

VFBV QUARTERLY SUPPLEMENT



June 2024

Welcome to the June edition of the quarterly VFBV feature supplement. The supplement includes relevant news, updates and information on current issues being pursued by VFBV on behalf of members.

Adam Barnett
CEO, Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria.

Additional Resources and Updates Available Electronically

National Volunteer Week (20 – 26 May 2024)	https://tinyurl.com/vfbv-supp44
VFBV VESEP Grants Help Pack	https://tinyurl.com/vfbv-vesep
Open for Consultation Dashboard	https://tinyurl.com/vfbvDashboard
CFA ‘Give us a hand’ Recruiting Toolkit	https://tinyurl.com/vfbv-supp43

VFBV Quarterly Supplement Enclosures

This month’s enclosures include:	Action Required:
1. VFBV Board – Invitation to apply	Please table at your next meeting & pin to noticeboard
2. Editorial: Everyone can help someone	Please table and note
3. Editorial: Chicken or Egg?	Please table and note
4. 2 Minute Briefings (Joint Committee’s)	Please table at your next meeting & pin to noticeboard
5. SOP Consultation	Please table at your next meeting & pin to noticeboard



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Board Positions

INVITATION TO APPLY

CFA Volunteers are invited to apply for upcoming Board positions.

Vacancies for four board members will arise when the terms of four VFBV Board members expire on 1st October 2024. Of the four members whose terms are expiring, two are eligible for re-appointment.

Terms on the VFBV Board are for two years, and these are honorary positions with no honorarium paid.

The role of the VFBV Board is to manage policy determination, performance and the governance of the Association and working with State Council and our District Council network to engage and consult with volunteers.

The VFBV Board typically meets six times a year and usually on a Friday. Travel reimbursement is provided.

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

Prior experience on a not-for-profit board is not required but is highly regarded, as to is background or experience in volunteer advocacy. Applicants must be a current CFA volunteer.

Closing date for written applications is Monday 2nd September 2024.

Scan the QR code or visit
<https://www.vfbv.com.au> for more information.





Everyone can help someone

By Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

Published: 'Fire Wise' May 2024 and adapted for VFBV Quarterly Supplement

Later this month we will celebrate National Volunteer Week, which this year runs between the 20th–26th May 2024.

This year's theme is 'Something for Everyone' which fits emergency service volunteering quite nicely considering the myriad of roles available within CFA. The key message for this year's theme is about emphasising that there's a place for everyone in the world of volunteering.

And while my go to Ronald Reagan quote is usually his tongue in cheek wise crack: "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the government and I'm here to help", I will pivot to the more subject appropriate quote of "We can't help everyone, but everyone can help someone."

As you would expect, I spend a lot of my time talking about all things 'volunteer' to many people who may not volunteer themselves. This is often the case when dealing with government, the public service and even business groups. Sadly, it has also become more common when dealing with people within the emergency management sector itself, and even when meeting some new CFA staff.

While I don't think being an emergency service volunteer should be a mandatory pre-requisite, it is important for those that have influential roles or responsibilities within the sector to have a very good understanding of the volunteer ethos, its culture, and how volunteers should be encouraged, respected, supported and appreciated.

When people roll their eyes over what they deem to be a pretty inconsequential complaint by volunteers, I ask how many of their staff would show up for work if the agency sent out an email advising all staff they wouldn't be paid for the next two weeks due to budget cuts.

Think of all the things an organisation would need to do to encourage its staff to still want to come to work for free, and then think about what's required to run a fully volunteer organisation not for two weeks, but for 365 days of the year.

Of late, some think its is totally acceptable to mirror arrangements for employees and expect volunteers to be treated exactly the same. Follow this through its logical conclusion, and if roles were reversed and employees had to give up their salaries but still continue to come to work – imagine the chaos and low morale.

Why then is it so difficult to understand treating volunteers like employees will similarly result in chaos and low morale.

And while just being a volunteer does not automatically qualify you as understanding these things or being proficient in the principles of volunteer management, it certainly goes some way to provide valuable context and personal experiences that may enlighten further development down the track.

For those that do have a background in volunteering, more often than not it is often involvement in non-formal volunteering, which is kind of the- 'all care and no responsibility' flavour of volunteering. That's not to say that this type of volunteering is bad, and I certainly mean no disrespect - it just simply does not create a reference point for people who have not had experience in formal volunteering for an emergency service that also includes a significant amount of obligation, the real risk of hurting yourself, as well as the removal of the flexibility to volunteer where and when they would like.

Anyone with a pager knows that emergency incidents rarely occur when convenient, nor can they be planned or blocked out in one's diary when planning the week.

Its not until you start truly appreciating the sacrifices that CFA and other emergency service volunteers make that you can start to really appreciate and respect it.

Then there is the type of incidents emergency service volunteers frequently attend that can weigh on your soul. I often describe CFA volunteers as being with Victorians on what is often the worse day of their lives. Therefore, the mental toll is as real as the physical, and often requires significant cognitive energy to ensure these aftereffects are managed and treated.

All this is to say, that when people tell me they really respect volunteers, I often pause to consider the context with which the statement is made. The words are easy, but genuine respect can only be given if the role and duty that emergency service volunteers give is truly understood. Only then can one really value and respect something.

I reflect on the occasions when someone has been accused of disrespecting CFA volunteers, and this is often followed by an exclamation that no this isn't so - they love volunteers and really admire what they do.



It then takes patience and deliberate effort to walk them through the logic of an ignorant though well-meaning sentiment, versus an informed knowledge of and appreciation of how volunteers differ from a paid workforce. Again, these sentiments are often not made maliciously, but the effect is none the less often the same.

