

Submission to the Hon David O'Byrne in relation to the Fire Services Review

This submission is made by Pat O'Donnell, a volunteer member of the Country Fire Authority, and relates particularly to s (h) of the 1. Terms of Reference.

'the best mechanism to provide support for volunteer fire brigades and to ensure their viability in providing emergency services.'

My background is that I have been a member of the CFA for some fifteen years and a member of the Peer Support program for twelve of those years. During this time and in both the capacity of a firefighter with my local brigade and as a Peer member I have been fortunate to meet and work with a large number of people from the organisation, including staff, career firefighters and volunteers. I have also been a member of the management team of a brigade and I believe I understand fully the additional pressures that this places on the volunteers who are so generous with the time, not only in the time given to responding to emergency calls but also in ensuring that the needed infrastructure and trained personnel are available when those needs arise.

Prior to my joining the CFA I was a newspaper photographer for some thirty five years and I was the privileged observer of how our emergency services operate, particularly in the eastern suburbs, the Dandenong Ranges and up through the Yarra Valley. The role of the press photographer during the responding of emergency services is one of the observer and that role gives one an opportunity that is not generally available to any other person involved in an incident. For most participants their role is one of quite high activity and the specific focus on the task at hand. They do not have the luxury that I had, of being able to look about and consider all the facets of the operation. My including of this detail is not to suggest that I have any greater insight than these men and women as they went about their work but rather to indicate that I was given that precious commodity, time, in my observations. On finishing work as a press photographer I was pleased to be able to then make some contribution to my community by membership of my local CFA brigade.

In my time with CFA I have attended fires and other incidents both around the state and interstate and have worked with our colleagues from other emergency services at many of those incidents. Having seen those other services in partnership with us I can confidently say that CFA personnel are the equal of any other service in the country. It is not a boast but simply I believe the recognition that we have developed over many years and with much effort and money expended achieved the level we are now at. I would suggest that the welcome we get when supporting our colleagues at major interstate incidents would be a telling testimony to this. This remarkable level of competency as an emergency service applies across the whole membership, those who are staff members and support the firefighters, the paid firefighters and the volunteer firefighters. I do not draw any difference in their capacities nor their willingness to contribute to the safety and well-being of our communities.

Now, in explaining why I am making this submission it is based on a number of assumptions that I believe are valid. The first is that as a community we will continue to have the need for emergency services, including both Urban and Rural fire brigades into the future. Indeed it would probably be argued by most of the climate change scientists that we will face even greater dangers from fires and for some communities, floods. The second assumption that I make is that it is unlikely that the Victorian community will be able to provide paid fire-fighting services to all communities in the state. The diversion of monies to such a venture would be unsustainable given all the other demands that must be met by the government and so the volunteer component will continue to play a major role with the provision of personnel for CFA activities.

Given these assumptions I now move to address how the needs for sustaining the volunteer component of the organisation might best be met. Many brigades, particularly in the smaller rural towns but also in the suburbs, are under pressure from the lack of available men and women in their communities to join or to be able to make a greater contribution than they do. This can be because of the need for them to travel for employment, the inability to absent themselves from their employment or their need to leave the area for either education or as is often the case because of the inability of the smaller country enterprise to now support other members. Indeed for many of our smaller brigades the general contraction of services within their community, for example the closure of many businesses and other infrastructure reductions has had a depressing withdrawal of people from that community and the inevitable reduction in available people for those essential volunteer roles.

Whilst this is not necessarily a problem in the area of Knox where I live we do have a significant number of our people in the workforce who travel out of the community for work and educational needs. In these situations the weekday response capacity can be severely impacted on. The problem though is further impacted by the reduction in the number of personnel working in local industries who might be available for response to the needs of an emergency incident. I believe it can be even more problematic when that incident may be a two, three or four day deployment outside the area. With the coming fire season being tipped to be one of extreme weather volatility it is a reasonable belief that the demands made on the emergency services will be as great or possibly greater than in any previous times.

