



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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VFBV Recovery Taskforce

Thank you to all members who responded to the expression of interest process initiated by VFBV District 8 Council to assist with recovery efforts in District 13. While initial works were planned for Saturday 26 June, this has been postponed by request of the local brigades.

These taskforces assist residents on private property or help fellow CFA volunteers directly impacted by emergencies and fills an important gap in arrangements. These activities are supported by the VFBV Volunteer Support and Recovery Trust that provides food and consumables and are endorsed by CFA allowing CFA and brigade owned appliances and equipment to be utilised.

The current model of recovery taskforces was led by VFBV State Councillor Bill Watson AFSM following the 2009 Black Saturday Fires and has assisted local brigades and communities with recovery works that are not eligible or prioritised under state-based recovery activities. Bill was the VFBV District 13 Council President at the time of Black Saturday and saw first hand the important role practical peer-to-peer activities supported members and morale. They supplement but do not replace formal agency-led relief and recovery activities. They have been used following most large-scale disasters, not only including bushfires but also significant flood and storm events.

Further planned deployments will be advertised at the local level first. Enquiries can be sent to Bill Watson via b.watson@sc.vfbv.com.au

BON VOYAGE

VFBV Support Officer Michelle Ryan will shortly be leaving us in her paid role to pursue some other opportunities. Her last day with VFBV will be Friday 16 July 2021.

While we are all very sorry to see Michelle go, we are also very excited for her and the opportunity to pursue some new things which she is very excited about. Michelle is staying on as a volunteer with her local brigade, and is also excited to be taking on the VFBV delegate role in her new chapter.

On behalf of Board, CEO and the whole extended VFBV family we wish

Michelle all the best, and thank her most sincerely for the joy, passion and enthusiasm she has brought to the role since she commenced back in 2017. She has supported her Districts across the North East with distinction, and provided tireless support to her brigades, district councils, joint committee and volunteers throughout her entire catchment area.

We will shortly commence advertising to fill the vacancy.

In the meantime, please join us in thanking Michelle for her exceptional service and wishing her all the best in her future endeavours.

VOLUNTEER TRAINER AND ASSESSORS

Based on various feedback received from Volunteer Trainer and Assessors, VFBV representatives to the Joint Training Committee have recently made a formal request, encompassing strategy and underlining initiatives for CFA to engage in an authentic and genuine process to greater enhance the capability and recognition of Volunteer Trainer and Assessors who continue to provide an excellent service to the membership.

VFBV's request is based on your feedback and includes recommendations from reviews into training, informal discussions and statements that have occurred in the past, including feedback from the annual VFBV Welfare and Efficiency Survey.

Suggested initiatives include, but are not limited to, identifiable helmets to be made available to all TAs, (Trainers and Assessors) funded workwear, additional PPC and genuine promotion, encouragement, recruitment, and retention of TAs.

DCO Training has committed to consultation on these requests and has indicated in-principle support for most of the recommendations, agreeing that the recognition and enhancement of trainers and assessors is vitally important to the success of training delivery across CFA. VFBV will continue to pursue these

initiatives with CFA and hope for a quick and positive outcome that will benefit everyone.

WELFARE FUND

With Jenni Laing on long service leave, Kara Bishop is performing the role of Welfare Fund Secretary.

The website and all Welfare Fund forms have been updated, but those of you with old forms should now send Welfare Fund enquiries to welfare@vfbv.com.au

While Jenni's address is being monitored, due to the urgent nature of welfare fund requests, it is preferable that all new applications are submitted through the welfare address.

SELFLESS, COURAGEOUS AND VITAL

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

It would not be Victoria if we didn't have the need to deal with wild and unpredictable weather throughout the year. Last month's flood/storm event caused significant widespread damage. And while the storms peaked over 9 and 10 June, the flow on flooding and damage to electricity distribution is still being felt today.

In the 24 hours to 10am Thursday 10 June, Mt Baw Baw had recorded 280mm of rain and 119kph wind gusts were recorded at Puckapunyal. As that day developed, more than 215,000 residents were without power, with thousands expected to be without power for weeks.

By the end of June, more than 550 personal hardship assistance payments had been made by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, and in excess of 3,890 residential customers were being assessed for continuing prolonged power outage payments. VFBV distributed a Storm/Flood Recovery Resource Fact Sheet to assist members understand what support was available.

The assistance of the Australian Defence Forces was well received, with the CFA State Logistics Centre acting as the main staging area for the distribution of generators, with a local sub staging area established at Olinda volunteer fire brigade.

On the Thursday morning alone, VicSES had received well in excess of 4,500 requests for assistance. Over the following days VicSES would record over 10,000 requests for assistance during the event, which is more than half of the average amount received in an average year.

I join my good friends at the VICSES Volunteer Association (VICSESA) in congratulating all SES members on an incredible job and thank them for their tireless efforts. Emergency Management volunteers demonstrated yet again how critically important it is to have these emergency management capabilities and capacities within our communities. While these communities were cut off from the world, it was the local units, brigades and community organisations that were on the ground, serving their communities and doing what needed to be done. Often at times, on their own and doing the best they could with what they had.

