

VFBV QUARTERLY SUPPLEMENT



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	
Open for Consultation Dashboard	https://tinyurl.com/vfbvDashboard
CFA ‘Give us a hand’ Recruiting Toolkit	https://tinyurl.com/vfbv-supp43
Joint Committee Expression of Interest	https://tinyurl.com/vfbv-supp45
CFA Social Media Support	https://tinyurl.com/vfbv-supp46

VFBV Quarterly Supplement Enclosures	
This month’s enclosures include:	Action Required:
1. AGM Special Notice	Please table and note
2. Editorial: Sickening Decision	Please table and note
3. VFBV Volunteer Survey Summary Results	Please table at your next meeting and pin to your noticeboard
4. 2 Minute Briefings (Joint Committee’s)	Please table at your next meeting and pin to your noticeboard
www.vfbv.com.au	

SPECIAL NOTICE

Annual General Meeting



This year's Annual General Meeting (AGM) is to be held on the afternoon of Sunday 6th October 2024, following State Council. The AGM is scheduled for 3pm.

Delegates intending to attend this year's AGM are requested to register their details with the VFBV office by the 23rd September. Following registration, delegates will be advised of relevant details.

The office can be reached via (03) 9886 1141 or via email at vfbv@vfbv.com.au

The normal business of the AGM includes confirming minutes from the previous meeting; tabling of a report from the CEO with audited financial statements, welcoming of new board members and annual appointment/confirmation of our auditors.



SICKENING DECISION

By Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

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

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..."

And while the opening quote requires no introduction, Dickens' use of anaphora (repeated words) in his opening lines of *The Tale of Two Cities*, is a good backdrop to my description of our relationship with CFA as eternally optimistic...but *complicated* at times.

I spoke last month about the strength of VFBV's relationship with CFA being due to our commitment to working cooperatively together wherever we can, but disagreeing where we must.

And while VFBV works incredibly hard to have these disagreements behind closed doors, there comes a time when those efforts are unsuccessful and require us to engage more publicly. This is one of those times.

Recently, Supreme Court judge The Hon. Richards handed down her findings against the CFA who had terminated a volunteer firefighter's compensation for PTSD.

The volunteer joined CFA at the age of 19 and served as an active first responder for 24 years. His brigade was a busy structural brigade and was also an accredited road accident rescue brigade, where he attended countless incidents ranging from house fires, motor vehicle accidents, hazmat incidents and bushfires during his time with CFA.

Over time, he started to suffer from depression and anxiety and originally brushed it off to other life events. When things started to get worse, he sought treatment from his general practitioner and psychologist. He was then referred to a psychiatrist who, in 2018, diagnosed him to be suffering from major depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In the psychiatrist's view, the PTSD was directly related to his service with the CFA, and the repeated trauma he had been exposed to.

When he made a claim under CFA's volunteer compensations scheme, CFA arranged for him to be assessed by their own independent psychiatrist, who confirmed the original diagnosis of PTSD with delayed onset and

confirmed that his service to CFA as a volunteer firefighter was the significant contributing factor to his condition of PTSD.

Following this report, CFA accepted the claim, and commenced payments for ongoing reasonable medical expenses and weekly payments for replacement labour. Between 2019 and 2022 two more psychiatrists confirmed the diagnosis, with one of these appointed and instructed by CFA to perform another independent medical examination.

Then in 2023, CFA went to yet another psychiatrist and asked the volunteer to again submit to another examination. This time, CFA chose to seek the opinion of Associate Professor Doherty, who provided a controversial opinion after a single consultation that not only did the volunteer not suffer from PTSD, but that it was impossible because there was no such thing as 'delayed onset PTSD' and in his view PTSD cannot by definition occur where the traumatising of symptoms are not present within the first six months.

This was completely at odds with all the other psychiatrists, yet based on this single report, CFA then proceeded to write to the volunteer advising they "preferred A/Prof Doherty's opinion" over all others and advised they would be terminating his entitlements.

The volunteer responded to this proposal, and undertook yet another independent medical examination, who was now the fifth psychiatrist (sixth if you count the original psychologist) who confirmed the diagnosis of PTSD, and that it was caused by his CFA service. This psychiatrist rebuffed A/Prof Doherty's view and opined that most patients who end up with PTSD are not acutely unwell in the immediate aftermath, and that a gradual build up is typical.

Following receipt of this report and choosing not to engage with any of the five previous psychiatrists who had all diagnosed PTSD, CFA again wrote to the volunteer advising they still preferred A/Prof Doherty's opinion and terminated his compensation.

The volunteer argued in court that it was unreasonable for CFA to 'cherry pick' the medical evidence. CFA defi-

nied the suggestion that it had cherry-picked.

The Court, when examining this chain of events, was scathing of CFA, with the Judge determining:

"The CFA's decision to terminate [the volunteer's] entitlements to compensation was legally unreasonable. As the sole arbiter of the merits of [the volunteer's] claim, it changed its mind about his entitlement to compensation on the basis of a single medical opinion that was contrary to all of the opinions it had previously accepted. It did so without engaging with the reason why A/Prof Doherty held a different opinion, and without considering whether it should accept the premise of his opinion. The CFA's reasons for decision disclosed no intelligible foundation for preferring A/Prof Doherty's opinion and its underlying premise."

