



# VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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## Survey open

This year's Vol Survey is now open.

Volunteers may complete the survey by scanning the QR code below, or visiting the VFBV website. Paper copies are also available from the office and you can call (03) 9886 1141 to request a paper copy to be posted to you.



Back in October, I commented on the amazing generosity of our members in sharing their thoughts and experiences. I am often humbled by the thoughtful and considered advice that frequently comes through. The feedback often demonstrates how broad and diverse the CFA membership is on any given topic and highlights the challenges of VFBV as a peak body and representative organisation that requires us to traverse complex and challenging topics that illicit a broad and diverse range of perspectives. It is for this reason we have built the volunteer led structures in place to help us find consensus and common ground on often polarizing topics. Vaccine mandates would certainly fit

into that category.

In recent times, we have seen a large increase in senior volunteers raising concerns on how the current CFA COVID-19 vaccination mandates are impacting on brigades, not just operationally, but also the effects the continuing mandates are having on brigade's social fabric and connectedness with their communities as we head into the summer months.

It would be fair to say that since the State Government dropped its mandates and revoked the remaining pandemic orders back in October, emergency services have been slow to revise their own individual workplace policies and have continued to implement their own mandates. To be fair to them, they haven't exactly been flooded with high level advice or guidance that would support them review their positions, and it would also appear there is a distinct lack of visible sector leadership to support the various services adapt to their unique environments and move towards some adjusted positions. As a result, the sector has been stuck in limbo with everyone waiting for someone else to go first.

For CFA brigades in particular - this presents a problem. Due to our very nature of being a community embedded volunteer fire service, we are intrinsically connected to our communities. And the situation we have unfolding now is, community settings have changed. Public expectations have also moved. While CFA continues to operate its own mandates, a friction is created between brigade activities vs community activities that is constantly rubbing and causing grief. Brigades are telling us that the logistics of organising brigade events and activities is now extremely difficult, and tensions between what people can do out in public vs what they can and can't do within the brigade is impacting not only brigade morale, but relationships, recruitment and service delivery.

Members would recall the public outcry at the peak of the floods when media reports highlighted the issue of SES volunteers being unable to contribute to the flood response because of the requirements to be triple vaxed. An optic made worse when the public watched lines and lines of ordinary citizens all working together outside to support their communities with sandbagging. While no vaccination checks were conducted on the thousands of citizens helping and interacting with emergency services, some of the most trained and qualified persons were unable to help due to an internal mandate by their agencies. A situation we would be well advised to avoid as we head towards the fire danger period.

In order to bring the matter to a head, VFBV has conducted its own consultation with Brigade Captains across the state inviting all Captains to provide feedback. In just under two weeks, we have collected feedback from 445 Brigade Captains, highlighting how top of mind this issue is at the moment. The results

improvements could be made to your application for the next round of grants.

## Let's talk vaccine mandates

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

are compelling and make a strong case for change.

On the question of whether they support CFA's current policy of mandating a minimum of three COVID-19 vaccinations, 67.4% indicated they no longer support the policy. This percent increases to over 80% when asked what their preferred policy position was, with only 19.3% indicating support for retaining the current policy moving forward.

When we asked Captains how the mandates were impacting or predicted to impact on the brigade's ability to respond over the fire season, only 19.8% indicated the current policy was or predicted to have no impact at all. State-wide, 42.3% indicated minor impacts, 24.5% indicated moderate impacts, and 13.5% indicated significant impacts. As expected, there were differences between regional and outer metropolitan locations, with 43% of regional brigades reporting moderate or significant impacts compared to just 17% of outer metropolitan brigades. Our analysis indicates this is mostly due to outer metropolitan brigades typically having higher numbers of members, and therefore a larger buffer when individual members are prevented from contributing.

When we explore a preferred position, the majority of respondents fell into three categories. 19% advocated for retention of the current three dose policy, 13% advocated for a two dose (no booster) policy, and the vast majority of 68% advocated for CFA policy to return to current community settings and the dropping of CFA mandates.

