



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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AFFILIATION

The number of Brigades affiliating with VFBV for 2020/21 is on track to match previous record numbers, a sign of continued strong support for

VFBV's work on behalf of volunteers in a time when it has never been a more important for CFA volunteers to show unity and support the state-wide independent advocacy of our volunteers as their representative body.

If you are not sure whether your Brigade or Group's VFBV affiliation and Brigade's VFBV Welfare Fund subscription have been paid please contact your Secretary urgently, as we encourage all those who have not yet affiliated to do so as soon as possible.

We strongly encourage Brigades to subscribe to the VFBV Welfare Fund in the interests of supporting your members in times of personal hardship. In 2019/20 the Welfare Fund distributed over \$273,000 to volunteers and their families in need.

VFBV AGM

In line with current Victorian Health Guidelines under Victoria's State of Emergency and advice from Consumer Affairs Victoria the VFBV Board have lodged a three month extension and postponed this year's Annual General Meeting to December 2020.

Following consultation with the State Council Executive, the Board has also endorsed State Council Executive's recommendation that all State Council & Welfare Fund office holder's terms that were due to expire in September 2020 will be extended through to December. The two State Council nominees to the VFBV Board terms have also been extended through to December 2020.

This decision does not impact on the VFBV Board member application process, with the interview and selection process of the four expiring Board members to continue as planned.

Further details of arrangements for this year's AGM will be provided closer to the date.

2020/21 Championships

With the current COVID-19 restrictions in Victoria, it is still not clear whether we will be conducting local competitions or State Championships next year. VFBV however is planning for the best-case scenario and that restrictions will ease in time for these events to go ahead.

Obviously this will be dependent on Government restrictions and the directions of the Chief Health Officer at the time.

It is highly likely that if local competitions and Championships are permitted, they will have to be conducted under specific Government health guidelines. VFBV delegates and CFA are working closely with the Championship Host Committees in pre planning to manage the impact of COVID-19 restrictions and requirements to conduct the events in order to comply with any potential health guidelines – and information on this will be forwarded to entered brigades once the guidelines become clearer.

VFBV has recently emailed Urban Competition Associations and District Rural Competition Committees to inquire if subject to Government advice and restrictions if they intend to conduct a competition; and VFBV has emailed all Rural and Urban competition brigades to inquire if subject to Government advice and restrictions they intend to compete.

Responses are due by 30th October 2020. This information is required to support development of the COVID Plan that will need to be submitted to the health department.

VOLUNTEER CONSULTATION MUST BE STRENGTHENED

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

There is an old 14th century saying that means "misery loves company" that is often used light-heartedly to describe a feeling that by commiserating with others we can feel less alone on a particular issue or challenge which in turn helps us persevere or renew our strength to overcome it.

I was thinking about this – this week when reflecting on the controversy of the alleged poor consultation with the business and industry groups over the governments COVID-19 roadmap. The issue of poor consultation and the criticism of just paying lip-service, undertaking tick box exercises and briefings masquerading as consultation would be a familiar frustration to many volunteers.

But my focus this month is drawn from another Shakespeare play 'Measure for Measure' which does perhaps provide a rhetorical answer to the dilemma of misery loving company. The line from the

play is "The miserable have no other medicine - But only hope."

And while I am conflating a couple of issues – my main message is that hope is crucial to CFA's current predicament. Without it – we are left to slowly stew like a frog in hot water. We cannot afford to lose sight of the opportunities ahead of us. Many are immense if we embrace them and seize the opportunity.

And as for hope – well in order for it to have any credibility, our responsibility is to not simply accept blind or false hope but to work together to build some confidence that there is indeed genuine hope, informed by reality and that the decisions being made today are laying a strong foundation to turn those positives into practical and achievable outcomes for the long term, rather than anchors or nooses around our necks.

By the same token, and equally important – we need to make sure that we don't cynically cut ourselves off from all positivity and hope and mistrust everyone we come across. For that really would be miserable.

For this reason, and within this context - I continue to share my cautious optimism that we are making some headway in encouraging CFA to embark on the paradigm shift as the organisation brushes itself off and pivots to the new environment. I have seen evidence of this starting to emerge in pockets at the executive and senior leadership levels of CFA. While it is still very early days - the challenge ahead is how to give those new seedlings of hope, some fertile ground to prosper.

The 'hope' of many volunteers is that we make the most of the current predicament and use the current environment to solve some of the systemic issues that have plagued us in the most recent past. At a high level, I am speaking of volunteer consultation, engagement, empowerment, self-determination, trust and respect. All areas that have slipped in recent times and feature prominently as recurring themes in volunteer feedback.

Many of you have heard me speak ad nauseum on the importance of genuine consultation and engagement. And while we are all incredibly proud of the volunteer Charter and of enshrining the shared principles, values and commitments into legislation, we must face the fact that without any teeth – the Charter can too frequently be dismissed and ignored.

But we also need to be careful we don't push the pendu-

lum too far towards a punitive and aggressive stance. For you can't just legislate respect. You also have to teach it, earn it and demonstrate it. Respect is more often given rather than taken.

Tellingly, there is some very wise advice from our forebears built into the Charter itself. The commitment that is enshrined at the very end of the Charter helps prepare the road ahead. It says that all parties commit to using and applying the Charter in the spirit of mutual respect and goodwill and to work together in that spirit to resolve any disputes which may arise between CFA, the State of Victoria and the Volunteers by reference to the key principles set down in it. These are enduring words and are perhaps a beacon for the journey ahead.