In speaking about Knox¹ it is worth noting that it is a community of some 1555,000 residents across an area of some 114 square kilometres. The area is a mix of residential and varying types of industrial with a wide range of industry types. There is a very limited agricultural component within the community. From figures published by the council on its internet site there are only 28% working residents employed within the municipality. On this basis there are then 72% of the working residents travelling outside the community for employment reasons. This high level of travel for work must then necessarily impact on the general weekday availability of volunteers. Of course this loss of daytime persons is not only applicable to the volunteer emergency services but also has an impact on the needs of many other volunteer groups within the community.

With these problems identified in the Knox community we can then consider what steps we need to take to alleviate the problems. In this submission I only suggest some possible solutions for the CFA based on my own knowledge and because of my lack of knowledge of the demands for the services of other organisations I make no comment.

One of the suggested remedies for the lack of available personnel during general working times would be to come up with method of releasing persons who are currently employed within the Knox area and as such are within workplaces that are in the CFA brigades' catchments. I acknowledge that there are a number of immediate issues with attempting to use such people as daytime firefighters for the Knox area. The first problem is, of course, that they do not wish to be involved in any capacity with the CFA. The second problem that I see is what we would then do about training such people who are interested in service with the brigades in the area they work in or perhaps at least those people who do not already have acquired the necessary training possibly with the brigade where they might reside. These people reasonably will probably be reluctant to travel back to the area they work in after hours to join the local brigade members in receiving the appropriate minimum skills training.

¹ All information accessed from the City of Knox Council internet site on August 30 2015

In such circumstances it might be that we need to come to some arrangement with employers to enable them to be absent from the workplace for certain periods. Of course such absences are not without cost to the employer and we might need to look at how the employer can be compensated for allowing these absences. It has been suggested at previous times that employers should be reimbursed for the use of volunteers during an emergency period when they are absent from work. Obviously this comes as a cost to either the CFA or the government. One further consideration needs to be as to how the actual reimbursements might be made. I would suggest that no employer wants to have a situation of being required to undertake paperwork that will cost the enterprise greatly to complete. Many employers would then rightly reject such the idea. It has also been suggested on occasions that there may be room for the costs to be ameliorated through taxation changes although I do not have any real knowledge or suggestion about this would be managed. However I'm sure there does exist within the minds of government the knowledge that could be utilised to work out a solution. Whichever solution is decided on needs to be fair to both the employee and the employer. Given that we already have recorded the names of those attending fires it would not create an additional work for the brigade.

Moving away from this I would now like to look at the recruitment of volunteers with the CFA. When you attend almost any brigade you cannot help but be surprised at the very few Asian or African faces you see. When you raise this with many brigades you are told that it is contrary to the culture of these groups to volunteer although the CFA certainly has a strong anti-discrimination policy to prevent any actions that might be taken prevent members of any such groups being denied membership. This should not in any way be seen on the policies or their implementation by the CFA at all levels, indeed I am proud to be part of an organisation that has taken such efforts to manage any types of discrimination within itself.

In the ABS publication, *General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2014*, it was noted that:

In 2014, 5.8 million people or 31% of the Australian population aged 15 years and over, participated in voluntary work. Over a 12 month period, voluntary work contributed 743 million hours to the community.

It was further noted that

Once people start volunteering, they tend to keep doing it and their children quite often follow. Nearly half of volunteers had volunteered for more than 10 years. More than two-thirds of volunteers (70%) also reported that at least one of their parents had participated in voluntary work

In addition it was suggested that

The most common reason identified for being a volunteer was to help others or the community (64%), while more than half identified personal satisfaction (57%) or to do something worthwhile (54%). Personal or family involvement (45%), social contact (37%) and to be active (35%) were also reported as reasons for volunteering

There is nothing to suggest that there is any ethnic cultural bar to volunteering rather there is a strong family influence impacts on whether it is likely that children will. It could be suggested that in the ethnic family where there might be a stronger familial authority vested in the parents we do not to involve them also in any campaign.

However I'm not sure that there is an existing cultural block for any of the ethnic groups. Certainly not within Knox. What I suggest is the problem is that we need to look at recruitment methods that will enable us to interact with all the ethnic groups within the community. In the figures above I have shown there were 155,000 residents in Knox in June 2013. Of these residents, there were some 41,000 born overseas and of these there were some 31,000 from non-English speaking backgrounds. Whilst the figures are slightly lower percentages than for the Melbourne metropolitan area it is clearly a reasonably cosmopolitan area. Another figure that we need to consider is that more than 25% of residents are over 55 years of age and reasonably we can expect that percentage to continue to grow.

