colleagues has been a devastating one, has pitted firefighter against firefighter in many outlets and has desecrated

the moral of the state's fire services. These actions are nothing short of disgraceful and disgusting, and the resulting discontent within the state's fire services will unfortunately take many years to rebuild.

9. Need for Resolution in the Fire Services

Given the above mentioned perspective in point 8, I truly believe that a resolution within the state's fire services needs to be reached and it needs to occur before the fire services enter the busy and potentially life threatening summer fire season. I implore all on this committee to put their political persuasions aside and indeed consider what is best for the state's fire services and the Victorian community as whole.

This potential reform is beneficial for all parties involved regardless of what is purported by political factions and media outlets. The Volunteer firefighters will have their autonomy and their roles in protecting the community safeguarded into the future as part of the CFA. Career firefighters will also have autonomy and the right to have their workplace agreements covering their desire for safe work practices and equipment enshrined without requiring third party involvement in the future. As a career firefighter, I believe it is my right as a Victorian worker to ensure that my workplace is as safe as possible and to have confidence in the workplace practices and equipment we utilise daily.

I believe the ones that will benefit the most though in this Fire Service reform is the Victorian community who will have a modernised and more dynamic fire service to protect them into the future.

I hereby encourage and implore the Fire Services Bill Select Committee to recommend the implementation of the Fire Services Bill and provide all Victorians with a modernised fire services model that reflects the current state of Victoria.