In response to CFA's defence and explanation the judge said in her summary:

"With respect, this explanation entirely missed the point of difference between A/Prof Doherty's and all the other experts. A/Prof Doherty's departure from the previous opinions was not due to a different or more thorough assessment of [the volunteer's] medical history and clinical records. It was because of his asserted premise that there is no such condition as delayed onset (or delayed expression) PTSD..."

Her Honour found that CFA's determination to terminate the volunteer's entitlement to compensation was legally unreasonable, and warned:

"Another dimension of the unreasonableness of the CFA's decision arises from the fact that the CFA administers the compensation scheme for the benefit of all volunteers, and to support the viability of the CFA as a volunteer fire service. It is a significant matter for the administration of the scheme for the CFA to deny liability for compensation for delayed onset PTSD, on a basis that may not reflect the general consensus of psychiatric opinion. If the CFA takes a consistent approach in other similar cases, its unquestioning acceptance of A/Prof Doherty's opinion that there is no diagnosable and recognised condition of delayed onset PTSD may have consequences for the ongoing capacity of the CFA to provide fire services in country Victoria."

Her Honour then made an order setting aside CFA's decision. My reaction to this sordid tale is likely very similar to many of yours. I was angry, disgusted and then ultimately left with a feeling of deep disappointment that we could find ourselves here in 2024. What governance failures have occurred that has allowed an organisation established by Parliament to support a volunteer emergency service, to stray so far away from what is a pretty basic responsibility to look after those of us who get injured?

Each volunteer who I have observed hearing this story, I have seen the blood drain from their faces as they shake their head as the full consequences become evident. In my view this is a CFA home goal, and this incident will send a shiver down the spine of every CFA volunteer, who will now have a question mark in their head as to if they were to suffer a similar fate, would they also be left unprotected and abandoned at their time of greatest need?

A service that relies on people to put themselves in harm's way in order to protect others cannot operate without confidence that it will look after any members who get hurt in the process. It pains me to say that CFA's behaviour in this instance was egregious.

The CFA volunteer compensation scheme was hard fought for by the volunteer associations and embedded into the Country Fire Authority Act to ensure volunteers would never receive any less protection than their paid counterparts who

are covered by WorkSafe. It was also intended to be designed specifically to cater to volunteers unique circumstances. It is therefore sacrosanct to VFBV, and any attack on volunteers' rights and protections must be met head on.

VFBV has demanded that CFA issue an apology to the volunteer, and immediately reinstate his compensation and support. We have also requested CFA undertake a review of CFA's volunteer compensation operating model and related processes to ensure current arrangements are adequate and meet our expectations. We must look at what decisions have been delegated to middle management, and what checks and balances are in place to safeguard against such bias creeping into decision making.

In an effort to ensure something like this can never happen again, VFBV is demanding the introduction of independent medical panels to deal with controversial or outlier medical views and other decisions.

We have also advised CFA that we intend on pursuing a review of the CFA Regulations, including exploring appeal mechanisms to ensure a volunteer does not have to go all the way to the Supreme Court just to overturn what is blatantly a miscarriage of justice. Members would recall we have previously called for a Volunteer Ombudsman.

No volunteer can have any doubt that their ability to provide for themselves and their families can ever be in question should they be hurt on the fireground.

This whole episode starts to sound remarkably like the fight we had to have to get fire services to recognise the link between firefighting and cancer. Proving PTSD is not like proving a broken arm or broken leg. The sectors' knowledge and understanding of PTSD is still evolving.

VFBV has renewed its call for presumptive legislation for PTSD. The Commonwealth, the ACT, NT, QLD and Tasmania have already added PTSD to their presumptive schemes for emergency service workers, and VFBV has been calling on the Victorian Government to do the same.

It saddens me to no end that a brave sick volunteer not only had to battle their illness contracted by their CFA service, but at the same time then had to fight the very same organisation just for a fair go. He deserved better, and so does each and every other CFA volunteer in the state. Our pursuit of presumptive rights does not let CFA off the hook.

As at writing; CFA is in the process of reinstating the volunteer's entitlements; have agreed to a review; and has provided in principle support for medical panels.

VFBV will not rest until these issues have been resolved to our satisfaction, and we call on all volunteers to support us in our pursuit of fair and reasonable arrangements that prioritise a volunteer's health and wellbeing above all else and ensure that our compensation arrangements not only meet the expectations of the membership, but sufficiently serve the legislations intent of providing an organisational arrangement designed to encourage, maintain and strengthen the capacity of volunteers to provide CFA services.

A genuine relationship that is honest requires transparency, and it is important to the broader membership that we make you aware of our efforts in trying to right the various wrongs that get reported to us from time to time, while also maintaining constructive relationships to best influence how these matters are resolved.

To this end, we will keep you updated of our progress, but fear not – we will remain frank and fearless and will not rest until these matters are resolved.

