



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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State champions crowned

Over two weekends in March almost 1,000 competitors contested the 2024 State Urban and Rural Championships in Mooroopna.

Melton A had two successful weekends, winning the Grand Aggregates at both the Urban Junior and Senior Championships. While the Rural Senior Championship saw Eldorado win both the Division 1 and Division 3 Aggregate's while Truganina A took out the Division 2 aggregate. For the Rural Junior Championship, Ascot & District won both the 11-13 years and Grand Aggregates while Napoleons-Enfield A took the honours in the 11-15 years aggregate.

The Torchlight Procession was this year held in Mooroopna with the new LED powered torches replacing the traditional kerosene torches with Melton continuing their success taking out first place with 98%. Full results from all four State Championships can be found on the VFBV website or on pages 10 to 12 of this edition of *Fire Wise*.

Of course, the State Championships wouldn't be possible without the 200 judges and officials who volunteer their time over the two weekends to ensure that the championships are run at a high standard for all competitors involved. VFBV also passes on our appreciation to the competitors, coaches, supporters and families of the competitors who keep the competitions going, as well as all CFA staff who contributed to the success of the championships.

A special thank you also to the Mooroopna State Championships committee for their hard work in preparing the competition venue for the Championships alongside the Greater Shepparton City Council who continue to support the Championships.

VFBV's competition committees will be meeting in the coming months to review this year's Championships. If any brigades, competitors or spectators have any feedback they would like considered by either committee please email championships@vfbv.com.au.

Thank you for members' strong show of support!

Again in 2023/24, CFA Brigades and Groups showed it is more important than ever that volunteers have a strong, united, independent and credible voice with 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.

In the coming weeks, Brigade and Group secretaries will receive the 2024/25 renewal notices for your Brigade/Groups' VFBV Affiliation and Welfare Fund subscriptions with a due date of 30th June, 2024.

The Board is determined that brigades/groups should benefit from the strong governance of the association and have found efficiencies to allow the reduction of the affiliation rate from \$84 to \$75. The price set when the rural and urban associations joined together in 2013/14.

To thank Brigades and Groups for their support, those who pay VFBV affilia-

AFFILIATION

tions before 30th June will be automatically entered into a draw to win one of four extremely worthwhile prizes valued at approximately \$4,000. Prizes have, for the fourth year running, been donated by GAAM Emergency Products and Powder-safe and we sincerely thank them for their continued support. A flyer detailing prizes on offer will be 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 costs ensuring 100% of funds received go directly to CFA volunteers experiencing personal hardship. The VFBV Welfare Fund provides small grants up to \$5,000 to assist volunteer members and long service ex members. The Welfare Fund has distributed more than \$2.5 million dollars since its inception.

Which came first – the chicken or the egg? Before you get too uptight, no – I'm not about to prattle on about this causality dilemma considered by many ancient philosophers exploring things like infinite regress and origin paradox's. Religion has had a crack with origin stories, and scientists have their evolutionary biology explanations. From a science perspective, tempted as I may be, I won't even publish the spoiler, but I will say that perhaps the answer isn't as clear cut as you may think. For the inquisitive among you, I have short linked an Australian source – the Australian Academy of Science that provide their answer – (<https://tinyurl.com/vfbv-chicken>)

But I digress. My main point is around the difficulty posed by situations where it is challenging to determine between alleged causes and effects. One of the most common discussion points that I frequently hear among brigades is the age-old recruitment and retention riddle. Again, people often approach this as a binary decision between does CFA have a recruitment or a retention problem? One or the other.

If we look at these separately, lets start with recruitment. While "volunteering" is generally thought to be in decline in Australia, these often-simplistic measurements often hide what's really going on in the detail. For example, recent longitudinal studies often don't separate out the COVID period and lockdowns that made many volunteering opportunities impossible and wiped out most of the "formal" volunteering sector during these periods.

These prophecies also ignore the fact that our form of volunteering – emergency service volunteering – accounts for just a tiny little fraction of total volunteers – so the potential pool of volunteers is still massive providing we look after them and meet their volunteering "needs".