Envisaging that there was likely to be differing views across the various emergency services, we asked Captains that while it would be preferable to have some commonality, if the other services did not change, how comfortable were they if CFA went it alone. Only 7% of respondents indicated they were not comfortable at all with that prospect, with 13% saying they were very uncomfortable. The remaining 80% indicated various levels of discomfort but felt CFA should change regardless of what the other services did, with 49% of that 80% saying they felt no discomfort at all.

Now at this point it would be wise to heed that saying popularised by Mark Twain that there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics. The benefit of VFBV's structures allows us to explore the depth of feeling from the qualitative data and the wisdom of the VFBV consultative and leadership structures add that much needed context, analysis and strategic overlay to the discussions.

It is clear that at this point in time, there has been a marked shift in brigade views, and there is clearly an argument for change. Early in the pandemic, overwhelming feedback was to give the benefit of the doubt and support measures that protected the most vulnerable while health professionals and scientists worked on vaccines and treat-

ments. The earlier position was strongly influenced at the time by two significant factors; the lack of knowledge available on COVID-19 and how quickly it would adapt and mutate, and the limited access back then to vaccines and treatments.

Things have advanced quite considerably since then.

This is not an argument that the pandemic is over. However, going through the feedback, it was clear there is a desire for CFA to adapt and move from the position of mandates to a position of empowerment and personal responsibility.

Historical data shows us that the risk of infection within CFA has been extremely low. This not only reflects our operating environment, but also the high level of discipline of CFA volunteers to implement hygiene, disinfection, and personal safety measures.

The external risk settings our members face is vastly different to the full time paid model of some other services. When we weigh up risk and reward knowing that CFA's large surge capacity is frequently called upon to assist the public during large scale emergencies, Captains are clearly telling us they feel it is time CFA policies adapt to the current community settings and the importance of protecting CFA's capability to save lives and property.

Top of mind is the fact that we also need to factor in fatigue after two months of an extended flood response campaign. Doing more with less people is simply not sustainable. The floods are also likely to extend this fire season later than usual into the fire danger period with the high moisture providing the perfect conditions for strong fuel load growth, especially in those areas with high grass fire risks.

The VFBV Board and State Council have considered all the feedback, and consistent with our principle of a risk-based approach, have agreed to advocate for the removal of the current mandates. Top of mind however was the desire to respect the diversity of views and try to accommodate those views in our advocacy. We have sought to be sensitive to people's individual circumstances. Our position moves the pendulum away from a one-size fits all mandate to one of more personal responsibility. With this in mind, our consultative structures have developed five overarching principles that form our position;

- (1) As a community and volunteer-based emergency service and based on the current situation - CFA should remove its mandates and return to community settings immediately. [Preserve CFA's capability]
- (2) Members should continue to promote the message that if you are feeling unwell, you stay away from CFA activities and workplaces. [Promote Safety First Culture]
- (3) Masks and rapid antigen tests should continue to be made available and be strongly recommended especially for any members caring



for or interacting with vulnerable people. We respect the right of these members to avoid CFA activities should they feel it appropriate, and their membership should be protected while they are exercising this caution. [Protect the vulnerable]

(4) CFA should respect the wishes of vulnerable facilities such as health and aged care facilities, and where individual facilities have their own policies, CFA should seek to abide by those rules, allowing brigades to only respond vaccinated members to those locations. [Respect the communities wishes]

(5) We support continued evaluation and monitoring of the evolving risks and respect CFA's right to use evidence-based risk methodology to propose short-term adjustments to deal with any emerging risks. We recommend CFA retain a COVID-19 level response system that can be applied to a brigade, group, LGA, district or region to deal with any outbreaks or clusters. [Remain agile.]

While it is impossible to please everyone, our view is that this suite of principles strikes a balance between respecting the sensitivities that have been expressed by some while respecting the views of the majority. It balances the need to protect CFA's capability for the fire danger period while also remaining sensitive to community settings and the need to remain agile. We think this is a reasonable and well informed approach.

