



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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VFBV delegates on the Joint Equipment and Infrastructure Committee have worked tirelessly over a number of years to demonstrate to CFA the shortfall in annual Group allowances to cover the realistic cost of the annual servicing and maintenance of forward command vehicles (FCVs).

Given the critically important role these vehicles play and acknowledging that Groups are quite limited in the amount and type of fundraising that they can do so as not to impact on their brigade's own efforts, VFBV has been arguing for an increase to Group allowances to cover the full cost of FCV servicing.

As of the 1 July, CFA has agreed to move all Group FCVs onto the centralised Fleet plan, which will mean all servicing (as per manufactur-

Group FCVs

ers servicing schedule), tyre and battery replacements will now be billed directly to CFA. Groups may also continue to use their local service providers, ensuring you can still support your local community.

This is an outstanding result, and VFBV thanks all delegates for their efforts. We also acknowledge and thank CFA for considering this request, acknowledging that current CFA budgets make initiatives such as this very difficult.

New windscreen stickers are being distributed to Groups, along with correspondence requesting Groups make contact with their nominated service providers to make them aware of the central billing arrangement.

King's birthday honours

VFBV congratulates CFA members Stephen Hicks from Pakenham Upper brigade and Deputy Chief Officer Gavin Thompson who received the Australian Fire Service Medal (AFSM) among 730 Australian's honoured in the King's Birthday Honours list this year.

Deputy Group Officer Stephen Hicks AFSM has been a member of CFA for more than 49 years. He has been recognised for his outstanding service to CFA as a leader, trainer and mentor and for his efforts and achievements in fire preparedness, fire prevention and fire response.

Deputy Chief Officer Gavin Thompson AFSM began his service to CFA as a junior member at Bayswater and

progressed through the volunteer ranks before joining CFA as a recruit firefighter. Gavin has been recognised for his commitment above and beyond what is normally expected of fire service personnel as well as his efforts in developing those around him to enhance the capacity of CFA and CFA volunteers.

VFBV congratulates Stephen and Gavin for their outstanding contribution to CFA and broader community.

Congratulations are also extended to the current and former members of CFA who were honoured with the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) and to James Mullins who was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for his significant contribution to firefighting.

AFFILIATION

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 almost 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 that affiliated last year.

Brigade and Group secretaries have received the 2024/25 renewal notices for VFBV Affiliation and Welfare Fund subscriptions with a due date of 30 June, 2024.

The Board is determined that brigades/groups should benefit from the strong governance of the association and have reduced the affiliation rate from \$84 to \$75.

We strongly encourage Brigades to also 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 to volunteers in need since its inception.

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 the 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.

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.

Last month I opined that we had very little clarity of CFA's budget for the year ahead, due to it being buried within the Department of Justice and Community Safety.

Shortly after our last newsletter went to print, the Government tabled answers to questions taken on notice through the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee that was held in Parliament on Friday 24 May, 2024.

These figures confirm that there is a further reduction to the CFA budget, with the estimated grant payment to CFA for the 2024/25 period set at \$337.6 million. This is a reduction of \$4 million when compared to the 2023 grant, and you have to go back 15 years to find a CFA budget of similar size. This is despite the Government collecting \$1.03 billion in levy, which includes a \$186 million increase on households this year alone. Working backwards, and knowing the FSL may only contribute 77.5% of CFA's funding, we can conclude CFA's share of the FSL will be just \$261.6m.

And while a \$4 million cut may not sound like a lot to some, in an organisation already starved of funding, the impacts are brutal. Given VFBV has been pursuing numerous health and safety initiatives to further protect the health of all CFA volunteers, these initiatives will be difficult to achieve with further cuts to CFA's budget.

And inequities abound.

For example, while FRV firefighters have all their uniforms, personal protective clothing, and laundry professionally cleaned and paid for by the taxpayer, CFA volunteers are still expected to take their putrid bushfire PPC home after an incident and wash it themselves. Sounds like a first world problem to some until you pause to think about the potential for cross contamination from all the carcinogenic toxins our PPC is frequently exposed to mixing in with the families' washing machine.

And while I am outraged that this continues to be an issue in 2024, CFA continues to be put into this terrible position of trying to prioritise funding across critical areas, when frankly every spare cent is being ploughed into the fleet budget to try and keep CFA's ageing fire trucks on the road. Confirmation has also been received noting that 474 CFA trucks are older than 26 years, with 230 more than 31 years old!

How then is the organisation expected to manage contemporary issues such as station upgrades to appeal to a more gender diverse membership, equipment maintenance, health and safety support, shortages of personal protective clothing, or replacement workwear or uniforms?

Let's use workwear as an example. Putting aside that not every CFA volunteer was provided a set, with the gear having to be rationed out to fit the budget envelope - many do not realise that this was one-off funding, and there has been no govern-

ment investment in providing workwear for new members, let alone the cost of replacing worn out or damaged gear. Despicably, volunteers are asked to buy it themselves when this occurs.

The same for CFA's next generation bushfire PPC and the structural helmets issued a couple of years ago. Each of these represents an increased cost as while next generation materials provide superior protection, they are more expensive, yet the Government has only provided funding for the initial rollouts. There have been no increases to CFA's base funding to support CFA with these increased ongoing costs, which means gear is again being rationed out by the Districts.