The COVID period of disruption proved what many of us have said for a very long time. Protect emergency service volunteering – as once you lose something as valuable as our volunteering culture – it is very hard to get it back. And while arguably CFA volunteers were able to participate in some activities during the

CHICKEN OR EGG

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

COVID years – many discovered just how pervasive their volunteering had become over other facets of their lives. It's not unusual for this to be a bit of a light bulb moment for some who now desire a more balanced work/life balance.

But there is also some positive in this.

This reckoning has occurred across the entire population, not just among CFA and other emergency service volunteers – and it has changed the way people want to volunteer, and what they want to get out of their volunteer experience.

The most common motivation popping out of research is many people are looking for opportunities to make a difference. They want to help people; they want to make a difference; and they want to do things that have social impact. And with more limited time on their hands with dual income families and cost of living pressures etc. people want their volunteering time to be not only impactful but efficient.

On the one hand – CFA provides a wonderful opportunity for people who want to make a difference. We literally change lives each and every day. By our very being – we literally respond to peoples' calls for help and are often with them on the worst days of their lives. There are few vocations that are not as impactful nor rewarding as CFA.

But how do we fair on the "efficient" part of that equation. Being a CFA volunteer is not exactly time efficient. Factor in the lengthy application process, onboarding, minimum training, mandatory skills maintenance and a lot of hurry up and wait, and we don't tick all that many boxes.

The good news for us is most people understand that if they want to be involved in a role as hazardous and impactful as that of a CFA volunteer, there is a certain amount of "overhead" that comes with that. CFA remains a very attractive organisation of choice for the first-time volunteer. This is evidenced by the high number of expressions of interest that flow in each and every year. After large summer campaigns, literally thousands of EOIs flow in from well intentioned people wanting to pitch in and give us a hand. These aren't evenly distributed, and the more remote brigades frequently miss out.

I only half-jokingly opined to a CFA executive recently that given all the hoops we place in front of an aspiring CFA volunteer just to get into the organisation – we really should award them a medal on day one just to acknowledge their persistence and tenacity in actually getting through it all.

This is evidenced by the massive disparity between those that express an interest and those that actually join. While the numbers fluctuate, I estimate on average only about one-fifth to one-quarter of expressions of interest actually translate to a completed application. I have cautioned many a Minister about

jumping up in Parliament to extoll the thousands of people signing up to join CFA during a campaign fire. Usually timed to dodge criticism around falling vol numbers, this mirage of applicants quickly disappears when tracking the actual number of applications completing their enrolment process.

And can anyone really blame them? While the cynic in me thinks that the application process is a very good test for aspiring applicants, as really – if they are not willing to jump through some hoops to get into the organisation at the start of their career – God help them when they realise how many more hoops will remain for the rest of their involvement just to stay. Maybe its better they learn the lesson up front and set their expectations accordingly?

But when you think about it – that's a pretty lousy excuse for a system and model that seems to delight in testing the human limits for patience and tolerance. A recent review of a nine-page medical form gives me the impression that the only Victorian likely to be worthy of membership these days is off training for the Olympics. We've got to do better.

Which gets us to the retention side of the equation. I saw this dilemma on full display when I observed a recent news article in a regional newspaper appealing to members of the community to get involved. The stories pointed out the excessive red tape and bureaucracy, the journalist pointed out that due to inadequate government funding the fire truck was now 30 years old and CFA can't afford a new fire shed for them, even though the current one has no toilet. Quite correctly they pointed out how difficult it was to attract new members, especially more diverse members when people have to use the paddock or public toilet block up the hill just to go to the bathroom. The article then invited people to apply.

It's not the brigade's fault they are in this position. Here we have a crucial emergency service starved of funding that leaves these civic minded community champions out in a tin shed with aging equipment, and dare I say – an aging workforce. Is this not the embodiment of the ultimate disrespect that government has for its volunteer emergency services? Who thinks this would be attractive to today's youth?