These principles will now form the core of our advocacy to CFA and we are seeking immediate changes to CFA's policy. I have met with CFA's most senior leadership and walked them through our position, and I have also sought the support of the Minister.

A huge thank-you to the 445 Captains who responded to our request for feedback, and a special thank-you to all the VFBV representatives who diligently contributed and worked through all the feedback to reach our final position.

I am reminded of this year's theme for International Volunteer Day that fell on the 5th December, which was 'solidarity through volunteering'. The theme recognises how volunteers are drawn together, working in solidarity for the benefit of our communities. CFA volunteers epitomise this theme, and I repeat how incredibly proud VFBV is of all our volunteers and want to acknowledge the courage, duty, stamina and compassion you exhibit every day and especially so over the last couple of years as we continue to navigate the pandemic. Thank-you and well done.

## ASH WEDNESDAY

VFBV has been working with CFA and the Veterans of Ash Wednesday volunteer group to plan next year's 40-year commemoration of the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983. The service will be held on Sunday 12 February 2023 at the Ash Wednesday Bushfire Education Centre in Cockatoo.

This will be a commemorative occasion to reflect not only on the more than 180 fires that occurred across towns and communities and the more than 16,000 firefighters and other personnel involved in the response, but also the improvements in technology, equipment, systems and processes that have since been introduced as a result from learnings from these devastating fires that claimed the lives of 47 Victorians.

Capacity at the venue is limited, so a booking and expression of interest system has been implemented to track interest and allow the committee to respond to demand. If you are planning on attending in person, please visit [tinyurl.com/vfbv-ashwed](http://tinyurl.com/vfbv-ashwed) and complete the expression of interest. The service will also be live streamed for those unable to attend on the day.

## Flood campaign

We continue to monitor and support those communities impacted by the Victorian Flood events. Thank-you to all members who have contributed to the flood campaign. As at the end of November, more than 8,000 CFA volunteer deployments have occurred, contributing to more than 11,500 total CFA member days.

Members are reminded that the Victorian Government has instituted a Volunteer Flood Response Expense Reimbursement scheme for CFA, SES and LSV volunteers involved in the response to claim any personal expenses incurred. Visit the VFBV website for further details. Claims can only be made once and must be submitted by 31st January, 2023.

VFBV continues to update its useful Fact Sheet to assist members impacted by the floods navigate the various support available. The fact sheet outlines the various local, State and Commonwealth support available and provides electronic links to resources where available, as well as common phone hot-

## Election results

While not all results have been finalised, VFBV takes this opportunity to congratulate all members of parliament who were elected in the November state election. We congratulate Premier Daniel Andrews on his third term and welcome the Hon. Jaclyn Symes back as the Minister for Emergency Services.

We warmly welcome all new members elected and look forward to working with them over the next four years while paying our thanks and respect to those MP's who were not re-elected but were on record as stalwarts of CFA volunteers.

line numbers for those not able to access the internet.

This is available on VFBV website, or paper copies can be provided by calling the VFBV Office on (03) 9886 1141 or contacting your local VFBV Support Officer.

Resources include immediate relief and recovery grants and advice, longer term assistance grants, income assistance, welfare support, business support and mental health resources and support.

was designed by VFBV and volunteers with the intent of being a grants program with minimal administration required. Since 2000, the program has funded over 2,000 projects totalling more than \$150 million.

VFBV congratulates the 145 CFA Brigades and Groups who were successful in their VESEP applications for grants across all categories in all districts across the State.

To any unsuccessful brigade or group in this year's allocation, please talk to your District to ascertain what

## VESEP

The Minister for Emergency Services the Hon Jaclyn Symes announced outcomes of the Volunteer Emergency Service Equipment Program (VESEP) for 2022/23.

VESEP provides grants of \$2 for every \$1 of Brigade or Group funding to assist brigades and groups in acquiring a wide range of additional equipment in recognition of the significant contribution emergency service volunteers provide.

In its 22nd year, VESEP