2023 VFBV Volunteer Survey Summary Results



VFBV QUARTERLY SUPPLEMENT EDITION

We are pleased to present the summary results of the VFBV Volunteer Survey conducted predominantly between October 2023 and February 2024 and is the 12th annual survey conducted since its launch back in 2012.

The annual VFBV Volunteer Welfare and Efficiency Survey is an initiative by VFBV, designed by us to help capture and communicate fundamental issues as volunteers see them. The survey connects grass root volunteers directly to decision makers and allows volunteers to influence funding, priorities and initiatives aimed at improving CFA.

Our annual survey is one of the many ways that VFBV gather evidence-based opinions from CFA volunteers on the matters important to them.

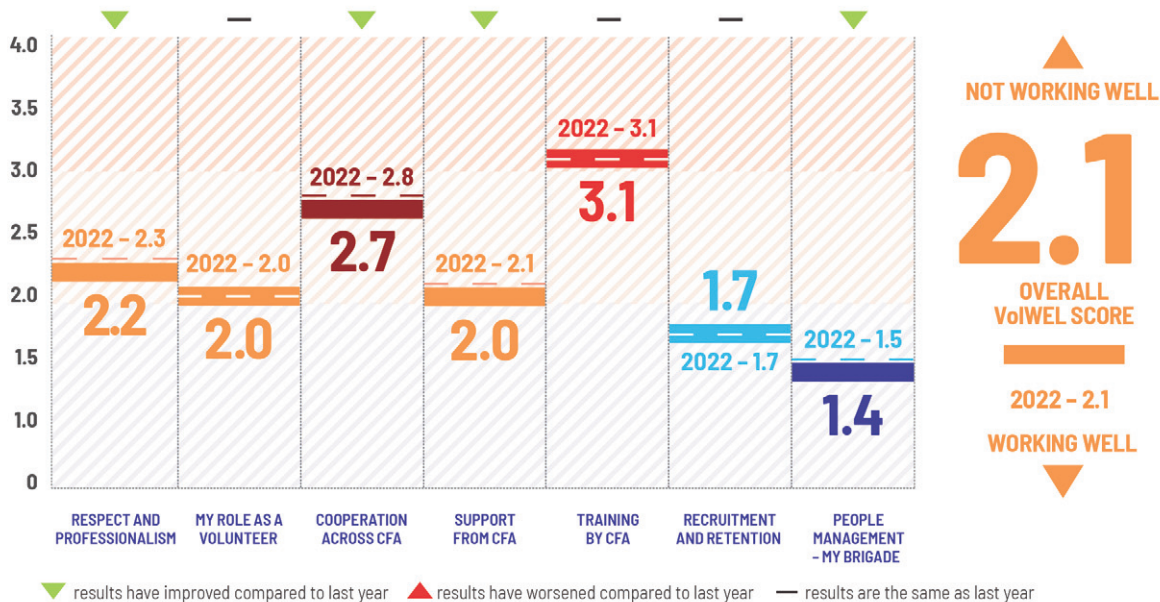
WHO RESPONDED?

WE LISTENED TO
2,185
CFA VOLUNTEERS

GENDER

20% 79%

VOLUNTEER WELFARE AND EFFICIENCY LEVEL (VoIWEL) - OVERALL



VOLUNTEER WELFARE & EFFICIENCY LEVEL (VOLWEL) DESCRIPTIONS

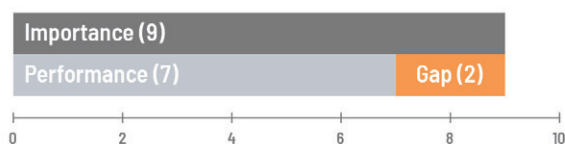
>3.0	Critical need for priority attention
2.5 - 2.9	Significant Gap – immediate attention required
2.0 - 2.4	Large Gap – remedial action to be taken
1.5 - 1.9	Mid-range Gap – need for improvement
1.0 - 1.4	Small Gap – potential for improvement
0 - 0.9	Meeting Expectations

HOW THE VOLWEL OUTCOME IS MEASURED

The survey measures CFA volunteer attitudes of the importance of each particular factor and their corresponding view of CFA's performance.

The gap between how closely Performance meets the expectation of Importance, is referred to as the Volunteer Welfare and Efficiency Level (VoIWEL) Outcome.

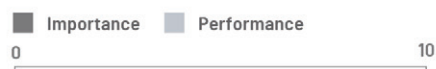
The VoIWEL outcome is a simple way to illustrate where things are working well or what needs attention.



