VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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Volunteer Unity

Thank you for members' strong show of support!

In 2025/26, brigades and groups showed it is more important than ever that volunteers have a strong, united and independent voice and peak body with the overwhelming majority of Brigades choosing unity over division and supporting VFBV's important work representing and advocating for volunteers.

Thank you to all brigades and groups who affiliated last year and helped us represent volunteers.

Brigade and group secretaries would have received the 2026/27 renewal notices in May.

SURVEY CLOSING

Responses to our Brigade and Group allowance survey were due by 31st August 2026. The survey was included in this year's affiliation pack sent to all Brigade/Group Secretaries to help us advocate for changes to the brigade/group allowances that have not kept pace with inflation. If your brigade or group has not yet responded, late submissions will be accepted for a very limited time.

All responses are confidential with only de-identified information to be shared with CFA. Help us help you and ensure your secretary or treasurer returns the survey ASAP.

OPERATION RICHMOND

The VFBV Board notes the recent release of IBAC's Operation Richmond Report. Members may access the report from ibac.vic.gov.au

We take this opportunity to fondly remember the courageous contributions of the late Emergency Services Minister the Honourable Jane Garrett MP, and express our disappointment in those public officials and Ministers who failed to act with honesty, honour, or impartiality in line with good public policy principles.

CFA BOARD

The CFA Act recognises that it is important that the CFA Board has strong volunteer expertise, knowledge and understanding of CFA volunteers. To support this, four of the skills-based CFA Board members are appointed by the Minister for Emergency Services from a panel of names submitted by VFBV.

Two volunteer nominee positions will expire early next year. Both are eligible for re-appointment.

VFBV is now seeking further applications from any CFA volunteer interested in applying. CFA volunteers who believe they have the skills, experience and capacity to make a contribution to the Board of the CFA are invited to apply.

In addition to volunteer experience and knowledge, selection will have regard to any of the following: knowledge of, or experience in, commercial, technical, operational, legal or financial matters; expertise in fire or emergency management, land management; or any other field relevant to the performance of the functions of CFA.

VFBV is seeking gender and culturally diverse candidates, in additional to a diverse range of skills and experience including applicants from diverse brigade type and classifications.

The CFA Board meets on a monthly basis, usually on a Monday and also operates a committee system which could require an additional commitment of at least one day per month. Regular attendance at official functions and brigade/group events is also expected.

The appointment to the CFA Board would be for a period of up to three years.

The CFA Board Charter and Position Description are available on the VFBV website.

Applications close on 31st January 2027.

Rebate scheme

A reminder that the eligible volunteers rebate scheme is now open for eligible volunteers and life members to apply for a rebate on an eligible property under the Emergency Services Tax.

To check the rules and eligibility requirements, you can visit: https://www.vic.gov.au/evrs

If you are eligible and own an eligible property, head to https://www.members.cfa.vic.gov.au/ to start the process.

Committee updates

Eight pages of updates from the CFA/VFBV Joint Committees are included in this month's VFBV Quarterly Supplement that is included in this edition of Fire Wise. Electronic copies of the supplement can be accessed via the VFBV website.

VFBV provides a free copy of Fire Wise to all brigade Captains and Secretaries, as well as all Group Officers and Group Secretaries.

The 2-Minute Briefings from each committee provides a quick way to stay updated on important updates to the issues raised by volunteers through VFBV District Councils.

ILLNESS SUPPORT

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

In recent times, one of the most common enquiries to VFBV delegates has been on matters relating to presumptive legislation. So, I thought it important to remind members about the support and assistance provided by VFBV to any members who are unfortunate enough to be grappling with serious illness that may have been attributed to their CFA service.

To start with the basics, presumptive legislation for Victorian firefighters commenced operation on July 2, 2019. In Victoria, it covers 15 specified cancers, each with their own qualifying service period. Under the rules, the cancer must have been diagnosed on or after June 1, 2016, while you were an active member or within a 10-year period after cessation of active operational service.

The term operational service is used loosely to indicate it needs to be service where there was a likelihood your service will be classified as a firefighter which would include attending incidents or being exposed to real fire simulations or training exercises. This determination will be made by an independent panel convened under the Regulations.

It is called presumptive legislation because the law presumes that these 15 specific cancers are firefighting related, and therefore a firefighter diagnosed with one of these cancers is "presumed" to have developed it due to the nature of their service as a firefighter. In other words, it reverses the onus of proof so that a Worksafe insurer who believes the cancer was not caused by a person's firefighting service must prove it was caused by something else, rather than the original onus of proof laying with the firefighter to prove it was caused by their firefighting service.

It was developed due to how difficult it is for a firefighter to prove which fire, and which chemical caused their cancer. An almost impossible burden given the very long latency period of most cancers, some of which can occur 25 years after the original exposure. Presumptive legislation allows firefighters to concentrate on treatment and recovery, instead of a lengthy and expensive court case.

In Victoria, both volunteers and career staff are covered by the same legislation. The 15 specified cancers and their qualifying years of service are identical for each group.

Under the legislation, volunteers do have one additional step in that volunteer claims are referred to an independent Advisory Committee who provide an expert opinion to CFA's WorkSafe agent as to 'whether you attended enough fires to the extent reasonably necessary to fulfill the purpose of [their] service as a firefighter.'

At the time this requirement was introduced, the State Government explained that this requirement was needed to differentiate between an operational volunteer vs one who's role was purely administrative. However, where it gets more complex is a volunteer can transition between multiple roles at multiple times during their service. This is not always clearly explained by your service records.

This is the element that normally causes the most distress for applicants, and VFBV is available to assist any member who is navigating this process. We have considerable experience supporting members through this process, and can demystify it for you.