This is the impossible position the government is putting brigades and CFA more generally into. How do we possibly attract new members when budgets are being slashed and burned? It's not exactly a great advert when we can't afford new trucks, or new stations and we are forced to continually ration out protective equipment and clothing to try and make it go around. While government MPs sweat about 15 year old FRV trucks yet ignore 34 year old trucks rusting away in CFA sheds, and where a paid firefighter gets an automatic allocation of multiple sets of PPC, uniforms, gloves and



individual portable radios for every seat in the truck, volunteers are forced to make do with much less each and every time. Despite being ten orders of magnitude larger than the paid service, CFA receives just one third of its funding and all the cuts that go along with that, rationing every glove, boot, chainsaw and hose.

For example, the new radios recently announced are fantastic – but we can't even afford to pop a portable radio in the truck for every seat in the cabin like our sister service does. So again, CFA is forced to make do and ration them out under fancy sounding terms like "risk assessment" and "operational justification" that if we're lucky will allocate three portables for every five seater truck, which given the incident controller often requires two – paints the picture of what volunteers have to put up with on the fireground.

And while CFA often gets blamed for these type of policy positions – what else can it do with such systemic under funding? And for those in any doubt, I will continue dropping these little budget facts in every newsletter for every week that cuts continue to be made to CFA, in the hope you will continue to raise it with your local member of parliament and keep raising it until CFA's budget is restored.

So when people ask me if we have a recruitment problem or a retention one, I go back to my analogy of the chicken or the egg. While it may sound trivial – there is a complex story in each. I think the recruitment problems are easier to solve. This explains why recruitment is often the first thing under siege governments usually latch onto. They are quick and results are fast. But just adding more meat to the sausage machine is not the answer if the sausage machine is broken. We have to fix the sausage machine first.

At time of writing, thousands of CFA volunteers are preparing to fundraise for the Royal Children's Hospital. Our members will selflessly rattle tins, give up a long weekend and stand on intersections to raise millions of dollars for some of Victoria's most vulnerable children. They will then return to raising funds for their own community's fire station, trucks and gear. They will do so while protecting their communities and responding to all manner of emergencies that will arise over the Easter long weekend, and beyond – just like every other day of the year. They will do so proudly, and humbly.

This is the epitome of a CFA volunteer. Our reason for being. Just wanting to help others. It shouldn't have to be this hard. Victorians rely on us, and our fight for fairer funding isn't for us – it's for them.

VFBV Board

Vacancies on the VFBV Board will arise when the terms of four VFBV Board members expire on 1 October 2024. Of the four members whose terms are expiring, two are eligible for re-appointment.

VFBV invites applications from any CFA volunteer who is motivated by the prospect of making a difference and believes they have the skills to contribute to VFBV Board.

The role of a board member involves contributing to VFBV direction, policy determination and monitoring the performance and governance of the Association. This includes actively contributing to policy discussion, consulting with CFA volunteers and contributing to the identification and management of strategic issues.

SOP FEEDBACK

A reminder that we are seeking feedback on various Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that are out for consultation. The Driving SOPs will close for feedback shortly. An additional 13 SOPs have been modified and

VFBV is seeking applications from gender and culturally diverse candidates in addition to a diverse range of skills and experience including applications from diverse brigade types and classifications.

Members should familiarise themselves with the VFBV Board member role statement and key selection criteria available from the VFBV website or via the office at (03) 9886 1141.

Applications close on Monday 2 September 2024.

are now available for review. These are SOP 3.01 Management of Junior Members; 5.05 Use of CFA Equipment; 7.01 Local Procedure Development; 7.05 Water Supplies for Firefighting; 7.07 Station Siren Use; 8.01 Incident Controller and CFA Agency Commander; 8.04 Transfer of Control; 9.13 Keeping Logs and Documents; 9.16 Media Management; and 9.18 Use of Personal Mobile Devices During Incidents.

Given the importance of SOPs in CFA's operational doctrine, VFBV encourages all senior volunteers to make themselves familiar with the proposed changes and provide feedback ASAP.

Please visit the VFBV website to access drafts and change logs to help guide your feedback.