In this vein, I wish to use this year's Volunteer Week to continue to contribute towards a better understanding of the value that emergency service volunteers bring to Victoria.

We know from the work we did with Lateral Economics a few years back, that Victoria's emergency service volunteers generate more than \$2.5 billion dollars of value to Victoria each and every year. Of that, \$1.4 billion is what we call emergency management value per year. This is defined as the contribution of volunteers to the direct outcomes achieved by emergency services before, during and after emergencies. This includes response, but also considers prevention/mitigation, preparedness, as well as recovery.

It should be pointed out this is not the replacement value and only represents a very conservative partial cost approach to quantify the value. That is value and saved money that gets diverted to schools, hospitals and other essential programs.

The more misunderstood component of the \$2.5 billion is the \$900 million that is generated every year that emergency service volunteers provide in community strengthening value. This refers to the broader and sometimes indirect ways in which emergency service volunteering helps to strengthen communities. In other words - visible, active, positive emergency volunteerism in a community can make a difference to society as a whole. Concepts fire service outcome measurements do not even pretend to contemplate.

Rather than paraphrase, I'll reproduce the observations of Nicholas Gruen the CEO from Lateral Economics after studying Victoria's emergency service volunteers. Nicholas is a widely published and respected Australian economist, visiting professor at King's College London's Policy Institute, and is the former chair of the Australian Centre for Social Innovation.

"Thinkers and philosophers have deliberated through the eons over the question of which is more important—the individual or society? The discipline of economics is built on 'methodological individualism' in which the wellbeing and functioning of groups is seen as no more than the sum of their individual constituents. Nevertheless economics' 'founding father', Adam Smith, had a different view, building his economics around a view of humanity set out in his first book – The Theory of Moral Sentiments in which individuals became individuals as we know them through the process of being socialised into the values of their family and, beyond that, their community."

"It is not necessary to decide the question definitively for our purposes. What we can say is that certain outcomes of the 3Vs [Volunteers, Volunteering & Volunteerism] are far more concrete than others. The value of saving a house from being engulfed in a bushfire is clear to all conceptually, and, at least in principle, it is easy to measure its economic value."

"This is far less true of the value individuals get from volunteering and even less true of the value communities gain from individuals within them volunteering. In this regard those close to volunteering—volunteers themselves and many who help organise them—are anxious that the value creation that is easiest to measure not crowd out that which is no less real for being difficult to measure."

So during this year's Volunteer Week while I acknowledge the incredible work our members do each and every day in protecting their communities from fire and other emergencies, I would also like to especially thank you for the community building, social capital and cohesion you each contribute to, that makes up a large part of the public value generated by your efforts.

'Public value' is the philosophy of performance measurement used to evaluate the value produced normally but not exclusively by public bodies and that is 'consumed' collectively by the citizenry rather than individually by clients or customers.

When you drill down into the four main domains that are often used to measure public value, it is clear the value proposition that CFA generates for Victoria. Public value can be measured by the outcomes achieved; the extent to which the organisation and activities are trusted and perceived to be legitimate; the extent to which the services delivered are high quality and match the need; and finally the extent to which an organisation is achieving maximal benefits with minimal resources. When you compare the public value of some current government priorities using these measurements, the disparity is clear.

With that in mind, we will be closely monitoring the Victorian budget due early this month. CFA volunteers will have every right to judge the tangible level of respect that the Victorian Government really has for its emergency service volunteers by way of its investment and resourcing (or lack thereof) of these essential emergency services.

If CFA and volunteer emergency services are truly judged by their public value and not by other measures such as political convenience, or industrial relations alignment, then CFA volunteers and the millions of Victorians that rely on their services will have nothing to worry about.

And while I fear this may not be the case, please take this moment to celebrate the incredible work that you do and the lives that you change for the better - each and every day.



CHICKEN OR EGG?

By Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

Published: 'Fire Wise' April 2024 and adapted for VFBV Quarterly Supplement

Which came first – the chicken or the egg? Before you get too uptight, no - I'm not about to prattle on about this causality dilemma considered by many ancient philosophers exploring things like infinite regress and origin paradox's. Religion has had a crack with origin stories, and scientists have their evolutionary biology explanations. From a science perspective, tempted as I may be, I won't even publish the spoiler, but I will say that perhaps the answer isn't as clear cut as you may think. For the inquisitive among you, I have short linked an Australian source – the Australian Academy of Science that provide their answer – (<https://tinyurl.com/vfbv-chicken>)

But I digress. My main point is around the difficulty posed by situations where it is challenging to determine between alleged causes and effects. One of the most common discussion points that I frequently hear among brigades is the age-old recruitment and retention riddle. Again, people often approach this as a binary decision between does CFA have a recruitment or a retention problem? One or the other.

If we look at these separately, lets start with recruitment. While "volunteering" is generally thought to be in decline in Australia, these often-simplistic measurements often hide what's really going on in the detail. For example, recent longitudinal studies often don't separate out the COVID period and lockdowns that made many volunteering opportunities impossible and wiped out most of the "formal" volunteering sector during these periods.

These prophecies also ignore the fact that our form of volunteering – emergency service volunteering – accounts for just a tiny little fraction of total volunteers – so the potential pool of volunteers is still massive providing we look after them and meet their volunteering "needs".

