

SUBMISSION TO PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE – INQUIRY INTO THE FIREFIGHTERS’ PRESUMPTIVE RIGHTS COMPENSATION AND FIRE SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (REFORM) BILL 2017

Submitted by: David Ferguson

I submit the following comments to the committee based on the effect on volunteer engagement and participation in fire service delivery and also the underlying policy rationale.

I am a career firefighter with the CFA, having served at various locations but predominately in Warrnambool for near 29 years. I have a particular interest in mental health and have been involved in the CFA’s Peer program for around 12 years.

I believe that the proposed legislation:

- Is generally a good resolution to the current impasse with the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement and will improve firefighting service delivery to Victorians in areas where career firefighters are employed;
- Could be improved by splitting the legislation into two different bills:
 - Presumptive Rights Legislation; and
 - Fire Services Amendment legislation;
- Further, the Presumptive Rights Legislation could be very much improved and provide a greater benefit for all firefighters, both staff and volunteers, and their families if it included post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as one of the diseases listed in the table in schedule 1.

I will comment specifically on the inclusion of PTSD in presumptive legislation:

- PTSD is just as significant an issue as cancer to the health of Firefighters. As more firefighters start to take up Emergency Medical Response the exposures to potentially traumatic events will increase;
- Already several provinces in Canada (Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta) have enacted legislation that creates a presumption for PTSD for Firefighters and Emergency Service workers;
- Initiatives are underway to improve resilience in firefighters to prevent or reduce mental health issues such as PTSD however as with cancer, it is very much an occupational hazard;
- There is a considerable stigma around mental health issues that could be perceived as a barrier to joining the fire services; recognition of this issue through legislation would go a long way towards improving this situation and the lives of volunteer and career firefighters;
- Using the policy rationale that we need to provide protection for firefighters and their families from the scheduled cancers, it is an easy step to move this to PTSD.