For many years the recruitment processes of the CFA have simply depended on members speaking with their mates or others in their community about coming along and joining up. The membership demands were fairly easy to meet providing that you would be available when the bell was rung. Of course we now live in a more demanding time and there is an increased need for our members to be better trained and better equipped. The days are long gone when mainly men would jump on the back of a truck in their normal working gear and head off to control a major bushfire with a knapsack pump and a beater. However we now require that all persons responding to an emergency have, at the very least, the minimum skills as are determined by the CFA. We now view our obligations under the relevant occupational health and safety legislation much more seriously than we once might have. With all of these changes joined with the rapid development in many of our urban areas the demand for volunteers is increasing at a time when the capacity of many people to participate is reducing. For these reasons we need to look at increasing the pool from which we can draw such people.

I'm suggesting that the Victorian Government finance a special recruitment program by the CFA to reach into the various ethnic groups and seek to have them join in the emergency services organisations. Not only should we be producing materials in the appropriate languages but we should be targeting the potential volunteers through the specific ethnic media services. For an example of this I would suggest the number of Vietnamese language newspapers that might be considered and also the various radio and television programs in the specific languages. I understand that almost all of the groups that we might target in an area such as the Knox municipality have access to a language publication that is appropriate. In addition we should also target the opinion leaders within those groups and ask that they involve themselves in the campaign. In many communities the opinion leaders may be identified with social clubs or religious groups and might exercise some authority over the group and this might assist us in then getting our message across. At a grassroots level we should also use local brigade members who have undergone some level of training to meet with the local ethnic members and ask them to participate in both the campaign and also to possibly join a brigade in some capacity. Today there are many opportunities for members to serve and not all are required to be firefighters. In Bayswater, which is where I live, it is not difficult to start the process given that we are fortunate to have many members of the Asian community involved in the hospitality industry. A simple approach to one enterprise by a properly trained and briefed recruiter would give more information about other likely contacts. It just takes that first contact by a confident recruiter who is supported by the suitable language material and the process is started. Within the main shopping area of the township of Bayswater I have identified Vietnamese, Thai, Malaysian, Indian and Mainland Chinese. With a little more effort I'm sure there are many others available.

It should also be recognised that the campaign does need to have some secretarial support to ensure that the information that is gathered is properly used to benefit the campaign. Such information would also be required to assess the effectiveness of the campaign. Of course that effectiveness should lead to a greater number of recruits available to the brigade but it might also

identify people who might wish to make other contributions to the CFA. (I hasten to add that I don't necessarily mean in a financial sense but rather in areas such as providing the skills in those specific languages and such.)

Once we have identified the opinion leaders at a local level we must then involve them in the ongoing campaign. One area where this would be absurdly easy was in the design of training. It would be of no benefit to either party should we recruit certain members and then fail them by not providing training and assessment in the appropriate language. So then by involving these people in such a phase of the program we are then almost locking these participants into joining with us as fellow team members. This is not a dishonest act but simply a recognition that by giving people ownership of a project it will then become theirs. In undertaking such a campaign we also need to keep our existing members fully informed of the plans we are proposing and ensuring that they are also comfortable with the proposals. It is of little value to the community if we simply bring in newcomers to replace those who we have alienated and have left.

Whilst the plan does call for the involvement of people with a professional knowledge of campaigning it is to be seen as a subservient role to that of the locally trained volunteers who will prosecute the campaign out in the community. As with ownership of process of the campaign by the target group membership it must be a shared ownership with the current organisational membership. If there is to be a successful outcome this unity of ownership is, I believe, imperative.

I do not believe that there are any identifiable cultural differences that will see the various ethnic groups not volunteer to improve their communities. I'm supported in this view generally by information on volunteering available from the Australian Bureau of Census and Statistics particularly in a study undertaken by the Bureau in 2014 on volunteering²

Pat O'Donnell

August 31 2015

² 4159.0 - General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia, 2014