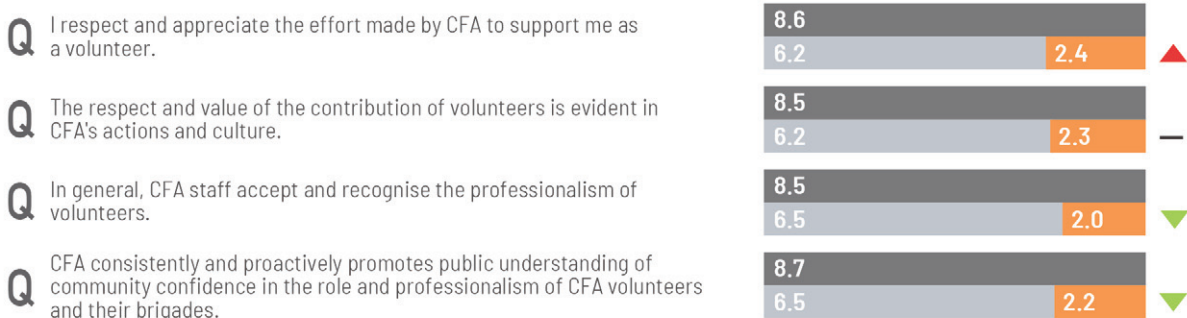
2023 VFBV Volunteer Survey Summary Results



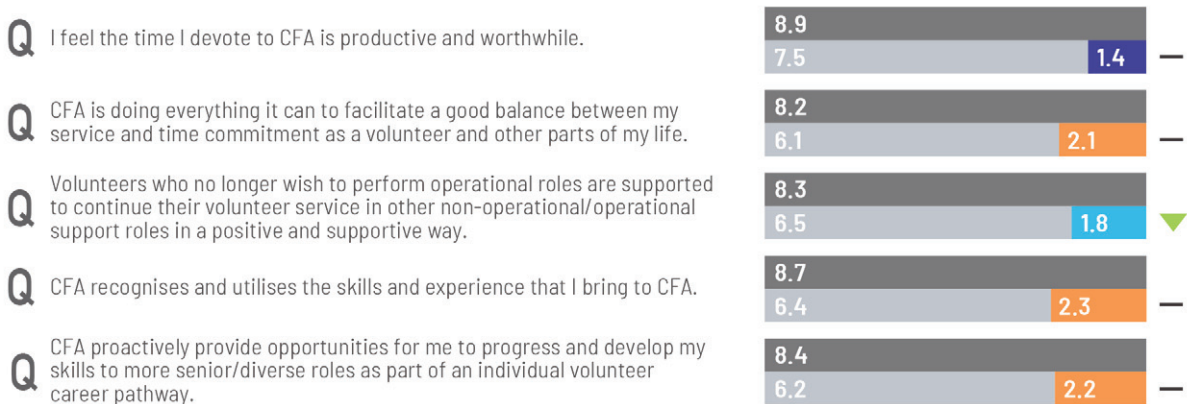
SURVEY QUESTION RESULTS



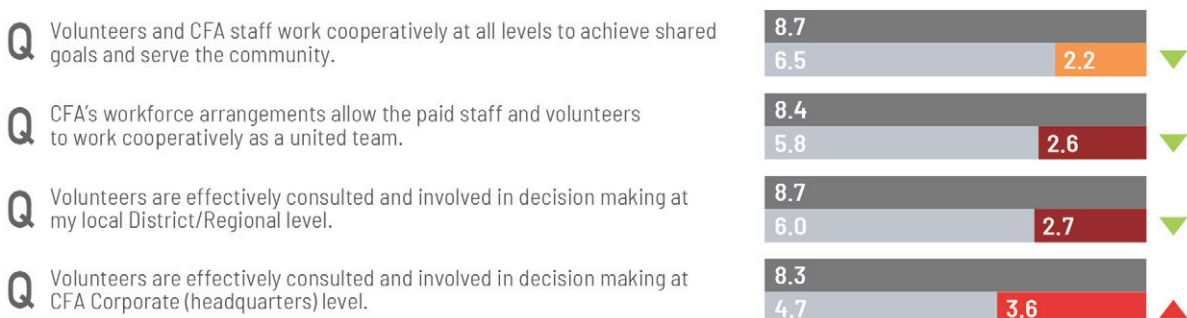
RESPECT & PROFESSIONALISM



MY ROLE AS A VOLUNTEER



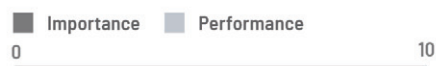
COOPERATION ACROSS CFA



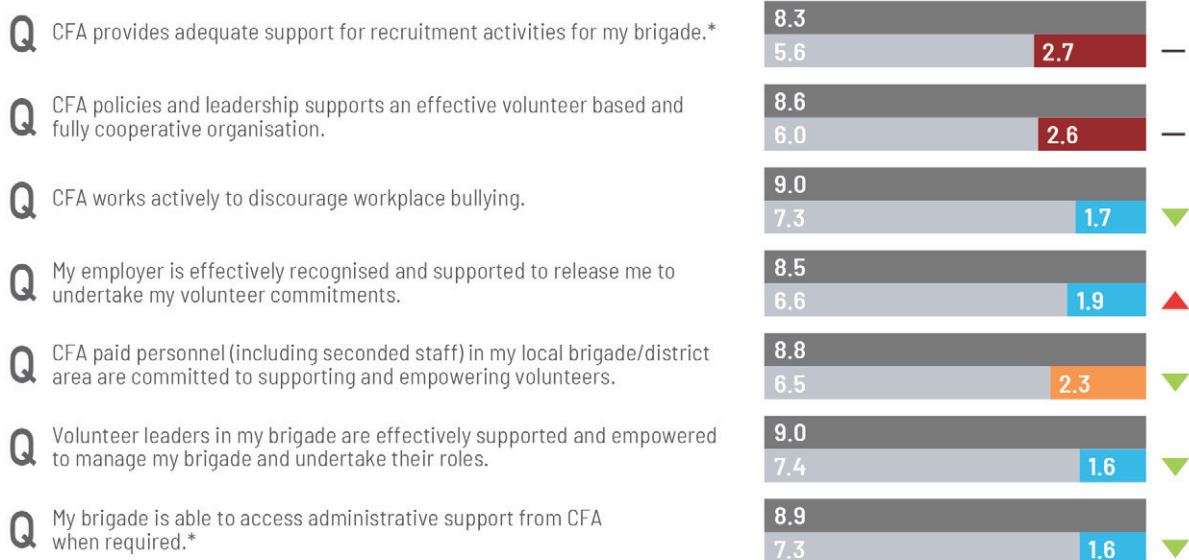
2023 VFBV Volunteer Survey Summary Results