The COVID period of disruption proved what many of us have said for a very long time. Protect emergency service volunteering – as once you lose something as valuable as our volunteering culture – it is very hard to get it back. And while arguably CFA volunteers were able to participate in some activities during the COVID years – many discovered just how pervasive their volunteering had become over other facets of their lives. It's not unusual for this to be a bit of a light bulb moment for some who now desire a more balanced work/life balance. But there is also some positive in this.

This reckoning has occurred across the entire population, not just among CFA and other emergency service volunteers -

and it has changed the way people want to volunteer, and what they want to get out of their volunteer experience.

The most common motivation popping out of research is many people are looking for opportunities to make a difference. They want to help people; they want to make a difference; and they want to do things that have social impact. And with more limited time on their hands with dual income families and cost of living pressures etc. people want their volunteering time to be not only impactful but efficient.

On the one hand – CFA provides a wonderful opportunity for people who want to make a difference. We literally change lives each and every day. By our very being – we literally respond to peoples' calls for help and are often with them on the worst days of their lives. There are few vocations that are not as impactful nor rewarding as CFA.

But how do we fair on the "efficient" part of that equation. Being a CFA volunteer is not exactly time efficient. Factor in the lengthy application process, onboarding, minimum training, mandatory skills maintenance and a lot of hurry up and wait, and we don't tick all that many boxes.

The good news for us is most people understand that if they want to be involved in a role as hazardous and impactful as that of a CFA volunteer, there is a certain amount of "overhead" that comes with that. CFA remains a very attractive organisation of choice for the first-time volunteer. This is evidenced by the high number of expressions of interest that flow in each and every year. After large summer campaigns, literally thousands of EOIs flow in from well intentioned people wanting to pitch in and give us a hand. These aren't evenly distributed, and the more remote brigades frequently miss out.

I only half-jokingly opined to a CFA executive recently that given all the hoops we place in front of an aspiring CFA volunteer just to get into the organisation – we really should award them a medal on day one just to acknowledge their persistence and tenacity in actually getting through it all.

This is evidenced by the massive disparity between those that express an interest and those that actually join. While the numbers fluctuate, I estimate on average only about one-fifth to one-quarter of expressions of interest actually translate to a completed application. I have cautioned many a Minister about jumping up in Parliament to extoll the thousands of people signing up to join CFA during a campaign



fire. Usually timed to dodge criticism around falling vol numbers, this mirage of applicants quickly disappears when tracking the actual number of applications completing their enrolment process.

And can anyone really blame them? While the cynic in me thinks that the application process is a very good test for aspiring applicants, as really – if they are not willing to jump through some hoops to get into the organisation at the start of their career – God help them when they realise how many more hoops will remain for the rest of their involvement just to stay. Maybe its better they learn the lesson up front and set their expectations accordingly?

But when you think about it – that's a pretty lousy excuse for a system and model that seems to delight in testing the human limits for patience and tolerance. A recent review of a nine-page medical form gives me the impression that the only Victorian likely to be worthy of membership these days is off training for the Olympics. We've got to do better.

Which gets us to the retention side of the equation. I saw this dilemma on full display when I observed a recent news article in a regional newspaper appealing to members of the community to get involved. The stories pointed out the excessive red tape and bureaucracy, the journalist pointed out that due to inadequate government funding the fire truck was now 30 years old and CFA can't afford a new fire shed for them, even though the current one has no toilet. Quite correctly they pointed out how difficult it was to attract new members, especially more diverse members when people have to use the paddock or public toilet block up the hill just to go to the bathroom. The article then invited people to apply.

It's not the brigade's fault they are in this position. Here we have a crucial emergency service starved of funding that leaves these civic minded community champions out in a tin shed with aging equipment, and dare I say – an aging workforce. Is this not the embodiment of the ultimate disrespect that government has for its volunteer emergency services? Who thinks this would be attractive to today's youth?

This is the impossible position the government is putting brigades and CFA more generally into. How do we possibly attract new members when budgets are being slashed and burned? It's not exactly a great advert when we can't afford new trucks, or new stations and we are forced to continually ration out protective equipment and clothing to try and make it go around. While government MPs sweat about 15 year old FRV trucks yet ignore 34 year old trucks rusting away in CFA sheds, and where a paid firefighter gets an automatic alloca-

tion of multiple sets of PPC, uniforms, gloves and individual portable radios for every seat in the truck, volunteers are forced to make do with much less each and every time. Despite being ten orders of magnitude larger than the paid service, CFA receives just one third of its funding and all the cuts that go along with that, rationing every glove, boot, chainsaw and hose.

For example, the new radios recently announced are fantastic – but we can't even afford to pop a portable radio in the truck for every seat in the cabin like our sister service does. So again, CFA is forced to make do and ration them out under fancy sounding terms like "risk assessment" and "operational justification" that if we're lucky will allocate three portables for every five seater truck, which given the incident controller often requires two – paints the picture of what volunteers have to put up with on the fireground.

And while CFA often gets blamed for these type of policy positions – what else can it do with such systemic under funding? And for those in any doubt, I will continue dropping these little budget facts in every newsletter for every week that cuts continue to be made to CFA, in the hope you will continue to raise it with your local member of parliament and keep raising it until CFA's budget is restored.

So when people ask me if we have a recruitment problem or a retention one, I go back to my analogy of the chicken or the egg. While it may sound trivial – there is a complex story in each. I think the recruitment problems are easier to solve. This explains why recruitment is often the first thing under siege governments usually latch onto. They are quick and results are fast. But just adding more meat to the sausage machine is not the answer if the sausage machine is broken. We have to fix the sausage machine first.

