



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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Your voice is important

It is now more essential than ever that CFA and Government honour its obligations under the CFA Act and Volunteer Charter to genuinely consult with volunteers and VFBV as their representative body, on all matters that impact upon them.

As our annual VFBV Volunteer Welfare and Efficiency Survey demonstrates, consultation by CFA on matters that affect volunteers is consistently the poorest performing area when it comes to issues that are important to volunteers.

The Government and CFA have made various private and public commitments to VFBV and volunteers about the implementation of their fire services restructure, including promises of close and genuine consultation on the implementation of the coming changes.

It is now more critical than ever that all members remain united and have a comprehensive view of whether those commitments are being met, so we can track them and inform stakeholders on the impacts of changes, including unintentional impacts as they arise.

The VFBV network, with elected representatives at brigade, district and state level, is here to represent you – so

your ongoing feedback and advice about how change is impacting you and your brigade is vitally important.

Please participate and remain actively engaged with your VFBV representatives to ensure your voice is heard and to ensure decision makers are fully informed on how changes are impacting volunteers.

VFBV Volunteer Welfare & Efficiency Survey

This year's survey will open on Friday 23rd August to coincide with this year's AFAC Conference being held in Melbourne. VFBV will be on Stand #595 in the Exhibition space at the Melbourne Exhibition and Convention Centre in Southbank throughout the conference, and members are welcome to drop by and have a chat and complete the survey while they are there.

The VFBV Volunteer Welfare and Efficiency Survey, now in its 8th year - is an annual snapshot of volunteer opinion and welfare. It has become a critical tool in monitoring short- and long-term trends, and the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at improving CFA volunteer engagement and wellbeing.

The survey is made up of 33 questions chosen by volunteers and takes just 10 or 15 minutes to complete. It is the largest survey of its kind in Australia, and VFBV supports the other Australian States and Territory volunteer associations in running the same survey within the other fire services to gain a national perspective.

Visit VFBV website to pre-register for this year's survey so you get notified the minute it opens – or use the paper sign-up form that was posted to all Brigade/Group secretaries in this quarter's mailout.

The CFA as we know it changed forever on Thursday 20 June 2019 after the controversial Fire Services (Reform) Bill was passed by the Legislative Council of the 59th Victorian Parliament 21 votes to 18.

For better or worse, the world respected CFA integrated model that has served Victoria so well has been replaced by a new model, with the details of how it will actually work unknown and still to be worked out. Let that sentence sink in –

An historic decision for CFA

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

no modelling, no plan and no analysis.

There is much to do, and an ambitious timeframe to work out an extensive amount of detail before the new model comes into effect next year, particularly with the fire season in between. The division of assets, duties and ongoing management between the new co-located Fire Rescue Victoria stations and the remnant CFA volunteer brigades that are to be de-integrated is an obvious immediate priority.

There is also the development and, hopefully, proper piloting of the incident management doctrine needed as a result of separating one current fire service into two fire services operating in the same geographic areas but with potentially different equipment, training, doctrines and command structures. This will apply to former integrated brigades as well as all those around them where mutual support arrangements will need to be developed.

Everyone is interested in ensuring that community and firefighter safety is not compromised during the transition, and to this end work has already started. VFBV has been meeting with CFA, EMV and Government officials including the office of the Minister for Police and Emergency Services to establish constructive discussions and ensure volunteer views are represented in decision-making and the proposed implementation structures.

Before I go further, I want to acknowledge how many CFA volunteers, their families, and communities, are feeling. This was not the decision or outcome many of us wanted. We have been clear and consistent in expressing our concerns about the risks and how this will impact on CFA's effectiveness, and on the men and women who built and made it the world-respected fire service it is today.

I stated on the night the Bill passed that although our warnings and advice have gone unheeded and many volunteers would be feeling betrayed and

broken-hearted, all of them should sleep with a clear conscience.

We have articulated our concerns, both collectively through VFBV and separately. We have put forward thoughtful, logical and factual advice, backed up by trusted fire services leaders and experts, and made available the vast knowledge and experience of CFA volunteers in warning of the dangers and unintended consequences that accompany the arrangements proposed in this Bill, not to mention the dangers of the 'just make it up as we go' attitude that now pervades.

I have no doubt that CFA volunteers' profound sense of duty to their communities and to the people of Victoria will overcome their immediate reactions for now. We are used to backing each other and getting on with the job, and the job ahead is immense. We will need to seize the positive and the opportunities and try to minimise the negative and prevent the harm. Volunteers should remember that history is scattered with setbacks and losses, and often they serve as catalysts for positive change. We should not just set our eyes on the next couple of years – but think much more long-term about how CFA might look in 5, 10- or 20-years' time.

The history of our own volunteer association dates back to 1884 and spans over 135 years where volunteers have tirelessly and selflessly worked and toiled, sometimes with dogged determination to build the CFA we know today. Volunteer firefighters have been the drivers of CFA's world-successful and respected achievements. They have led, administered and coordinated CFA services to our communities for decades, whether it is in prevention, preparedness, or response and recovery. We know what we're talking about.

We now have an obligation to use that knowledge and experience to build tomorrow's CFA, no matter how hard that may seem now. Our experience and achievements deserve to be respected, and we must continue to ensure the promises made to us through the Volunteer Charter are honoured and respected. For that is how the collective wisdom, knowledge and experience of volunteers can best be utilised, and that is now the task ahead of all of us. We owe it to our forebears and those that will come after us - to build the best CFA we can.

Now is the time to heal the divisions that we never wanted but that have been created by the agenda of recent years. It is now critically important that we all unite behind our common cause in putting our communities first and protecting lives and property. For our part - VFBV is committed to working hard with the Government, agencies and all stakeholders to find common ground and heal the divisions of the recent past. We are committed to working constructively and in good faith as we move into the next part of this journey. No one should read this as a sign of giving up, in fact it is just the opposite. Just as we do on the fire ground, we must remain agile and adaptable. Changed circumstances calls for new thinking and our strategy must evolve with it.

