



# VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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## MEMBERS' STRONG SHOW OF SUPPORT

Again in 2022/23, CFA Brigades and Groups showed that it is more important than ever that volunteers have a strong, united, independent and credible voice with more than 95% of Brigades demonstrating strong support for VFBV's important work representing and advocating for all CFA volunteers. Thank you to all brigades and groups who affiliated last year.

2023/24 renewal notices for your Brigade/Group's VFBV Affiliation and Welfare Fund subscriptions and have now been mailed out to Brigade and Group secretaries with a due date of 30 June 2023.

To thank Brigades and Groups for their support, those who pay their VFBV affiliations before 30th June will automatically be entered into a draw to win one of four extremely worthwhile prizes valued at approximately \$4,000. Prizes have, for the third year running, been donated by GAAM Emergency Products and Powder-

safe and we sincerely thank them for their continued generous support. For further details of the prizes on offer, see the flyer included with your renewal notices.

As well as affiliating, we strongly encourage Brigades to subscribe to the VFBV Welfare Fund. The Welfare Fund is a capital fund and an exclusive benefit to affiliated members with VFBV funding all the administration and operating cost ensuring 100% of funds received go directly to CFA volunteers experiencing personal hardship. The VFBV Welfare Fund provides small grants of up to \$5,000 to assist volunteer members and long serving ex members.

The grants support members and their families experiencing personal financial hardship/crisis by providing welfare grants, on a needs-assessed basis, that may help alleviate stress impacting their ability to maintain involvement as a volunteer.

## Nominations for Trust Fund

VFBV is calling for nominations to the CFA and Brigades Donations Fund.

The purpose of the fund is to raise and receive money and donations of goods and services from the public for distribution to brigades to assist with costs of purchasing and maintaining firefighting equipment, facilities, training and administrative expenses which are associated with their firefighting functions.

Following nominations, five new or reappointed members will be appointed by the VFBV Board to serve as VFBV Trustees on the fund for a term of two years.

All current trustees are eligible for re-appointment. Please visit the VFBV website for details. Nominations close on Monday 19th June 2023.

## VESEP

Applications are now open for the 2023/24 Volunteer Emergency Services Equipment Program (VESEP). Applications are due to your District ACFO by the 16th June 2023.

VFBV has updated its VESEP Help Pack to assist brigades and groups with their VESEP applications. This pack is available from our website, or paper copies can be obtained by phoning the office.

VESEP provides grants of \$2 for every \$1 of Brigade or

Group funding to assist brigades and groups in acquiring a wide range of operational equipment.

Now in its 23rd year, VESEP first started out as the Community Safety Emergency Support Program in 2000 and was designed in close consultation with VFBV and volunteers, with the intent being a grants program designed by volunteers with minimal administration required from volunteers.

VFBV wishes all CFA Brigades and Groups well with your applications and thanks you for your untiring service to Victoria!

## National Volunteer Week

The week of 15 – 21 May is National Volunteer week, and it sets out to celebrate the power of how volunteers drive change and ensure that volunteering is inclusive.

The 2023 theme for National Volunteer Week is 'The Change Makers.' This recognises that volunteers dedicate time and energy to effect change in their communities which sums up CFA volunteers perfectly.

This year's theme identifies change makers as people who are driven to contribute for the greater good; passionate about the causes they care about; turn their passions into purpose; are a force for social change; and give their time and energy to make a difference for their communities. Each of these qualities are evident in CFA volunteers

each and every day.

VFBV passes on our deep gratitude, respect and appreciation to all CFA volunteers for the work you do in your communities 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

During this year's volunteer week we reflect on the past 12 months where in addition to protecting their own communities, thousands of CFA volunteers travelled to flood affected areas across the state to effect change in communities in need. While it would have been easy to just say this was someone else's job, CFA volunteers again put their hand up to come to communities in need. Your 'can do' attitude should be celebrated, respected and acknowledged by all sector leaders.

Victorian's are safer because of the work you do,

This month I am drawing strength from a Gandhi quote – "Truth never damages a cause that is just."