At time of writing, thousands of CFA volunteers are preparing to fundraise for the Royal Children's Hospital. Our members will selflessly rattle tins, give up a long weekend and stand on intersections to raise millions of dollars for some of Victoria's most vulnerable children. They will then return to raising funds for their own community's fire station, trucks and gear. They will do so while protecting their communities and responding to all manner of emergencies that will arise over the Easter long weekend, and beyond - just like every other day of the year. They will do so proudly, and humbly.

This is the epitome of a CFA volunteer. Our reason for being. Just wanting to help others. It shouldn't have to be this hard. Victorians rely on us, and our fight for fairer funding isn't for us – it's for them.



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2 Minute Briefings June 2024

The **2 Minute Briefings** are a quick snapshot of the priority issues and actions from recent Joint Committee discussions between CFA and VFBV.

They are intended to update members on key issues that have recently been discussed. Effort is made to include any related items that may have been progressed out of session or through other avenues that are related to each committee's subject matter. Priority is given to topics where recent progress has been made. Topics where no progress has been made or where there are differences of opinion are sometimes included to ensure members are aware of VFBV efforts in continuing to advocate for progress or outcomes.

Joint Committees are formal committees between CFA and VFBV made up of VFBV delegates appointed by VFBV State Council, and CFA management representatives appointed by CFA. They are a critical loop in our consultative structures. They endeavour to work collaboratively and cooperatively on issues but may also be required to escalate issues where resolution or common ground cannot be found - requiring executive attention.

Quick snapshot of the priority issues and actions from discussions between CFA and VFBV.

CHILDREN'S FIRE EDUCATION PROJECT

Work continues to redevelop Fire Safe Kids, CFA's school-based fire safety education program. The majority of Fire Safe Kids was developed in 2011 and has remained unchanged since its initial development. During this time demands on schools and brigades has increased and the methods of engaging with young people has changed considerably. The current version of Fire Safe Kids is designed for children aged 4-12 years which statistics show are an age group that is at higher risk of death or injury from both structural fire and bushfire. To address this risk the educational programs must be best practice for the age group and effective in discouraging behaviour that may contribute to a fire starting and encourage an understanding of how to best respond should a fire occur.

The project's steering committee has been meeting every two months to oversee the project. The committee is working through a wide range of issues such as ensuring the program is compatible with the current curriculum, the creation of training packages and child safety modules, program websites and branding. It is also proposed that 11 videos will be developed to help children understand topics such as what happens when dialling triple zero (000), the importance of smoke alarms, common hazards around the home and preparing for bushfire etc.

The new children's education program was un-named at the time of meeting. Delegates were advised there was to be a consultation process for naming the program to be developed. However, we have recently learned the decision has been made to call the new program Fire Wise Kids. Committee delegates will seek to understand what consultative process was undertaken to ensure opportunities for members to be involved is respected and maintained in future decisions.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PATHWAYS

Readers will remember that last year we reported on training pathways being developed for delivery of Community Engagement. These pathways are to enable members to understand what skill, learning and training is required for them to deliver various community engagement programs as well as how to advance their training into other areas. Community Engagement pathways are currently being developed for FEM technician, Communicator, Presenter, Facilitator and an IMT pathway for community engagement.

The draft pathways can now be viewed by logging onto Members Online and clicking, Brigades/Operations -> Training -> Training Pathways -> Community Engagement. Members are encouraged to discuss the pathways and any suggestions for improvement with members of the Committee. Your local delegate can be found by contacting VFBV Support Officer Colin Booth at c.booth@vfbv.com.au

E-learning packages and training modules will be uploaded as they become available.

SMOKE ALARM INSTALLATION PROGRAM

The Smoke Alarm Installation Program is set to continue for another year. In the 2022-23 Financial year, brigade Community Safety co-ordinators installed 2590 smoke alarms into 1059 households. These smoke alarms were installed free of charge by CFA members to people deemed vulnerable due to not being able to obtain, install or maintain smoke alarms themselves.

Recently CFA announced that in partnership with RACV, funding has been obtained for a further 500 homes. As well as the installation of free smoke alarms, the program also provides opportunities for brigades to discuss other aspects of home fire safety with residents such as fire prevention, escape plans and provides details on how to check and maintain smoke alarms once installed. In some regions the program has been delivered in partnership with other community organisations such as the Bush Nursing Centre. Brigades interested in participating can speak with their Regional/District CFA Community Education Coordinator.

2 Minute Briefing

Joint Equipment & Infrastructure

June 2024

Quick snapshot of the priority issues and actions from discussions between CFA and VFBV.

WORKWEAR ORDERING

Members have continued to discuss the availability of workwear for new members that have joined since the initial workwear project ended. It was acknowledged by CFA that the Project had an initial allocation which has now been exhausted, and work needs to be done on a new member and replacement workwear policy including how workwear could be funded and managed. While welcoming the ability to order workwear, concern was raised by delegates that under the current user pay proposal only wealthier brigades that could afford to do this for new members would take on the cost but brigades that are unable to bear the cost would be left to wait until an ongoing solution had been found. This then risks the costs being pushed onto volunteers personally. Delegates have called for clear communication that this is being worked through, as some brigades may place bulk orders if the ordering system is rolled out and communications on intent aren't clear. Delegates queried how additional workwear could be purchased if stock was allocated when the project finished. CFA advised that after the project closure, an assessment was made, and additional stock was procured to hopefully fill this. Delegates also queried the opening hours of the State Logistics Centre for volunteers for fitment or to collect items, as its current opening hours are very restricted and not at all volunteer friendly. CFA has acknowledged that the current operating hours are not member-focused and that it was an issue that CFA was seeking to address.

