



Friday 18 December 2015

Message for All Volunteers

Many of you will be aware that the release of the Fire Services Review report and the State Government's response have been postponed until after the bushfire season.

Minister for Emergency Services Jane Garrett will now lead a working group of Ministers to study the Review's findings in depth and report back to the Government.

VFBV acknowledges that many volunteers are frustrated with the delay and we certainly share their feelings of disappointment. However, given that we are already into what is clearly going to be a long and busy summer, I suggest we take the opportunity to get on with the job at hand and concentrate on the important work of protecting the community.

When the Review's report does become public, volunteers will need to be ready to have their say. By visiting www.vfbv.com.au you can see our submission and VFBV's September 28 letter to the Minister and all MPs, outlining the key issues of concern. I encourage each of you to read them and discuss your thoughts with your fellow volunteers.

Also in September, VFBV requested a meeting with the Minister to discuss issues coming out of the Fire Services Review before any decisions affecting volunteers are made. The Minister offered to meet with us after the report has been presented, and with its release newly postponed I will make another request that we meet and discuss the issues at the earliest opportunity.

GENDER EQUITY AND WORKPLACE CULTURE

The Government has also announced that the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commissioner will examine issues around gender equity and workplace culture in Victoria's emergency services, and I very strongly encourage all VFBV delegates to show leadership in actively welcoming and engaging in this work. Support for greater diversity in CFA is something VFBV has recognised as a real opportunity, and where there are gaps, an area warranting concerted effort to achieve improvement.

Any move towards encouraging greater diversity with regard to gender, cultures and ages in CFA, is something that will strengthen Brigades' connections with the communities we protect and increase the pool of potential volunteers.

Minister Garrett has expressed concern that only 3% of CFA and MFB operational staff are women. In comparison, approximately 20% of all CFA volunteers are women and nearly 5,000 of those volunteer women are operational members.

I am assuming the activation of this work to examine issues around gender equity and workplace culture has been identified during the Fire Services Review, and we have already seen the *Jones Inquiry into the effect of arrangements made by the Country Fire Authority on its Volunteers* identifying culture and human resource management issues requiring attention.

Judge David Jones noted in his report that “CFA culture, leadership and human resource management are keys to maintaining and strengthening the community’s understanding of, confidence in, support for and active participation in the volunteer based emergency service model for Victoria, which is consequently fundamental to the future success of the CFA”.

Judge Jones also observed that “Improving leadership in CFA from top to bottom is key to the success of the CFA integrated model – this cannot be over emphasised and is one of CFA’s biggest challenges”.

The annual *VFBV Volunteer Welfare & Efficiency Survey* has also asked volunteers for their opinions on diversity and workplace culture issues, and found they strongly desire an environment in CFA that welcomes people from all cultural backgrounds as well as different religious, political and personal beliefs; actively discourages workplace bullying; and ensures that there are no barriers to the roles women can occupy in Brigades.

The 2015 survey results show that although CFA performance in this area is scored comparatively well against other areas, it still needs attention. The results showed that female volunteers saw a greater gap between the importance of equity and diversity issues and CFA’s actual performance.

CFA VOLUNTEERS; READY FOR SUMMER

With the fire season well and truly here, and considering many parts of the state have already been extremely busy with large and serious incidents, my message to the Minister has been that the CFA and Emergency Management sector need to be supported in focusing on the immediate task of protecting the community.

Many volunteers have expressed frustration that CFA is in an era of review upon review, but we must not let this damage the spirit of CFA or the professional standards of protection we provide to the community every day and night of the year.

We know CFA is an overwhelmingly great organisation, achieving great things in communities across Victoria, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t keep looking for areas for improvement and ironing out any issues we find on the way.

Andrew Ford
CEO
Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria