

4 September 2015

fireservicesreview@justice.vic.gov.au

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Dear ██████████

ASU Submission to the Review of the Fire Services

The ASU welcomes the opportunity provided to participate in the fire services review. We also wish to state from the outset our desire for ongoing dialogue between ourselves, the Victorian government and key decision makers in the fire services system on ways to improve Victoria's fire services system.

This letter constitutes the Australian Services Union's formal written submission to the fire service review. We propose to deal with the terms of reference in turn as they appear.

- a. **An assessment of the resourcing required necessary to ensure Victoria is appropriately equipped and fire ready.**

The ASU supports a full review of the matters arising from this term of reference. Any review should be conducted by independent experienced reviewers with an expectation that the unions covering fire services staff are fully involved.

The ASU believes that sufficient staffing and equipment levels must be maintained at all time for Victoria's fire service to remain operationally effective. We believe detailed consultation on these matters must be done on an ongoing basis and done with the workers on the front-line (and their representative unions), since they are best positioned to comment on whether staffing levels are sufficient or available equipment is effective. For instance fire agency personnel must be provided the necessary resources to conduct their day to day workplace activities, i.e. provision of appropriate vehicles, latest ITC technology.

An indispensable component of fire services is the existence of Incident Control Centres. Many of these are small and inadequately resourced. A change to purpose built, well-resourced and well equipped Incident Control Centres will aid in the endeavour of strengthening Victoria's fire services system.

Further the fire services system needs to take a year-round approach. This will allow fire services to properly respond to any incidents throughout the year, including responding to HAZMAT incidents and not just focussing on fire season. Also it will strengthen the capacity of fire services to operate in incidents where the involvement of multiple agencies is needed.

Authorised by ASU Branch Secretary, Richard Duffy

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In addition to this we believe suitable training, coaching and mentoring packages need to be developed so as to aid workers employed in fire services. Equally the ASU believes supports need to be developed and in place for non-operation personnel conducting support operations. This includes volunteers who must have readily accessible training programmes to ensure their suitability for any role they undertake.

The above points lead to the question of training. The ASU believes a systematic approach to training must be taken across the state and should aim to skill staff appropriately for the roles they perform.

The ASU believes that it is vital beyond this that all fire services properly consult on an on-going basis with the unions that cover their staff. It's important that this is done on a regular basis with all services sending senior experienced staff to regular consultative forum to seek the expert views of experienced union delegates about matters relating to the services' fire readiness and the suitability and effectiveness of the equipment that staff use.

b. How CFA and MFB staff can be best supported in protecting communities, taking into consideration operational needs, as well as OH&S best practice and best training methods.

The CFA and MFB can best support their staff around the matters raised in this term of reference by genuinely seeking feedback in a structured way from the unions that cover staff in both services. ASU delegates have decades of experience within their agencies and feedback provided to the ASU from these delegates is that their views are not often sought and that when they are these views are often ignored by management too stuck in a command and control structure that seems to reward assertiveness over genuine consultation.

Some obvious points for focus are training, accreditation and competencies. Some of these things are a logical corollary to our comments in the term of reference above. Mentalities and cultures may also require transformation in order to ensure staff have the confidence to speak up and raise issues of consequence that management may have overlooked or ignored. A culture of silence enforced on the workforce is not in the interests of the communities fire services are entrusted to protect.

If CFA and MFB continue to ignore the feedback from the staff for whom training is provided and focus on OH&S matters as a budgetary issue rather than seeking world's best practice outcomes based on properly structured review processes it should come as no surprise that there remains a disconnect between communities, staff and management.

Another matter we wish to raise in relation to OHS is the establishment if a dedicated Incident Management Team (IMT). We believe the IMT must be a dedicated unit training personnel established within the work-force and not just be a limited funded project. The ASU believes further consultation with the workforce regarding this issue is necessary.

c. The interoperability between the CFA & MFB

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d. The interoperability across fire agencies responsible for preventing and suppressing all types of fires in Victoria, whether on public or private land

The ASU believes that MFB and CFA operate in such different ways across different geographic regions, different staffing profiles (MFB mainly professional, CFA a mix of professional and volunteer) that the two services should remain as separate entities. However the ASU believes that a review panel should be established to look at how the two agencies can better work together during times of crisis.

This review panel should include industrial staff and delegates from unions that cover all CFA and MFB staff.

e. CFA and MFB management structures and management work practices

f. Enhancing workplace culture, including fostering greater respect and cooperation between management and its workforce, as well as enhancing workplace innovation and diversity

The management structures at the CFA and MFB are totally different. For instance the CFA structure supports volunteers and relies on communities to supply firefighters; the MFB on the other hand is not geared toward volunteers. Rank structures are another difference between the two organisations. In addition the management levels at both organisations are too top heavy, resulting in scarce resources being diverted from frontline service delivery.

However one similarity is that both agencies are run by a command and control structure that often means that input from those at the coal face, often literally, are not sought or taken seriously. The CFA in particular have over the past few years conducted a series of reviews under the title COFT that don't effectively consult with staff.

COFT program is still rolling through organisation (albeit under a different name). This process has been ongoing in Districts/Regions since 2009 and at East Burwood headquarters since 2011. ASU members are mystified by this particular program seeking answers to questions like: When will this process be finalised – what does the 'end point' look like? How successful has the process been (what metrics determine 'success' in this area)? How much has the program cost to date – including consultant fees etc?

In the view of ASU members the program is a failure – staff numbers continue to increase (particularly in upper levels – executive managers etc). There is no transparency in staff appointments and there are still staff in 'the pool' (ie 'unmatched' under COFT program).

In order to improve management structures and work practices consultation needs to be genuine at both CFA and MFB. Change needs to be driven from bottom to top. Respect is another crucial component to improving workplace cultures – this needs to be reciprocated by those at the top showing respect to those lower down the organisation chain.

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Career structures also need to be mapped out. Appropriate balance of management and workforce personnel to meet the demands of the considerable workload is required. A part of the solution is to stabilise the workforce – at the moment there are too many people in ‘acting’ roles, reflecting the uncertainty that afflicts the two organisations.

g. Registration Board

The ASU does not seek to add anything to this term of reference not already said by other unions.

h. The best mechanism to provide support for Volunteer Fire Brigades and to ensure their viability in providing emergency services

Volunteers are an integral part of the fire services system and need support. The ASU believes the best form of support that can be provided volunteer fire brigades can only be developed once a detailed consultation with the firefighters has been undertaken. We believe that as a starting point, permanent staff numbers must not diminish since it is paid firefighters who often provide the leadership and guidance to the volunteers.

Volunteer firefighters also require support. In this respect the key support to volunteer brigades is the paid staff who work with them on a daily basis. Volunteers will be best served by enhancing the skills and number of those paid staff who in turn are relied upon by volunteers.

We have already mentioned the necessity of training. Special nuance needs to be followed when developing training programs for volunteer firefighters. This is because attending courses for volunteers are – for all intents and purposes – out of reach due to work (or other) commitments which prevent attendance at training courses. A model similar which reimburses volunteers for time off from employment to obtain/enhance skills is a reform that ought to be considered. So to should some form of legal guarantee to enable volunteers to participate in courses that will enhance their firefighting skills.

With this the ASU will close this submission.

We’d again like to thank you for the work you are undertaking and hope you find the time to speak with us again to flesh out some of the issues we’ve raised in greater detail.

If you need to contact us regarding any matters in this submission please contact ASU Branch Coordinator Leon Wiegard on [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely



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ASU BRANCH COORDINATOR

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