QUALITY ASSURANCE OF NEW STATIONS AND TRUCKS

VFBV delegates and members have reported an increasing number of faults with new station and appliance builds over the past 18 months. Consequently, the delegates raised the issue with the E&I committee. CFA has noted that the Quality Assurance process is a continuous learning process, and CFA is constantly looking for ways to improve it. Land & Building Services is still navigating the relationship with the Community Safety Building Authority (CSBA) as the government partner in new station builds, which has its own Quality Assurance overlay. VFBV encourages members and brigades to report all issues and faults they have discovered to the relevant department as CFA remains the contact for brigades.

Some questions raised by delegates on the Quality Assurance of new build appliances were answered, such as the process of reporting and tracking defects and faults, the end-user testing of new appliances, and the extent to which volunteers are involved in the testing of new appliances or involved in the Quality Assurance process. Currently, CFA is refining its internal process to capture data on when vehicles are at the Workshops and the DMOs are performing repairs of warranty or contract items, or whether they are returned to the manufacturer for warranty issues. This is intended to enable better reporting and allow CFA to understand the size and scope of defects or faults and whether they are systematic or one-off issues.

FCV FUNDING

Delegates and interested parties continue to raise the issue of the current CFA maintenance funding model for Group FCVs across the state. This has been a long and drawn-out process to source additional funding to cover the gap currently worn by Groups. Research has identified that Group funded FCVs have not had an increase in funding for many years with the allocation falling well below annual CPI increases. Delegates have argued that due to groups not having the same ability to raise funds as brigades currently so there is a large funding shortfall. Some Groups are supported by their Districts by an outdated process, which wouldn't cover the cost of servicing and was found to be approximately a \$22k shortfall across the state for the 96 group vehicles which is a substantially higher estimate than previously thought.

The servicing cost break down is for the standard Ford Ranger delivery provided by CFA but the additional costs on top of the finalised figure for Toyota Prados or other special-order vehicles will have to be met by Groups. If DMOs were to undertake this work they would require additional resources as there are currently 361 FCVs across the state as well as the 8 red-plated CFA FCV funded through fleet budget, 257 funded by brigades, 96 funded by groups.

CFA has been aware of the growing gap in funding and is working with finance with an aim to fund the difference.

Quick snapshot of the priority issues and actions from discussions between CFA and VFBV.

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT HUB UPDATES CONTINUE

Further improvements to the Volunteer Recruitment Hub (VRH) were implemented in March but volunteer feedback continues to seek further performance improvements. Improved Brigade Secretary/Captain visibility and email advice has seen an improvement in application movement. CFA has reported that there have been increased numbers of people putting in an EOI however there are only 36% who make it to the Brigade member status. The progression past the current 'blockers' e.g. WWCC (now able to progress to 'Fit for Work' without waiting for the WWCC number) has improved the process but members transferring between Brigades remain problematic with further investigation at State, District, and Brigade level required.

Further enhancements will follow as VRH v4.2 is rolling out in the middle of 2024. There are resources available for members on the members online portal including information for families, VRH Toolkit and a dashboard to help you. Captains/Secretaries and recruitment officers are requested to monitor these upgrades and any future changes and let CFA know if the system is improving by contacting the VRH team at volrecruithub@cfa.vic.gov.au

CALLS FOR MORE LEADERSHIP TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Delegates continue to raise concerns on the general lack of leadership training available within CFA. Recent progress of the Volunteer Leadership Development Project that is funded through the CFA Public Fund, saw CFA recently call for members who are interested in applying for a Certificate IV in Leadership and Management, similar to the inter-agency program that VFBV used to run prior to EMV cutting funding for that program back in 2018. While CFA's latest program only made 20 positions available, it received more than 150 high quality applications from volunteers. VFBV believes this is a clear indication that volunteers from across the state are screaming out for leadership training.

Some online resources have been developed and can be accessed via Members Online as a part of the CFA People Capability Framework and the CFA Leadership library is available for members who wish to learn more or improve their knowledge base. VFBV is continuing to call for CFA to provide further leadership opportunities in a timely manner for members to participate in, including ensuring CFA training pathways incorporate what development opportunities are available.

VICTORIAN CONTAINER DEPOSIT SCHEME UPDATE

Following our update back in December '23 on this topic, we are pleased to advise that CFA has now registered to be a donation partner with the CDS to receive donations. However, donations received through this 'generic' CFA are lodged to the CFA Public Fund and are not attributed to the local brigade. These funds will be used for Statewide initiatives.

If brigades wish to benefit from the scheme, they must register individually with the relevant Zone Operator (East, West or North). In your application, CFA advise you must nominate for the funds to be deposited into the CFA & Brigades Donations Fund bank account to meet the registered donation partner rules. Your CDC allocated donation partner ID will then enable the trust to link deposits to your individual brigade. Search for 'CDS' on CFA members online for the FAQ.

CREDIT/DEBIT CARD AND TAP AND GO DONATIONS

Brigades have been waiting patiently for CFA to finalise the policy on CFA brigades receiving donations through tap and go services. Delegates continue to seek an update from CFA Financial Services on the results of the trial of mobile terminals and the two differing contract services that were offered during the pilot. Delegates continue to follow this up with CFA with brigades awaiting the results of this long-awaited trail so they can plan for their next event with the knowledge they are operating within the CFA guidelines.

Quick snapshot of the priority issues and actions from discussions between CFA and VFBV.