With no increases to budgets for five years in a row, these costs are having to be absorbed into existing budgets which are already stretched paper thin. Add a budget cut (or five) and you are left with a dystopian version of the hunger games playing out across the State.

My message to members is that VFBV will not stop calling out these hypocrisies and raising awareness about the dire nature of CFA's funding, and we hope you do too. This is the only way that we can pressure government to provide CFA with its fair share of the funding collected by the fire service levy. At present, millions of dollars are being siphoned from residents living in CFA areas to cover the out of control costs of others.

The disparity is glaring. It costs the taxpayer \$283,000 a year to run each of CFA's 1,209 fire stations across Victoria, yet it costs the taxpayer \$10.3 million a year to run each of FRV's 85 fire stations. And rather than thank volunteers for their generous contribution by properly resourcing them - government would rather poke them in the eye and cut what little funding is already given.

Let's also talk about the fact that CFA volunteers don't make ambit claims. The issues VFBV is pursuing on behalf of volunteers are those supported by volunteers through our extensive District Council network and prioritised by volunteers. Our members ask us to seek cost efficient outcomes, knowing that every expense is borne by the taxpayer. CFA volunteers are doing their bit and can hold their heads high. By running Victoria's most efficient fire service, you are freeing up vital funding that can be used for hospital beds, schools and other essential services. But that generosity is increasingly being abused. When we see waste, when we see spiralling costs and growing bureaucracies from others across the sector that are simply diluting the funding available to everyone else - we must all call it out.

While we will continue to pressure CFA about ensuring its internal spending and prioritisation is as efficient and fair as possible, don't let Government MPs off the hook. They are ultimately responsi-

ble for CFA's funding and their appalling record of five years of CFA cuts.

CFA is being backed into a corner and is being forced to ration and cut costs to meet an ever-decreasing budget. Rather than unleash on CFA because they happen to be the ones in front of you, please assist us by applying pressure to your local government MPs. Many of you don't think it makes any difference, but history shows otherwise. Phone, write or meet with them. Ask them how much of the \$186 million extra revenue they are collecting is going towards CFA.

DEPARTURE OF CFA CEO NATALIE MacDONALD

After describing the poor budget situation, I can't say I was completely shocked to learn about CFA's Chief Executive, Natalie MacDonaldeparting early.

How could anyone that cares for Victorian communities and the whole CFA family as much as any CFA leader does - not be impacted by the constant cost cutting, hypocrisy and financial mismanagement on display.

Given this will be the fifth year in a row of budget contractions for CFA, imagine how that makes a tough job even tougher.

To be fair, Natalie has advised that she is leaving for personal reasons, of which I understand and empathise completely. I suggest however, that these personal challenges may not have been so overwhelming if CFA was being properly supported by the whole of Government, and CFA was being treated fairly.

Following the appointment of a new CFA Chair just last month, I know many volunteers are fearful we are seeing the return of the great instability in senior officers and the loss of corporate memory like we saw during the start of this government's fire service reform journey. And while I share these concerns, there are some differences.

We have had three to four years of relative leadership stability, which while historically this is not very long, it is significantly better than the six CEO's we saw cycle through the organisation in a few years during the height of reform.

I also wish to acknowledge the strong foundations and legacy that Natalie will leave behind.

I have enjoyed a close and constructive working relationship with Natalie since her appointment to the role, and can attest to her passion, intelligence and drive to further CFA's mission. I can similarly attest to the empathy and integrity she has demonstrated while going about it, especially at times under very trying circumstances. Her loyalty has always been to CFA and the communities in which we all serve.

There have certainly been difficult decisions needing to be made. Decisions that perhaps she didn't agree, and probably a few she looks back in hindsight and regrets. But



among those are plenty of decisions and initiatives which I think have changed CFA for the better.

CFA has firmly pivoted to embracing and celebrating the fact that it is a volunteer and community embedded fire service. Natalie has led and supported key initiatives that embed the volunteer charter and its section 6 obligations into the DNA of the organisation. And while its implementation is far from perfect, nor complete - genuine change takes time.

We have stronger CFA/VFBV joint committees, stronger processes to navigate what is increasingly often broad and disparate volunteer feedback, and we have built a trust and respect that honours and respects the unique role each organisation plays. Under Natalie's leadership CFA and VFBV have reaffirmed that we are committed to working constructively together, disagreeing when we must - but always committed to listening and considering the needs of our volunteers.

In this sense, I will feel a real loss and sadness when Natalie finishes up at the end of this month. With the passage of time and reflection I hope she shares my pride in her legacy and the solid foundations she has set for the next person taking the baton. Natalie has also confirmed she intends on continuing as a CFA volunteer with her local brigade.

As I tell every CEO, they are merely a temporary custodian of an iconic organisation that breathes, bleeds and effects all who toil within, whether that's for a day, a year, a decade, or even a lifetime. I know CFA touched Natalie, and I would like to think it was also touched by her. And while I'll quietly admit that she could at times be a force to be reckoned with, I don't mind admitting I enjoyed almost every minute of it.

Thank-you Natalie for your outstanding stewardship of CFA, and the respect you have always shown towards our members and towards VFBV. We sincerely thank you for your efforts and the improvements you have made.

We will miss you at the helm but look forward to your continued journey as a fellow CFA volunteer which is the ultimate sign of respect you could choose to bestow on the organisation and the communities it protects.

Well done, bon voyage and don't put those yellows too far out of reach....summer is coming.