Next steps for VFBV

We will proceed in good faith and look to salvage the best possible outcomes from these changes. We will also ensure decision-makers are held to account for the structures, promises and commitments they



have made, and for that we need your help.

As well as meeting with CFA and other stakeholders, VFBV has begun work with our Brigades and Groups to ensure they are supported during these changes. VFBV delegates will be on hand to help members identify needs, challenges and opportunities, and areas requiring support. Together, we are working on improved processes to help you monitor impacts and ensure that any detrimental impacts on volunteers, communities and CFA brigades is well known and understood.

We need every brigade, group and member to support each other and to be active in contacting VFBV through your delegate or District Council executive if there are detrimental impacts or where commitments made are not being delivered on the ground.

Conversely – your local VFBV District Council is the perfect forum to start sharing your ideas and aspirations for what tomorrow's CFA will look like. While at times it may feel like as individuals, we can't make much of a difference, collectively we are a strong and powerful group that can make a huge difference. Things are likely to get worse before they get better. I don't say this to depress you – but rather to manage your expectations. If elements of this reform are as unworkable as many have predicted – it may be better for those elements to fail quickly rather than be a long drawn out scab that gets picked at. We have done our best to warn of the dangers, now those that have made the decisions must accept responsibility for them. As always, I hope we will stand by our communities and give our all in our selfless service to the people of Victoria. History will judge what we do next, just as it will judge what has recently occurred. I urge you to be part of the new CFA, and rather than walk away or wait to be told what it will look like, busy yourselves in helping to create something we can all be proud.

Thank you

I would like to thank all those who contacted MPs or wrote letters about their concerns, and those who have been staunch defenders and supporters of the CFA and CFA volunteers throughout this turbulent period.

From MP's to commentators, fire service experts and members of the general public - your support and confidence has been invaluable.

And to my fellow CFA volunteers, supporters and friends – I offer my sincere thanks and respect. It has taken great courage and conviction to stand up for what you believe in – and in the face of significant odds. I have never been more proud to stand beside you. Never lose faith nor hope. We are stronger together, and together we will continue to stand up for our communities and the safety of all Victorians.

SOP feedback reminder

VFBV has received detailed feedback from members about the proposed CFA Standard Operating Procedure 6.06 Practical and Hot Fire Training.

Feedback and data provided by members is now being consolidated into a formal response to CFA. The feedback received was wide ranging, with unusually high levels of dissatisfaction raised with many aspects of the policy. Key themes included concerns for the increased workload and red tape being introduced; the wide scope that seems to pick up every training activity regardless of complexity or risk, and impractical approval process required to get CFA signoff.

One area of specific concern was the strong objection that training can only be conducted with 'potable water' (i.e. drinking water standard.) Member feedback indicated this standard is not practical nor sustainable with many worried about community backlash in using precious drinking water which was effectively being poured down the drain. Farmers and irrigators were the most critical, with many lamenting the long periods of drought and how offensive and disrespectful to rural communities it is to suggest that such a precious commodity be used in this manner.

Feedback confirmed that in many communities across Australia – potable water is not even available, let alone a practical standard for firefighting use. Examples of non-potable water is rainwater from tanks; water from creeks, dams and rivers; agricultural water used for crop irrigation; swimming pool water; and class A recycled water – the highest quality of recycled water that has been treated. While there was recognition that water must be clean, safe and fit for purpose, considerable feedback has indicated 'drinking water' to be an unachievable target.

This is a clear example of how critical it is to consult volunteers on decisions that affect them, and how policies need to respect the diversity of our operating environment. VFBV will be asking CFA for clarification, as it would have a significant impact on volunteer training and support if staff and paid instructors will refuse to participate if potable water is not available. VFBV will also be requesting that CFA provide support and funding to assist Brigades improve their access to appropriate water.

VFBV will provide consolidated feedback to CFA and is likely to recommend that this SOP be completely re-thought and redrafted to address the considerable concern raised by volunteers.

A reminder that SOP's 5.04 Service Hose Testing and Coupling Inspection; 6.03 Derelict Structures – Burning Of; 9.06 Fire Alarms – Monitoring and Logging of Tests; 9.14 Low Voltage Fuse Removal; 9.41 Safe Work at Heights; 10.24 Emergency Medical Response; and 15.27 Train Incidents are all being consulted on and feedback is due 15th July 2019.

Thank you to all volunteers, District Councils, brigades, Groups and District Planning Committees for the detailed and professional feedback received so far. We recognise and respect the time and skill it takes to read and recognise potential impacts and put it on paper in a detailed, professional and informative manner – so thank you!

Bushfire Thermal Imaging Camera course now available

Members will be pleased to learn that CFA has finally introduced a bushfire-themed Thermal Imaging Camera (TIC) course after considerable advocacy by VFBV on behalf of brigades.

CFA has seen an overwhelming increase in TICs thanks to grants like the Volunteer Emergency Services Equipment Program (VESEP). However, there have been serious shortages of courses, including the inability to provide courses due to skills profiles and pre-requisites that have excluded some brigades from the training. Disappointingly there has also been reports of CFA District variations around rules of when these time saving and critical pieces of equipment can be placed on trucks.

The new bushfire-themed TIC awareness course is now available on the Learning Management System (LMS) as an E-learning package.

Disappointingly, the VFBV/CFA Training Committee was not formally consulted on the actual package before it was uploaded, and the committee now encourages members who partake in the 'E' Learning module to provide ongoing feedback to your VFBV representatives so any issues can be identified and followed up.

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