I was most unfortunate to attend the recent meeting of the volunteer consultative forum (VCF) where it was announced by the Emergency Management Commissioner that a decision had been made to disband the VCF. To say that the volunteers at that meeting drawn from the various agencies were saddened, hurt and disappointed would be an understatement.

The VCF was an initiative floated by VFBV during discussions of the Victorian Government's White Paper on emergency management back in 2012. The concept was embraced and announced by the then Minister, the Hon Kim Wells MP. The VCF was officially formed on the 18th November 2013 and was heralded as delivering on the Victorian Government's commitment to consult emergency management volunteers across the sector.

The forum was designed to provide a multi-agency volunteer feedback loop direct to the Minister for Emergency Services on issues affecting EM volunteers. It was made up of more than 20 emergency management volunteers and agency nominees drawn from CFA, SES, Life Saving Victoria, Australian Red Cross, Ambulance Victoria, VFBV, St John Ambulance, Volunteer Coast Guard, Salvation Army, VICSESVA and the Victorian Council of Churches emergencies ministry.

The first meeting of the VCF was attended by Minister Wells who spoke about how grateful he was for the opportunity to consult with volunteers with regard to the emergency management sector and in particular the importance of volunteers having input in ensuring the sustainability and effective utilisation of volunteers across the EM sector. It was widely acknowledged that EM volunteers face unique challenges that deserved dedicated and focussed efforts.

Upon a change of Government at the end of 2014, the new Minister for Emergency Services, the Hon Jane Garrett MP attended her first meeting of the VCF on the 6th December 2014. Minister Garrett was a frequent attendee and echoed the importance of the VCF and acknowledged that ministerial involvement with the VCF would continue to be a priority under the Andrews

and VFBV could not be more proud of you, your brigades and all those that support you in the work you do to protect lives and property.

We also acknowledge all our brothers and sisters across all of Victoria's emergency management volunteer workforce including volunteer first responders from VicSES, St John Ambulance, Ambulance Victoria, Life Saving Victoria, Coast Guard, Salvation Army, Red Cross and the Victorian Council of Churches Emergencies Ministry – just to name a few who work together to contribute their time, skills and resources to make change in their communities as emergency management volunteers.

## EMV HOME GOAL

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

Government.

On the 4th May 2016, Premier Andrews, along with Minister Garrett and the Emergency Management Commissioner signed the Emergency Management Volunteer Statement that was an agreed commitment between the State of Victoria and emergency management volunteers that committed the State of Victoria to consult with EM volunteers and their representative bodies through the VCF on matters which affect them. The statement was co-signed by each of the 11 organisations represented on the VCF, including VFBV.

Therefore it was rather surprising to learn that consultation around the disbanding of the VCF with the VCF itself had not occurred prior to the decision being made. To disband the forum and ignore the commitments made without so much as a discussion with the very volunteers affected is quite astonishing and represents a significant betrayal of trust and integrity.

Even more remarkable is the fact that the EM Volunteer Statement was a public statement of commitment signed by the Premier himself on behalf of the whole Victorian Government.

It is at times like these that I remind members why VFBV had to take the extraordinary step of giving the CFA Volunteer Charter legal effect by inserting recognition of the Charter into the CFA Act. A change it should be pointed out, that received and celebrated bi-partisan support across both houses of Parliament.

Volunteers should not have to fight for governments to simply honour the commitments they make and it is heartbreaking to have to deal with such betrayals.

VFBV has learned that the decision to disband the VCF was made after a secret briefing and recommendation was prepared by EMV and given by the Emergency Management Commissioner to the Minister.

In an effort to hold decision makers accountable for their actions, VFBV has committed to public advocacy and formally advised the Minister of our concern that EMV has failed to acquit its obligations under the Volunteer Charter, which is a hard fought statutory obligation on not only CFA but also the State of Victoria.

In response, the VFBV Board has unanimously declared EMV to be an 'Organisation of Concern'. This decision has not been made lightly and follows the VCF's disbandment as well as consideration of recent activities such as the EMV Operating Model Review and the lack of a cross agency after action review for last year's flooding event.

The VFBV Board has taken this unprecedented step in order to highlight the serious disquiet and concern we have towards this behemoth of a bureaucracy and its recent poor record of engagement and direct consultation with volunteers and their representative bodies on several matters. We take no joy in having

to take these steps but are committed to representing CFA volunteers with integrity and transparency.