Is our current predicament worth abandoning this commitment that was so hard fought for? Will giving up on that 'hope' lead us to any better conclusion? I'd argue that we can't let fear, anger and disappointment cloud our judgement or hold us back from moving forward, and we have the greatest chance of success if we use all our patience and energy to try and take those steps WITH CFA rather than attempting to single handedly drag the organisation down this path. And I observe a CFA tentatively taking those first few steps, more receptive and more open to progress and accountability.

I respect that for many volunteers, given recent experience and events, the notion that there is any goodwill left in breathing new life into a tripart commitment to living and honouring the principles in the Charter is going to be hard to imagine. And I'll be honest with you – there are days that the prospect or possibility of goodwill emerging with some parties is not only hard to imagine but downright impossible. But thankfully - those days are few in number. Our eyes must be fixed on the pathway ahead, not just the one recently travelled.

We also can't be naive. The Charter was written for a time where one's word was one's honour. Clearly times have changed. A practical way to move forward and provide genuine hope is to pursue both outcomes and balance them to honour the spirit and intent of the Charter. In other words - pursue changes to give the Charter some teeth AND work together in the spirit of mutual respect and goodwill with those willing to do so to try and effect positive change.

Teeth need not be just a stick – there is a reason a carrot is usually paired with it to achieve persuasion.

So returning to consultation and engagement, this remains one of the highest priorities of the VFBV Board and State Council. It is based on the principle that in any workforce, the genuine engagement with the 'workers' is fundamental to an organisations success. In a community embedded and volunteer-based workforce, not only is genuine, robust and meaningful engagement important, but

as an underlying driver of organisational culture, values, behaviours and approach – it is critical.

CFA cannot operate on the premise that all leadership, direction, governance and performance management will be provided by paid personnel. Just as volunteers are essential to front-line firefighting and incident command, volunteers in CFA are vital to the leadership and management of CFA at every level of the organisation from brigade to board.

Empowering volunteers, trusting them and engaging with them as equal partners to consider issues, challenges and opportunities will be fundamental to volunteers rebuilding confidence and trust in CFA (and vice versa) and ensuring it prospers and is restored to a confident and proud volunteer and community organisation of choice.

Fortunately, we already have some really good foundations to ensure we don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. We are also an organisational overflowing with exceptional people. We have some good existing consultative structures and processes in place that are simply not being used to their potential and are being hampered by a lack of accountability, commitment and governance.

We have broad consultative forums and structures throughout both CFA and VFBV at State, Region and District levels that have been squandered or ignored for far too long.

One way for CFA to signal that the organisation is ready to embrace its volunteer focus and commitment is to work with VFBV to strengthen these structures, better connect them to the various leadership levels and hold managers accountable for their performance in genuinely engaging with and embracing volunteers. Too often change is done to volunteers, rather than with them.

Too often I hear people asking 'if' volunteers were consulted. This has lost all meaning – as the question is normally dismissed with a simple yes – with no accountability on that person to demonstrate the robustness of their answer. So please stop asking IF – and start asking HOW. This is the only way a qualitative judgement can be made on its efficacy.

And consultation also needs to be a partnership. You, we and us have an incredibly important role to play. Genuine consultation cannot simply be demanded. It's hard work – and requires a commitment from all parties for it to be effective. But its rewards are infinite.

The key to effective consultation is to consult early and consult often. Its often slow and deliberate in order to bring people along on the journey. It needs to occur when policy, proposals or approach are still under active consideration and development. The objectives of the consultation and the problem or opportunity we are trying to address needs to be clearly explained.

There has to be an opportunity for volunteers to readily



contribute to the development of the solutions and the sharing and exchanging of information and analysis to form genuine and informed dialog between the parties. This is critical to ensuring everyone is working off the same assumptions and baseline and also helps manage expectations.

Information and issues papers, draft assessments, impact statements, white papers, surveys or exposure drafts should always be readily available to help illicit informed comments and feedback loops that develop robust impact assessments from the various outcomes or approaches. It cannot be rushed, and must be well planned, methodical and transparent.

Robustness is achieved by the proper analysis of alternatives; providing timeframes that are respectful and appropriate for a volunteer-based organisation; as well as a commitment to show how feedback was taken into account and considered before decisions or next steps are taken.

None of this is rocket science - but it does require a mature and disciplined commitment. We really do have some good and strong foundations – but we must evolve and mature them to survive in this brave new world and to rebuild confidence that CFA is serious in volunteer consultation and engagement.

The VFBV Board, State Council and Executive are absolutely committed to seizing this opportunity and ensuring volunteer consultation and engagement is restored and strengthened. We are pursuing all opportunities to embed this work in everything we do. We are also working with District Councils to support relationships and help improve and strengthen the local escalation and issue management pathways so that brigades and groups can be actively involved in strengthening volunteer consultation with CFA at the local level.

My hope is that whoever you are, and wherever you are reading this - you will consider what you can do to assist and support this work. We cannot do it on our own and everyone has a role to play.

VFBV will be there to help, support and encourage you along the way. Please share and discuss your ideas with each other and share these discussions with your BMT, delegates, State Councillor's and District Councils. Please don't wait for hope to come knocking – seize the moment and let's create some of it ourselves.

For in the words of novelist Brian Moore; If misery loves company, then triumph demands an audience.

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