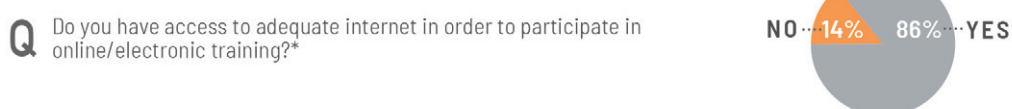
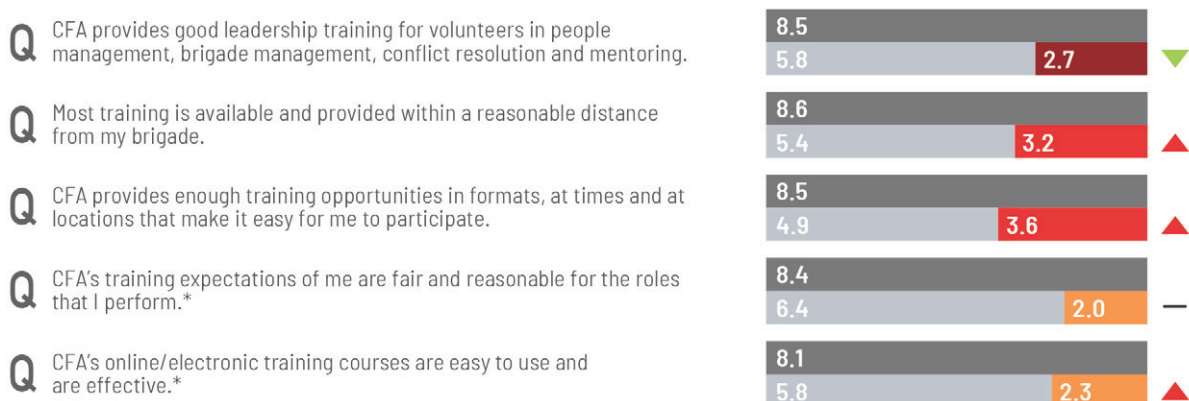
SURVEY QUESTION RESULTS



SUPPORT FROM CFA



TRAINING BY CFA

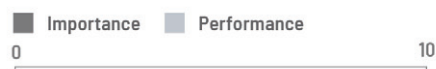


* New question inserted from 2022 survey onwards, has been excluded from the VolWEL calculation for this theme until trendline data can be established.

2023 VFBV Volunteer Survey Summary Results



SURVEY QUESTION RESULTS



RECRUITMENT & RETENTION



PEOPLE MANAGEMENT: MY BRIGADE



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

JOINT FUEL MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Delegates have reviewed CFA's joint planned burning progress over the last year and are pleased to report that the 2023-24 season was the program's most successful year to date. CFA has reported that 6,258 hectares of land was treated in the 243 burns that were completed. Overall, this progress equates to 126% of the Chief Officer's Statement of Expectation. Last year's burns included 9 successful cultural burns that partnered with traditional owners to build capacity and further support traditional owner group cultural burning programs.

In the 23-24 season, burns were able to be successfully conducted between October and May with the programs eventual goal of being able to conduct burns all year round, dependant on the right conditions.

Work is currently being done to identify areas in need of fuel reduction for the future planned program. Brigades have been invited to provide input based on their local knowledge and risks. The JFMP along with interactive maps can be accessed through Forest Fire Management Victoria's website. If you or your brigade wish to be considered for the Joint Fuel Management Program or have an area that you consider may be suitable for inclusion in the program please talk to your district Vegetation Management Officer. While there is a lot of preparation to get a burn listed on the program, once it is there, it remains on the register and can be treated again as part of a regular maintenance program.

PLANNED BURN TASKFORCE

The planned burn taskforce has been established through the Safer Together program and aims to increase CFA's capacity to undertake planned burning. The taskforce's role is to partner with local brigades to conduct planned burning and therefore reduce bushfire risk. They operate like a strike team, with taskforce members able to be deployed to anywhere in the state, depending on availability, for periods ranging from a single day deployment to up to five days inclusive of travel. When the taskforce members are deployed they will work alongside FFMV, local brigades, indigenous groups and landholders to conduct burns. The taskforce provides CFA members with a great opportunity to participate in planned burning and help rebuild brigade capacity. It also provides training opportunities to further develop firefighting skills and understanding of fire behaviour through experiential learning. The Taskforce currently consists of 732 CFA volunteers. In the 2023-24 season, 327 members were deployed which is a significant increase from 166 members deployed the year prior.