MOBILE DATA CAPABILITY PROJECT

Members have been highlighting the need for consultation on the integration of changes to the CAD environment. CFA gave the Committee members an update on this project with particular focus on the barriers that members see in its progression. CFA is lobbying Triple Zero Victoria, EMV and the Minister to ensure that the CAD Integration for CFA is provided as part of the Next Generation CAD upgrade. The Next Generation CAD upgrade is expected to be completed within the next 2 years. The Committee members reinforced that this work is essential for the success of the mobile data project. The Project Team is currently going through the process of how a Brigade may be able to purchase the Tablets through ICT with restrictions applied. These restrictions include all purchases, installation and ongoing (including replacement) costs will be the responsibility of the Brigade. Tablets, and dock will be a standard configuration and type and the cost of the SIM is likely to be at the brigade's expense. CFA security requirements and software updates will be managed via CFA's Enterprise Mobility Management (EMM) tool SOTI. Brigades will be notified as to the final requirements and how to access this via communications from CFA at a later date. Members have highlighted that while it is pleasing to see some progress it is also disappointing that brigades will yet again be expected to fund vital front line equipment. VFBV is working with CFA to explore alternate funding opportunities, but again calls out the appalling state of CFA's budget which sees volunteers having to fundraise to buy essential tools and equipment.

RADIO REPLACEMENT PROJECT UPDATE

The Committee was informed by CFA that the radio replacement rollout is commencing with the first of the radios to be rolled out in District 14 during May. It is expected that the rollout will take approximately 15 months for all Districts to receive the new radios. Brigades will be given the portables first with the intent that any good batteries from the old radios can be recycled onto other Brigades ensuring the Tait portables can continue to work prior to a Brigade receiving the Motorola set. The standard portable radio will be the APX800HXE that has the same intrinsic Safety level as the current TAIT portables.

FIRS ENTRY FOR GROUP ACTIVITIES

Delegates have noted that operational activity performed by members of a Group are difficult to capture in the Fire Incident Reporting System (FIRS). The request from Committee members that any activity performed by members of a Group and not captured by Brigade reporting can be added to FIRS online by either being added as a member of a Group vehicle being responded, added in the Responded to Station section or entered in the comments section. Members have requested that this be made easier so that the true level of activity is recorded and the process be communicated to Groups and Brigades.

TELEPHONE SYSTEM UPDATE

Members have reported to the committee that the rollout of the IP Telephony system into stations has not been without issues. Generally the problems are being rectified as they happen however it has highlighted the absence of a process for members to activate should they encounter problems or faults. Some of the issues include lack of information being passed onto Brigade members from Captains, misunderstanding between sub-contractors, contractors and the Project Team and the removal of old handsets. However, on a positive side, additional handsets when requested by a brigade above those initially indicated by the Districts have generally been agreed to. Members are reminded that if they are experiencing problems with this changeover please contact CFA District in the first instance.

Quick snapshot of the priority issues and actions from discussions between CFA and VFBV.

FIRE SPOTTING GOES DIGITAL

In 2023 delegates received an update on the state of the fire towers across Victoria. FFMVic is currently responsible for the operation of 62 fire towers across the state and CFA has 3 towers. While towers play a very important role, there has recently been trials of remote cameras, with only one camera attached to a current fire tower and the remaining 6 being attached to telecommunication towers. The Cameras provide a 360 degree view of the surrounding area and are AI enhanced to spot smoke and fire 24 hours a day with a range of over 20km. Each site has remote access allowing an operator to digitally zoom into an area where a fire is suspected to have started. If a fire is spotted by the operator an alert is sent to the Dedicated Duty Officer (DDO) who can action further if required. These 'stations' as they are named can be very useful when spotting lightning strikes and storm events as they can be monitored 24/7. If a strike is detected that starts a potential fire the operator then alerts 000 for a brigade to respond or an aircraft to be despatched on days where PDD is operating. Members can currently only access the digital images in a limited capacity, with further work continuing to assess the programs usefulness.

PPE & C WORKING PARTY FORMED

It has been some time since CFA abolished its Personal Protective Equipment and Clothing (PPE&C) committee and members have been advocating for the need for a constructive volunteer forum for volunteers to raise specific PPE&C issues. During last year's reform to our Joint Committee structure, PPC/E now sits within the Joint Operational Capability Committee and the Chair has now agreed for the working party to be formed. The working party will meet out of session and provide recommendations back to the Joint Committee for endorsement. VFBV is looking forward to announcing some of the exciting new projects that will begin to see traction shortly. In the past the PPE&C committee was involved in selection and trials of the cold weather jackets, new generation wildfire gear and F15 Structural helmets to name just a few. CFA has advised there will be trials running in 2024 for a new structural firefighting boot, structural flash hood and structural glove to name just a few. VFBV will continue to update members on the progress of items as they come before the committee for discussion.

IMT WORKSHOP

VFBV delegates, Group Officers and experienced volunteers from many brigades have been commenting over some time on the lack of real training towards developing members to fill IMT roles when incidents cross into the Level 2 and Level 3 space. Often the higher-level roles are being filled by the same people time after time and there has been no increase in capability since fire service reform, with numbers actually declining in some areas.

In some positive discussions some groups are allocating an IMT mentor role to an experienced member with the intent on helping less experienced or new interested members to understand and develop in the roles within an IMT. Before the start of the 2023-24 fire season the Chief Officer published a 'Statement of Intent' to the Districts for IMTs with 4 key performance measures –

1. Increase the number of volunteers in development for IMT level 3 roles.
2. Increase the number of volunteers as level 3 Operations officers and planning Officers
3. Develop the ability for District Level 2 ICCs to be stand alone for up to 48 hrs after an incident starts
4. Increase the capability for level 2 ICC across all districts using local volunteer members.

