

SUBMISSION TO:**INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS' PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017*****By:***

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I have 29 Years of full time professional operational firefighting experience and I am currently seconded to the CFA

I reside in Greendale Victoria and work with CFA – Ballarat City Fire Station.

I am writing this submission in support of the proposed reform of the fire services for the following reasons:

After 28 years of working with The Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Early this year I took an opportunity to be seconded to the Country Fire Authority at the Ballarat City Fire Station. During my career with MFB I enjoyed the comfort and security of guaranteed back up and support, knowing that oncoming fire appliances would definitely arrive and would contain a minimum of 3 crew, (usually 4), all trained internal structure fire breathing apparatus wearers, pump operators and with advanced first aid training. Since commencing with CFA I have been constantly challenged by the uncertain and varied support provided by volunteers. Ballarat is Victoria's third largest city after Melbourne and Geelong with a regional population 170,000. Ballarat City Fire Station is the only career fire station within CFA Western Region and has only nine firefighters rostered on duty. In addition to protecting the City Of Ballarat its firefighters provide Technical rescue and Hazmat response all the way from Ballarat to the Victorian / South Australian border. Volunteer support is essential.

I have been impressed by the quality of the people who are volunteers in the Ballarat area. Their dedication and commitment is commendable, however, despite their best efforts, I have found volunteer support to Ballarat Staff is inconsistent, often untimely and unreliable. The very nature of voluntary response creates great stress and uncertainty for me as an incident controller when trying to deploy staff to combat a fire or incident not knowing if the volunteer brigade will respond, how many people will be in the responding vehicle and what their skill level and qualifications will be. This is very different to what I am used to as an MFB officer.

I wish to make it clear to the committee, I value and respect volunteers highly however I am critical of a system that relies too heavily upon them in a highly urbanised area with a high call volume. It is unrealistic to expect volunteers to maintain availability and still honour work and family commitments in a busy urban brigade. How is that that the state runs campaigns about driving or operating vehicles or machinery when fatigued yet expects and even lauds volunteers who work all day and then operate emergency vehicles all night before returning to work the next day? This situation is obviously rare in rural and remote Victoria where volunteers are and shall remain the most appropriate service given their low call volume

however, from my personal experience, volunteer fatigue is very real in Ballarat. It is noticeable that volunteers decide when to respond based on call type. Calls likely to be false alarms, often fire alarms at protected premises like hospitals and nursing homes, regularly leave staff to do the response.

When this bill is passed there will be NO IMPACT on service delivery in Ballarat. Ballarat City integrated station only has a handful of active responding firefighters usually responding to fires only, arriving on scene in private vehicles. The remaining volunteers attached to the station provide specialist support including the brigade's staging area management hut.

I have worked extensively on the MFB / CFA border. I have found fire ground operations in this area to be seamless and I expect the same outcome on the FRV / CFA border. CFA brigades manage on a primary and support system and should easily adjust to new boundaries.

As Victoria's population grows the number of career firefighters must also increase. If the current structure was to remain in place Volunteers would slowly become less relevant in CFA as staff management and training would take up much of the available resources. If this bill is passed, volunteers will have a service to themselves with dedicated management and appropriate and tailored training resources.

Rural population and risk has changed little so there is no need to change the fire service delivery model. Conversely the rapid expansion of Melbourne's outer suburbs and major regional cities has been dramatic and is predicted to continue. Whilst ambulance and Police resourcing in these areas has been increased however the fire service model has not changed since the 1950's.

The cost savings achieved by placing staff into one organisation, streamlining management and resourcing, bulk buying and contracting and establishing consistent training standards will over time deliver better value for money to the Victorian Public.

Victoria needs a fire service that evolves dynamically with the increase in population, risk and call volumes. The nature of fires and firefighting has changed thanks to global warming, manmade fibres and furnishings, light weight building materials, high density living and the trend towards high rise apartments.

An independent committee to review risk and service provision and determine the appropriate response level to incidents will ensure the Victorian government meets its statutory responsibilities to provide a professional and timely emergency service in line with the expectations of the community they represent without political, union or association ideology or influence.

The last thirteen years of my career have been very stressful. This has unfortunately also affected my family and social life. Whilst I am equipped and experienced at coping with the operational demands of firefighting the constant attacks on my profession by outsiders who place their own causes ahead of community safety has had a profound affect upon me. I was once very proud to tell people I was a firefighter, but not now.

Without the successful passage of this reform bill, the constant conflict will continue between paid and volunteer firefighters, stress levels will continue to rise and public respect will continue to dwindle. The loss of firefighters from both sides will place considerable strain on our fire services.

Please support this Bill and bring to a close 13 years of conflict.

Sincerely,

Darren Power

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