All members who have completed General Fire Fighter can apply to join the taskforce regardless of fireground experience but must have the approval of their Brigade Captain. More information can be found by searching 'planned burn taskforce' in the member's section of the CFA website.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WEBSITE REDEVELOPMENT

Work has started to redevelop the CFA 'Community Engagement Plan and Prepare' public facing website. The last time a major update occurred was in 2012, though the website's content is reviewed on a regular basis. There are approximately 110 pages currently in the 'Plan and Prepare' section of the website which allows members of the public to better understand their role in planning their response to an incident in their community.

A recent audit of the website indicated that changes need to occur to make the website more suitable for modern digital consumers. The searchability of the website does not deliver intuitive results and the website generally compared unfavourably with other websites. The project aims to address these, and other issues which will make navigation simpler, better searchability. It will also provide brigades with confidence that people will easily be able to find the information they need when directed to the website. It is anticipated that development and testing will occur through 2025 with an expected launch date some time in 2026. If you have some ideas that would improve this section of the website, please get in touch with your State Councillor or talk to your CFA district catchment team.

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

HELMET STOWAGE ON 4.4 TANKERS

Delegates continue to advocate on the issue of helmet stowage across the tanker fleet. VFBV continues to receive reports from volunteers outlining the impact of the helmet bags and brackets blocking vision and communication to the front of the cabin, often leaving members in the back suffering motion sickness. CFA fleet advise it is trialling stowing helmets in lockers, however there are concerns that this solution could create other issues such as lack of stowage space and operational impacts such as taking more time to store and retrieve helmets within the lockers. Delegates are concerned that other potential impacts have not been fully considered. To address delegates consistent concern, CFA has agreed to establish a working group to consider the potential pros and cons, impacts of changes, and consider other options regarding helmet stowage options.

In related news, the next gen pumper working party is looking into rearranging cabin stowage by utilising a bin format placed in front of the rear seat passengers and this arrangement is expected to allow for easy and secure placement of helmets as per operating procedures, facilitating quick access before exiting the appliance. The working party is also planning to improve water availability by increasing the input to the appliance to 100mm feed and is investigating new branch designs.

COLLECTION OF DRIVERS LICENCE CONCERNS

Following recent attention to data breaches involving Optus, Medibank and the cyber breach on FRV, members are understandably concerned and anxious about CFA's storage of personal information that could be potentially used to commit identify fraud against CFA members. Several brigades have formally raised concerns through VFBV's State Council processes. While VFBV was aware of CFA's pursuit of exemptions under the National Heavy Vehicle Law which has resulted in CFA needing to record licence numbers of drivers of fatigue regulated vehicles (trucks 12T or over) being driven 100km away from base, delegates were somewhat taken by surprise at CFA's insistence that every single driver was to provide their licence details into CFA's systems via the website regardless of whether they drove a fatigue regulated vehicle or not.

VFBV has formally requested details on how this information is being collected, stored and protected, including what cyber security measures have been put in place to ensure this information is safe (encryption) and who has access to this information. We have also sought information on whether CFA has conducted an independent security audit on the system that is intended to store this information to reassure members about the systems privacy.

FLEET WORKING PARTIES

Delegates have been working to gather feedback and close off expired and outstanding issues from old working groups including; the Ultra-Light Tanker; Prototype Pumper/Tanker; and Heavy Tanker Working Groups. The Committee has agreed to create a standard Terms of Reference for future working groups which will have clear objectives, define roles, ensure diversity, ensure proper representation between VFBV and CFA management, and strive for an outcome that includes preparations for the operational and training committees to be included when they are required.

The new Ultra-Light Tanker is at the waiting-for-approval stage from the Chief Officer and the next step for is for the working party to spend time at the Huntly Training ground to compare the prototype Ford Ranger unit with the current Toyota Landcruiser format and test the operational capability. It is important to note that volunteers involved have not yet given the Ford Ranger the thumbs up as the base platform for the new builds and is waiting for the tender process to begin.

The Big Fill working party is also making good steady progress, and configurations are being worked through.

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

VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT HUB UPDATES CONTINUE

In the last 2-Minute-Briefing we reported on the further enhancements to the Volunteer Recruitment Hub (VRH) with version v4.2 rolling out in July 2024. Volunteers are reporting the benefits of the recent changes but are still looking forward to continued performance improvements. Captains/Secretaries and recruitment officers are requested to monitor these upgrades and any future changes and let us know if the system is improving.