I want to acknowledge the frustration felt by many and raised with me regarding the view that elements of local knowledge was again absent in the early stages of the State's control arrangements. And while there are certainly

differing views on whether that was indeed a perception or fact, it is a timely reminder that ensuring local knowledge is embedded within our emergency structures is critical.

In my observation, the use of local knowledge is much more than simply designating 'locals' within our incident management structures. It is also about linking local brigades, units and community organisations with appropriate information to triage and streamline relevant information and the collecting/transmitting of valuable operational intel and observations.

Many of our process and systems simply rely on someone occupying a position within an IMT to establish what we think are the local linkages. However, some thought on how these linkages actually operate and how information is disseminated is key. Calls for increased focus on closing the loop and not only tapping into local knowledge but sharing how it is being used and influencing arrangements would provide stronger confidence at the local level that the structures are indeed working and local intel is influencing decisions.

Anything that increases confidence and morale during the early stages of developing incidents is certainly a key focus we will be encouraging to be raised through after action reviews. 'Fog of war' is a military term I often use to explain how local brigades and units operate in the early stages of developing incidents. And while great advances have been made to provide those at the top with good intel and information, the view on the ground is they have not been so fortunate. Rather than argue for one or the other, the clear message is we need both.

The Emergency Management Commissioner has certainly indicated his willingness to sit down and discuss how systems can be strengthened with local brigades and units, and these are important conversations we will be encouraging and supporting.

These local community capabilities are not built by accident, and must be cherished, respected and protected so they are there when we need them. For them to operate safely and effectively means they must be well trained, well exercised and well utilised to keep their skills and experience at the forefront and ensure all members return safely home. This is why VFBV is so passionate about empowering communities to build volunteer surge capacity, and it is one of the

central obligations of government to build and support effective community capability and resilience for a safer Victoria.

Time and time again, emergency management volunteers demonstrate their intrinsic value and critical role during emergencies, and it should not just be immediately following disasters when our politicians are lining up for their media grabs.

As one would expect CFA brigades played a critical and significant role during this event. While strike teams were tasked to assist SES, I want to draw attention to the efforts and initiatives of local brigades, and the untiring and courageous work of CFA volunteers who did not stop for weeks on end.

During the height of the storms, and for many days and weeks following – entire communities were cut off by fallen trees and debris. Many CFA volunteers were cut off from their stations – as were many stations cut off from reaching all parts of their community. Volunteers were required to operate in little cells coordinating by phone or radio to get to trapped residences. Fortunately, brigade phone trees enabled Captains, Lieutenants and Group Officers to coordinate CFA crews in their private vehicles to do urgent reconnaissance and respond to urgent requests for assistance involving rescues and danger to life.

These were systems and processes created long before computer aided dispatch and pagers, and is yet another reminder of the inherent agility, flexibility and ingenuity of volunteer brigades serving their local communities.

It was also a bit of a challenge to the way things 'are normally done' which did create some tension and stress points within the more formalised structures and management. This serves as a really good reminder of the culture shift now underway within CFA as it adapts to a fully volunteer model.

Volunteers join to serve their communities, and when our communities need us – we are there. In the heat of the moment - they are not too bothered by the typical 'whose job is this' line of thinking and CFA members constantly demonstrate they can be trusted and counted on to be disciplined, safe and professional. Bureaucracy does not traditionally support or enhance this fast and decentralised command and control, so it is unsurprising that friction points often emerge during these kinds of events.

And while this can be challenging for the organisation at times, especially when we are the support agency, there is always the dual obligation to ensure we have maintained our capacity to respond to fire. I strongly support the local view that these obligations are not mutually exclusive, and history shows we can capably deal with multiple simultaneous incidents as we do all the time and have shown great capacity to stay focussed on our primary goals



without rigidly sacrificing our ability to support our peers, whether that be SES, Police, Ambulance or Defence.

The same holds true for relief and recovery works. This work often cannot just sit and wait until the emergency is over, especially when we are dealing with long protracted incidents. The line between response and recovery is not a wall of steel and often both need to be occurring hand in glove with each other.

I highlight the stories of Brigades in affected communities throwing open their doors to provide central places to coordinate relief and recovery efforts. Local brigades teaming up with the Salvos to offer hot meals for residents who had lost their power or whose homes had become unsafe while community relief centres were being established and outfitted.

Brigades running door knocks to check in and monitor isolated or vulnerable community members and ensuring they were aware of critical services as lead agencies and local councils worked on clearing roads and repairing damaged infrastructure.

This is what sets CFA and SES apart and makes local volunteer brigades and units so special and so essential. It's what attracts civic minded people to join in the first place. To actually help those in need.

For all those who think leadership is just a top-down exercise, take a long hard look at the collaboration and unity of effort demonstrated by local volunteers and crews who didn't care what colour their PPC was, or if they were from a response agency, a relief agency or a community support organisation.

These are the stories of an organisation that doesn't just put the community at the centre of everything it does because someone wrote it on a brochure or stuck it in an annual report. This isn't the work of spin doctors or PR consultants. The public knows what you do, it recognises the value of what you do. And simply put – this is why volunteers occupy and have earned such a special place in the communities' hearts and minds. You are selfless, courageous, and vital.

If Nike hadn't trademarked it, 'just do it' would make a very fitting description of what CFA brigades do each and every day.

Well done to all members and bravo on a job very well done.

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