We have taken no comfort from the Commissioner's protestations that EMV will conduct some future review and consider future arrangements further. If the machinery of government cannot honour the public commitments made to volunteers under the EM Statement, how can anyone expect volunteers to trust any further promises?

EMV's development since it first commenced operation on 1 July 2014 has been quite a journey. Moving from a small, dedicated team of less than 12 people who formed the Fire Services Commissioner's Office, EMV has now morphed into a bureaucracy of several hundred, with its own CEO, Commissioner, Deputy Commissioners and countless executive directors, public servants, consultants and advisors.

Despite those resources, clearly it appears unable to support the peak volunteer forum that was given "enduring effect" under the EM Volunteer Statement.

Volunteers are sick and tired of hearing leaders give speeches about how much they respect and value the contribution of CFA volunteers, to then not match these words with actions.

If we add up all the numerous committees and working groups that EMV host across the sector filled with agency representatives and employees, it is quite an indictment that the only committee dedicated to emergency management volunteers who make up more than 90% of the workforce gets dumped. One only needs to track the poor progress of EMV's actions towards the 13 strategic priority actions developed by volunteers through the VCF back in 2015 and quietly erased from EMV's strategic action plan over consequent years to see how far volunteer priorities and initiatives have been abandoned.

EMV's recent Operating Model review is a further example of poor process. Readers would recall our concerns from the January and February 2022 editions of Fire Wise where volunteers were expected to provide feedback to their review over the Xmas and New Year period. The final report cemented EMV's position that the solution to any and every problem facing the sector was to recommend more public servants.

Any cursory review of the COVID-19 Hotel Quarantine inquiry will show you the dangers of mixing public servants with incident management. Yet, EMV's Operating model review advocates for more public sector full-time personnel to be employed to form fulltime Incident Management Teams managed by EMV. It then uses the gaps observed during their recent pandemic (Class 2) emergencies to argue for even more public servants to lead the management of Class 1 and 2 emergencies moving forward. The review even proposed a business case to train 500 public servants to form a new



'Emergency Management Corps'. Where was the recommendation to recruit, retain and encourage another 500 volunteers you ask? Good question, we asked the same thing.

To demonstrate its priorities one need look no further than the announcement in last year's State Budget of a record \$36.2 million dollars for the establishment of EMV's new fulltime State Control Centre workforce. This isn't even a new capability. It simply replaces the current workforce contributed by each of the agencies through existing surge capacity. A surge capacity that is being undermined and neglected. The lack of any real action to address consecutive drops in endorsed level 3 incident personnel across the sector over recent years is a good example of just hoping for something to fail and then rushing in with a pre-formed solution.

\$36.2M could have bought 80 brand new fire trucks.

The emergency management sector relies on trust, and a workforce that is overwhelming volunteer. EMV's actions risk it becoming more and more distant from the very people that make up the EM sector.

Advice from the ground will become more and more filtered and censored by the layers and layers of bureaucracy. Governments and Ministers will then be on the receiving end of very poor advice so distorted and disconnected to be almost useless. Current case in point.

Victoria cannot simply afford layers and layers of bureaucracy for no tangible benefit. With a cost-of-living crisis looming large, budgets will become more and more under scrutiny. Priority must be given to CFA's budget that is already under strain after decades of underinvestment, with ageing trucks, stations and hundreds of personnel transferred out of CFA under recent reforms.

If the Government is looking for savings that won't impact on front line services and the critical work that emergency volunteer first responders do each and every day to keep our communities safe, then it need look no further than this bemoaned of a bureaucracy. EMV's status as an organisation of concern to volunteers represents a significant deterioration of support.

VFBV will continue to monitor and pursue meaningful arrangements that ensure genuine volunteer engagement and consultation through whatever means possible. We will continue standing up for CFA volunteers and reminding decision makers that EM volunteers contribute more than \$2.4 billion dollars every year to the Victorian economy and taxpayer. Volunteers keep doing their bit, it is time for EMV and other sector leaders to step up and do theirs.