



# VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

## STATEMENT

**28 November 2024**

### **EXPLOSIVE INDEPENDENT FIRE SERVICES MONITOR FINDINGS**

The independent Fire Services Implementation Monitor (FSIM) has slammed the secondment arrangements and concluded that in his opinion and the unanimous opinion of senior leaders of the fire services (CFA & FRV) that the arrangements are not working, have not worked for quite some time and in fact will never work.

And while these findings do not come as a surprise to VFBV who has been the canary in the coalmine about these issues for years, these findings from an independent monitor herald a crossroads for the Victorian Government. An opportunity to make right.

Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) are contractually required to supply CFA with 45 Assistant Chief Fire Officers, and 96 Commanders. These are key positions and are critical to CFA's ability to perform its role and respond to fire and emergencies in one of the world's most fire prone areas.

The independent monitor reports on average in any given week there are at least 17 senior vacancies amongst the Assistant Chief Fire Officer and Commander pool each week. The monitor also finds that at its worst, there can be more than 33 vacancies in a week, accounting for more than 20% of CFA's paid operational workforce. These figures are supported by volunteer brigades who frequently report to us the shortages and gaps of support they are now routinely having to deal with.

These are alarming figures as we head into Victoria's fire danger period.

VFBV wish to make clear that our attacks on the secondment arrangements are in no way a reflection on the secondees themselves, but rather a reflection on the misguided arrangements that set them up to fail in the first place. We respect and support each of the individual secondees loaned from FRV to CFA, and have great empathy for the impossible position they are often put in requiring them to straddle two significantly different organisational cultures, two entirely separate chains of command, and unacceptably high vacancy rates from unfilled positions which pushes these brave men and women to exhaustion as they try to cover empty positions while trying to protect themselves from burnout. CFA volunteers support them, and demand that they be treated better.

The CFA Chief Officer is forced to rely on 94% of his operational chain of command to be seconded from a different organisation. In fact, the Chief Officer is left with only 9 Deputy Chief Officers directly reporting to him, with all the remaining 141 uniformed officers in his chain of command forced to be seconded from FRV. The Chief does not even get the chance to choose which ones.

The monitor has reported repeated instances where these arrangements do not work and have constrained CFA's ability to effectively manage secondees and address the vacancy and non-relief of the seconded positions.

Despite being contractually obliged to fill these positions, when seconded positions are not filled, FRV pocket the savings and redirect them to funding their own cost blowouts leaving CFA completely in the lurch. This is totally unacceptable.

VFBV reminds members that these arrangements were never discussed or proposed by the fire services themselves. In fact, the CFA and MFB Chief Officers of the time were not even privy to the discussions and negotiations who along with volunteers - were left completely in the dark.

A 2017 Parliamentary Inquiry into the arrangements recommended the legislation not proceed and be withdrawn. The inquiry uncovered that the secondment arrangements along with other reforms were cooked up by a small group working in secret within the Department of Premier and Cabinet under Premier Daniel Andrews and the then Deputy Premier and Emergency Services Minister James Merlino following the resignation of MP Jane Garret.

In VFBV's view, the Chief Officer's and Commissioner's are there to run emergency services that protect the people of Victoria. They have to make hard decisions, and put the safety of Victorians first and foremost in their minds. For a government to tie the hands of these officers behind their backs represents a complete dereliction of duty and a failure to govern for all.

The monitor documents the long-standing systemic issue of the operation of the "consult and agree" arrangements within FRV that act as a significant barrier to progressing actions jointly led by CFA and FRV. He reports on the significant delays and the result of no clear pathways for resolution.

It is VFBV's view that the blame for these arrangements lies squarely with the Victorian Government for agreeing to them in the first place. These arrangements are unprecedented, and no other Australian State or Territory government have ever transferred control of an emergency service to a third party.

It is a complete travesty for a government to shirk its responsibilities to the people of Victoria by implementing completely unworkable arrangements that have been proven to be intractable and unworkable for decades. Judge Gordon Lewis first reported on these problems back in 2008, a whole 6 years before the Andrew's Government was even elected, warning them of how these processes can be abused and lead to the complete deterioration and paralysis of decision making. Findings the independent monitor has echoed today.

VFBV is calling on the Premier to intercede and commit to fixing these issues once and for all.

Both Premier Allan and Minister Symes inherited these ridiculous arrangements and have diligently done their level best to make them work. But it is now time for this chapter to be called to an end, and we respectfully request an immediate commitment to fixing it. The government must restore the CFA Chief Officer's control of his operational workforce.

In addition, we call on the Victorian Government to implement immediate transparency measures that will force the public reporting of the weekly vacancies from here on in, and immediately commit to directing any weekly FRV budget savings from the unfilled positions to be diverted back to CFA's truck funding in order to prioritise the replacement of CFA's 30+ year fire trucks.

CFA must be fully funded and supported as we head into this year's Fire Season. CFA volunteers and the Victorian public deserve no less.



**About VFBV:** VFBV is established under the Country Fire Authority Act and is the peak body for CFA Volunteers in Victoria. VFBV works tirelessly to represent, advocate and support CFA volunteers to the CFA Board and management, governments, ministers, members of parliament, councils, instrumentalities, business and the public. Our vision is for ***Strong Volunteerism, Embraced to Build Community Resilience for a Safer Victoria.***

**Media:** Quotes may be attributed to VFBV CEO, Adam Barnett on behalf of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.