It was reported by members who currently volunteer at the level 2 and level 3 incidents that even with recent fire and storm events the organisation has struggled to fill all the roles required, with many members having to undertake more than one role for extended periods of time in all parts of the state. VFBV commends the CO's 'Statement of intent' which is focused on improving the IMT capacity and capability in every district so that there is a high level of 'self-sufficiency'. The next step is to ensure training opportunities are made available, which delegates will continue to monitor.

Quick snapshot of the priority issues and actions from discussions between CFA and VFBV.

DOCTRINE REVIEW CONTINUES

Delegates were pleased to hear that the review of CFA's (outdated) doctrine will continue for 2024, however the pace at which this change is occurring is of concern to delegates. While no-one is arguing that some of CFA's doctrine is grossly outdated with some SOPs not having been reviewed since 2003, there is great concern that some of the timelines for members to reply to feedback requests are very short and inadequate for effective consultation. While VFBV usually requests a minimum of 3-months for doctrine reviews, multiple requests and more than a half dozen SOPs being reviewed in each tranche is leaving very little time for detailed discussions on each item. Given CFA has waited more than 13 years to update some of its doctrine, delegates have stressed the importance of genuine consultation and not rushing to do it all at once. Members are very keen to get involved in the doctrine feedback space but question the quality of feedback when only given a short time to reply to some very complex subjects, especially multiple items at once. Members are also balancing work commitments, family time and CFA duties. VFBV will continue to try to amend time frames to best fit volunteer's busy lives however there will be some instances where this may not be possible. The Chief Officer has to date been very understanding of our requests for more time. For members who do find time to give feedback VFBV thanks you and will work to ensure all feedback is considered adequately. Please don't wait until after a SOP is finalised to provide feedback. By then it's too late.

FIRE DISTRICT REVIEW PANEL

CFA has completed its submission to the Fire District Review Panel, with feedback submitted to the panel by the Chief Officer. All 13 brigades were involved in their own brigade chapter with the submission published and available through the Members Online portal. Impacted brigades will also have an opportunity to contribute to an After-Action-Review process to discuss the lessons learned out of the review process. Delegates noted that keeping the affected brigades updated to the progress of the review will be a very important part of the process so that any actions can be responded to quickly and effectively and we continue to learn how to develop responses and demands in the future.

POST INCIDENT AARS

With the close of this year's fire danger period, and following busy fire activity across the Western Districts in particular, members continue to ask how they can contribute to After Action Reviews. Following last quarter's update on post incident AARs, CFA has now advised the Committee it is working on introducing an Observation Collection Tool which will allow members to contribute in real time. We are told the tool will be available for all volunteers to contribute and will allow all members to see the results in an expedited process. The Committee will monitor and update on progress.

PUMPING PITS

Brigades with pumping pits will have received a letter from CFA at the end of December last year outlining the organisation's decision to discontinue the use of pumping pits based on water quality issues. Members will remember that Safety Alert 35 was issued in 2015 suspending the use of pumping pits. While VFBV pushed CFA to establish a pumping pit remediation program, Brigades have been informed that after an extensive testing regime across many brigades it was impossible to guarantee the water quality would be unaffected by contaminants over a period of time. The decision to discontinue the use of pumping pits is disappointing as VFBV's preference was for a regular testing and maintenance program to be implemented so that brigades would still have access to safe water and pits for training purposes, and our belief that collar tanks introduce manual handling issues when used regularly for training, as well as unknown water quality when using natural bodies of water as an alternate. CFA is investigating the distribution of a 2000 litre collar tank for each of the 94 brigades as a replacement of the now discontinued pumping pits. If brigades have a pumping pit and were unaware of the closure or did not receive notification or are unhappy with the decision, we urge Brigades to raise their concerns with CFA and notify VFBV of your action so we can monitor.

Quick snapshot of the priority issues and actions from discussions between CFA and VFBV.

CFA COMPLAINTS PROCESS KPMG AUDIT

At the end of 2023 CFA contracted KPMG to undertake an internal audit of the CFA Complaints process, including oversight of Issues Management Complaints, Case Management, policies/procedures, systems including data integrity and reporting. The findings shared with the committee were not very favourable. These findings included, among other things, a lack of clear process for prioritising complaints, lack of a standard approach for escalation of complaints, no documented process for contact frequency with complainants and inconsistent issue of the satisfaction survey for closed matters. The audit also identified concerns with the lack of clear assessment criteria for determining if external investigators should be appointed and a lack of KPIs for external investigators i.e. clear timeframes and quality standards of investigations and subsequent reports. CFA Record keeping for informal complaint matters was also identified by KPMG as a concern, as was data accuracy. Sadly, these findings come as little surprise to VFBV delegates, who have raised these and other concerns with the committee for some time now, reflecting feedback they have received from disgruntled and distressed volunteers, experiencing the complaints process. VFBV now see those volunteers and delegates as vindicated, in their unwavering attempts to address and change what was a less than satisfactory complaints process. All is not doom and gloom though. The fact that CFA shared the audit findings with the committee, shows genuine transparency and a robust appetite to include volunteers in the discussion for change and improvement. CFA has requested VFBV, via a volunteer working group, meet with CFA, to work through the issues together, and find solutions to rebuild a fairer complaints process. This work will include the procurement and establishment of a panel of external investigators. VFBV will continue to report on changes made to build a better, fairer more robust complaints process.