CONTEMPORARY VOLUNTEER MEMBERSHIP MODEL

Summary outcomes of the project team's national and international research has been presented to the committee delegates. Given only some bullet points in a PowerPoint slide have been presented, delegates requested to see the research, but are still waiting. The presentations on this project to date has not been very enlightening, and delegates have expressed concerns that many of the concepts appear to cover 'old ground' and only seems to be aimed at very specific user cases with no analysis of risks. Feedback from volunteers attending the forums held to discuss the project have remarked they appeared to simply be information sessions rather than consultation. Delegate feedback has pointed to some of the existing systems of registration and management of volunteers that is already flexible enough to accommodate many of the examples given but are often hamstrung by differing interpretations and CFA District rules. VFBV has raised concerns with any proposals that seek to restrict a member's voting rights and has advised CFA that any proposals to modify voting rights will need to be the subject of broad and robust consultation across the whole state.

SECONDARY SCHOOLS PROGRAM

In combination with discussions about CFA's refreshed junior and cadet programs, and improved youth pathways, discussions have continued about a secondary school program. A concept brief has been developed that explores a 3-tier offering depending on the level of engagement a school would like. Ranging from a simple day program that may introduce CFA, to a term program which could cover emergency response theory to an accredited style program that might run throughout the year. The committee will continue to examine the reinstatement of this successful program and as the review gets underway a call for nominations for a working party is likely. We will keep you updated.

SOCIAL MEDIA PAGE REGISTRATION

CFA's social media channels across Victoria have become an invaluable asset to showcase the work brigades do, promote what it means to be a volunteer and share important information about the protection of life and property. CFA was an early adopter of Facebook and CFA's social media team and brigades have harnessed the power of two-way conversations. In order to ensure brigades with social media channels can be supported and assisted with content and information, CFA has established a new Social Media Registration Form to help CFA keep an accurate record of all the public pages that exist with a CFA brand affiliation.

Without registration, it can sometimes be difficult to locate page administrators because the page may have been set up many years earlier and the original administrators may have left the brigade or are undertaking a different role. This was highlighted recently when helping brigades with local recruitment and the 'give us a hand' campaign.

Brigades can register via <https://www.members.cfa.vic.gov.au/brigades-operational/community-engagement/media-and-social-media/social-media/social-media-support>. This page also contains a CFA social media training package and other helpful resources to assist page administrators.

CFA has reiterated that by registering your page, this does not mean the CFA social media team can, or will, take action on your page without authorisation. They have committed to working in conjunction with the relevant leads of the Facebook page and providing support for brigades to create engaging and up to date content.

2 Minute Briefing

Joint Operational Capability

September 2024

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

FIRE INVESTIGATION

A team of very experienced volunteer Fire Investigators lead by CFA's Fire Investigation Manager Nicole Harvey presented to the committee on the progress being made on developing volunteers' capability in Fire Investigation since reform. It was pleasing to all that CFA has continued to develop fire investigators and they continue to be well utilised across the state. The important role fire investigators play is exemplified by their detailed reports often leading to significant fines and charges against offenders, changes to building practices and faulty product recalls as well as contributing to many community education programs developed by CFA. Fire investigation is one of the key pillars of CFA's responsibilities under the CFA Act. CFA has reported, 499 fire investigations were conducted within CFA's area in the 2023-24 financial year, and of those 282 were completed by CFA volunteer fire investigators, highlighting why CFA needs this critical capacity. The commissioning of the new state of the art fire investigation training facility at Huntly VEMTC incorporates specialised capacity for fire investigator training. If you have an interest in undertaking fire investigation training, please talk to your catchment team who will assist you with all the information and advise you of the training requirements.

DECONTAMINATION PROCESSES

Delegates continue to raise brigade concerns with CFA's decontamination processes and the sometime inconsistent processes implemented at district levels which sometimes contradict state processes. VFBV has requested a proper review following feedback to recent SOP updates that have highlighted these differences. CFA has stood up a project that will look holistically at exposure to contaminants and the whole decontamination process. This project will also look into PPC laundering and PPC allocation to provide a level of consistency for members regardless of the classification of brigade or district they operate in. The committee will continue to monitor and provide updates when available.

SINGLE USE SPLASH SUIT TRIAL

VFBV has long advocated the need to replace CFA's older splash suits that are being retired from service, and the benefits of moving to a disposable suit that would better cater for different sizing to support greater diversity amongst volunteers. CFA is in the process of replacing the current yellow splash suits with a single use level B suit. The new blue coloured splash suits have been chosen after a long testing period and have many benefits such as the hood having a neoprene rubber face grommet to ensure there is a safe seal around the SCBA mask. The suits have also been tested to provide protection against type 3 liquid chemicals and agents. The protective gloves are welded to the suit material and have an integrated sock foot to be used with rubber splash suit boots. The suits are a one-use item and have a shelf life of 10 years. Districts 8 and 9 are currently trialling the new suits over the next few months with the intention to distribute them to all brigades upon successful completion of the trial. The trial 'kit' has the splash suit, boots, and a set of fire ground practices all packaged in a sealed bag ready for use. After use, the suits are sealed in a decontamination bag and disposed like any other decontaminated products when used. The trial is looking at user acceptance and appropriate sizing, recognising there is limited stowage capacity on vehicles. Once the trial is completed the new suits are expected to be rolled out to every appliance that currently has the old suits allocated.