This same process applies to Forest Fire Management firefighters and District Mechanical Officers, who go through a similar independent panel to try and differentiate between the different risks and roles of their occupations and service history. It sounds scary – but most volunteers report inquiries from the panel have been done with compassion and empathy.

Our most critical advice to members is to contact us BEFORE you submit your claim. The reason being, once your claim is submitted – strict time limits kick in.

Sadly, it is quite common for CFA historical records to be a bit ordinary, certainly for service dating back 20 or 30 years ago where practices and record keeping was still evolving. If there are gaps in your service history it is better to know before you submit your application, so you can do some research into brigade or your personal records that may have been missed.

Should your presumptive claim be unsuccessful, volunteers are also able to seek compensation under the Country Fire Authority Regulations. Volunteers may not claim under both schemes for the same cancer, but volunteers are permitted to apply to the CFA scheme should their presumptive claim be rejected by Worksafe. CFA claims do not have the benefit of presumptive legislation, so members need to be well prepared, including seeking legal advice where appropriate. We have worked with a number of no-win no fee practices over the years and can help you consider options.

One of the biggest myths we often come across is that self-employed or agricultural workers are not equally covered for time loss injuries. While it is certainly easier for a Pay As You Go (PAYG) employee to prove their annual income, all schemes have the capacity to calculate your annual income either via tax returns or accounting records to demonstrate average incomes. This is certainly one of the more complex areas, and one where you need professional advice. We are also working through some constructive conversations on how CFA can better support members who perhaps do not have consistent income to try and make the process a lot less stressful and time consuming.

Under the presumptive legislation there is also allowance for an exceptional exposure event for cases significant enough that the normal qualifying years of service may not apply. However, this category typically needs to be supported by relevant findings from a coroner, court proceeding or other official inquiry regarding an event known to have exposed firefighters to carcinogens.

We can also help members who may be covered under the Fiskville Redress Scheme. This scheme was established by the Victorian Government on 5 September 2022 to acknowledge past harm and support people impacted by activities at the former Fiskville Training College site.

Members do need to establish prolonged exposure to the former Fiskville Training College, with typical periods of at least three months or more of cumulative exposure, though it does not need to be all at once. In our experience, CFA historic records have been less than ideal, so we strongly urge members to make contact.

Members can contact a delegate or State Councillor who may refer you to a VFBV Support Officer, who is located and embedded in your Region, to help members resolve local issues and provide localised VFBV support.

VFBV is also continuing to advocate to the Victorian Government for the expansion of the Victorian presumptive scheme. While almost every other Australian State and Territory has expanded their scheme as scientific evidence evolves, Victoria's legislation lags behind. For example, volunteer and career firefighters in QLD and NSW are covered for 22 cancers, while Tasmanian firefighters are covered for 21. QLD and Tassie firefighters are also covered for presumptive PTSD and asbestos injuries.

While we have made significant progress with the expansion of the Victorian scheme to cover three additional firefighting cancers affecting female reproductive cancers (expanding Victoria's scheme from 12 to 15 cancers) Victoria is lagging significantly behind.

VFBV, together with 10 other Australian State and Territory Volunteer Associations, is working together through our national body - the Council of Australian Volunteer Fire Associations (CAVFA) to try and influence the Commonwealth Parliament to take a stronger lead in helping the various States and Territories evolve their schemes to include addition cancers as the scientific evidence evolves.

Cancer does not discriminate based on where you live, and neither should our legislation. Yet, that is exactly what is happening. With volunteers commonly crossing interstate borders to provide surge capacity to other States and Territories, two firefighters standing side by side and fighting the same fire could potentially be covered by very different legislation, with one covered, and the other not.

We are also working with our interstate brothers and sisters to advocate for stronger portability of coverage for when volunteers permanently move from one Australian jurisdiction to another. For example, while Victorian legislation does cover firefighters who have done the majority of their service in Victoria, but have now moved interstate where they continue as a firefighter, on the downside Victoria is also one of the few State's that enforce a strict 10-year post service time limit that can differ from other State's.

While our advocacy in this space is often in the background and unseen to many members it is nonetheless vitally important and takes significant patience and resilience to maintain. While this work continues in earnest - we'll keep you updated.

CHIEF OFFICER'S DEPARTURE

CO Jason Heffernan AFSM recently announced his resignation, with him taking on the role of CEO for St John Ambulance in NSW. This will take Jason back to family and friends, with Jason commencing his firefighting service as a volunteer back in 1998 with NSW RFS prior to taking on the CFA Chief's role back in November 2020.

While Jason is not due to depart until November, we certainly wish him all the best with his move and taking on exciting new challenges with St John. I have worked closely with St John Ambulance here in Victoria and know first-hand what incredible work they do across the emergency management sector.

While there is still plenty of time to thank Jason for his service and sacrifices over the last six years, I encourage members to engage with his office at their earliest opportunity to thank him for his CFA contributions.

At times like this, minds will inevitably turn to what's next.

While Victoria has certainly experienced much upheaval during the fire services reform years, there is also plenty of opportunity. VFBV is keen to hear from members on what kind of qualities they are looking for in the next CFA Chief Officer. Have a think about the qualities that make the biggest difference to you and your members, the kind of personality traits you most admire and value and have a think about where CFA is currently at and what kind of qualities you think best suit the current environment.

VFBV District Councils provide a perfect forum for volunteers to actively engage with these discussions and are the perfect opportunity to hear from your peers. The role comes with a lot of expectations and requires plenty of sacrifice, but the role also leaves a deep impression and legacy. To those comic book readers out there, "With great power comes great responsibility".

I encourage BMTs and GMTs to similarly discuss what you're looking for and arm your delegates with your thoughts so that those aspirations can be represented in discussions with CFA.

As always, your collective voices will greatly influence these decisions, so please don't be backward in coming forward.