HR BUSINESS PARTNER RESTRUCTURE

CFA has completed a restructure which will enable four (4) Issue Resolution Business Partners and a Child Safety Advisor to be dedicated to the matters of complaints. Their role will include early intervention and hopefully early resolution, whilst matters are minor and less complex. They will also be responsible for Case Management, which will include keeping complainants and respondents updated on the progress of their individual matters i.e. progress of external investigation and time frames etc. VFBV will monitor these changes and look to see if it results in the desired process improvements.

NEW COMPLAINT REPORTING PORTAL

CFA's Organisational Development Department is in the process of establishing a portal by which any volunteer at any time, can access the portal to report a complaint. Once a complaint is logged within the system a member of CFA's Complaints Department is alerted and can act immediately. It is hoped, this alternative pathway will eliminate those complaints, that were raised at a local level in the past, and not acted upon in a timely manner or at all, thus often causing a small informal matter to fester and develop into a larger more serious, formal complaint.

The committee has also discussed exploring language to eliminate the use of 'Formal' and 'Informal Complaints'. CFA is in the process of establishing a Tier System that will nominate a lower end, minor complaint at Tier One for example, and a more serious or more complex complaint at Tier Four. A VFBV working group will work with CFA to help develop and refine this Tier system and we will continue to keep you updated on progress.

SUSPENSION STAND DOWN

VFBV previously raised its concern with the use of 'stand downs' in complaint matters. CFA has now confirmed there is no provision within the Regulations for 'stand down' – the only provision is for a formal suspension, which requires certain procedures to be followed. VFBV understands the Chief Officer will be issuing an interim SOP (for volunteer consultation) which clarifies the suspension process, and the steps CFA is required to undertake. If any volunteer is currently "stood down" please contact VFBV and the Resolutions Team in People and Culture at resolution.support@cfa.vic.gov.au

Quick snapshot of the priority issues and actions from discussions between CFA and VFBV.

GFF TRAINING CHANGES

After consistent feedback from members across the state, CFA have now completed a review of the GFF program. As well as having direct input into this review, VFBV Delegates of the Joint Training Committee (JTC) have been closely monitoring CFA's progress to ensure that a diverse range of Brigades, Groups and Volunteer Instructors have been consulted for their views. Member feedback has ensured that improvements to the materials being delivered; fixing issues with and updating slides as well as re-shooting videos to better reflect modern equipment and practices has been completed. However, there is no substantive change to the actual duration or scope of content that is delivered in these materials. The review found that the material presented as part of the GFF program is generally appropriate for the needs of the vast majority of new firefighters. It is how this material is delivered that needed to be changed to make it easier for members to complete the course in the most efficient manner for them.

While it was always the intention that the existing GFF course would be flexible in its delivery methods, the structure of the course made it difficult to do and many Districts only made one model available to members. The updated course has now been structured such that it can be more easily delivered in a multitude of ways. Each of the theory modules can now be completed either face to face, online in the participants' own time or, a combination of both. The assessment for each module will be undertaken at the completion of the module, rather than the single multiple hour theory assessment in the current GFF program. As with the current program, there will be the equivalent to about 2 days of practical training and assessments that participants must complete. But, when and how these are completed during the program will be tailorable by the district, brigade and instructor to best meet the requirements of the participants.

Brigades and Groups should work with their District Training teams to structure the delivery of GFF courses that best suits the needs and availability of the cohort undertaking the course. Whether it be a course that is completely delivered face to face or a course where participants would prefer to complete all of their theory online and only have to be in attendance for a couple of days of practical work. There is an example of District 16 successfully delivering the full GFF program in 3 long days face to face. This has been specifically structured to suit small numbers of 4 or 5 participants who already have some practical experience with firefighting equipment and demonstrates the sort of flexibility that can be negotiated between Brigades/Groups and their District. CFA is planning to have the updated GFF Course released for delivery during the third quarter 2024. Districts should continue to deliver the current program until the new release.

BLUE HELMETS FOR INSTRUCTORS

VFBV has long been advocating for better management, utilisation and recognition of volunteer instructors. CFA appear to be now taking this on board and Delegates were pleased to be briefed that Volunteer Instructors will be issued with blue instructor helmets. Recognising this was recommended in the AFAC Peer Review into CFA Training, this step forward has been in discussion for considerable time and is an important recognition of the valuable contribution that volunteer trainers and assessors make to ensuring members receive the training they need.

The Committee has endorsed the following principles as the criteria for Instructors to be allocated a blue helmet:

- Must be a qualified Trainer and Assessor, holding a current Cert IV in Training and Assessing or the older quals.
- Must be endorsed to deliver courses in their District.
- Must have been actively delivering courses in the past 12 months.
- There must be a process where an Instructor can appeal a decision for a helmet not to be issued to them.

Issuance of instructor helmets will be managed through the Operational Doctrine and Training Department at CFA HQ. All volunteer instructors should have received an e-mail with a QR Code to link them to the application form. The QR code can also be found on Members Online by searching for "instructor helmets".

Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)

Consultation is underway on a large number of proposed changes CFA is seeking to make to Standard Operating Procedures.

New changes are being released each month, and members are requested to frequently visit our Consultation Dashboard to review any procedures currently under review.

Your feedback and comment helps set VFBV support or non-support for proposed changes, and heavily influences our feedback to CFA. We also regularly provide short surveys to assist you provide feedback on the proposed changes.

Visit www.vfbv.com.au to access the draft SOP's