ACFO/COMMANDER VACANCIES

VFBV continues to request regular updates on ACFO and Commander vacancies across the state as many districts are operating well below the required allotment. The flow-on effect to volunteers across the districts from not having catchment and district support is felt when catchment officers take leave, but no backfilling occurs. This puts undue stress and pressure on those staff members in district offices that have to try to backfill a position for a short time or cover more than one group at a time as well as volunteers unable to get timely assistance when they need it most. VFBV continues to highlight these issues with the CFA executive and the Fire Services Implementation Monitor to ensure Brigades are being serviced and supported effectively.

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

OBSERVATION COLLECTION TOOL

After a busy summer fire period in some areas and off the back of several interstate deployment's delegates continue to call for CFA to provide timely opportunities for volunteers to provide feedback following their deployments. The over reliance on AAR's as the sole means to gather feedback has been problematic due to factors such as; little grass root involvement in some AAR's; they are often not held at times suitable for volunteers; and sometimes members feel intimidated raising issues in a large forum. CFA has reported the development of an Observation Collection tool will allow this to be done more efficiently and in real time. The observation tool is not intended to replace existing methods of information collection however members could use the tool to provide feedback whilst returning from an incident or deployment in the truck or bus once they have been released. This 'real time' information will be valuable for planning and better incident management. In some instances, the system may have the ability for members to scan a QR code which will be specific to the incident they attend, and all information gathered will be gathered for that one incident. Delegates look forward to being involved in user acceptance testing once the tool is developed.

FIRS (FIRE INCIDENT REPORTING SYSTEM) UPDATE

Phase 3 of the FIRS updates continues with new changes rolled out as well as changes to the administrative portal which is intended to make future updates and additions easier. Some of the intended inclusions moving forward will see a number of options in the drop-down boxes to be reduced and better organised so that members don't have to scroll through a long list before finding what they need. There is also a great deal of work being done to improve the accuracy of calculations such as vehicle speeds etc. as well as providing some improved quality assurance for all reports submitted. This will mean in some instances the brigade or member submitting the report may be contacted for clarification on issues that may need amending. Delegates continue to note that delays can occur with on-scene times due to radio operators recording times and radio traffic. Improvements to the form are being made to make it easier for brigades to notify of these occurrences. Finally, members have commented that the amount of information required for brigade's support calls has improved and the ability to save incrementally, then return later to complete has made things easier.

We will continue to provide updates on changes to FIRS as they occur.

ANNUAL BRIGADE REVIEWS

In the March briefing VFBV highlighted the inconsistencies in how DPCs are conducted across the state, and judging by volunteer feedback it would appear that the annual Section 29 process is fraught with similar issues and inconsistencies.

The Section 29 is a process used to undertake an annual report on a brigade's readiness and capability. It gets its name by way of Section 29(b) of the Country Fire Authority Act 1958 that requires the Chief Officer to: "inspect or arrange for the inspection of all Brigades and report to the Authority (Board) on their state of efficiency or otherwise, and make such recommendations as he thinks fit".

Over recent years, CFA has experimented with different version of this process. For example, in the South East Region, the S29 was replaced with the Annual Brigade Review (ABR) process. This pilot appears to have been shelved due to Commander feedback that the process takes too long to complete. In other regions, several districts undertook a Brigade Capability Review (BCR) which appears very similar to parts of the ABR process. In worrying developments, brigades have been reporting that their section 29 has been completed without their knowledge by someone sitting in the District Office with the Captain just been phoned to let them know it's done.

Delegates are calling on CFA to determine which system of review they will undertake, finalise it and roll it out across the state to get some sort of consistency in how these functions are undertaken. While some flexibility is welcomed, brigades are calling for some consistency and a settling of processes that end the constant changing of acronyms and processes.

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

CFA COMPLAINTS PROCESS PROGRESS REPORT

In response to the findings of the KPMG internal audit reported in our last 2-Minute briefing, delegates to the VFBV/CFA working group have been engaged and are regularly meeting to progress action. The working group has progressed action on the following areas of focus including; criteria and checklist for engaging external investigators; KPIs for external investigators; triage considerations like how and by whom a complaint is managed; respondent confidentiality, the role of a support person; and a review of the investigator's performance as part of the close out process. VFBV has advocated for volunteers to be provided an opportunity to give feedback of their experience with the investigator as part of the survey offered to complainants and respondents at the finalisation of a complaint matter. CFA had made good progress on a series of process maps which are intended to be available at Members Online. These maps will clearly explain what the process looks like and what volunteers can expect at each juncture of the complaints process which addresses our complaints surrounding the lack of transparency and consistency in the previous processes.

In related matters, the committee has also discussed the workload of the resolution support team following concerns about the backlog of conflict matters. Delegates have requested resources be prioritised and utilised dealing with conflict matters over other tasks to ensure conflict matters are dealt with in a timely manner.

VFBV continues to advocate for improvement in:- CFA support for respondents during the complaints process, case management (updating of volunteers throughout their complaint) better timeframes to finalise complaints and also ongoing training and development for Resolution Support Business Partners.

INDEPENDENT MEDICAL EXAMINATION (IME)

Throughout the life of a volunteer compensation claim, it is common practice for CFA to seek an independent medical examination (IME) as a way to keep apprised of a volunteer's medical condition and recovery. IMEs are also used when CFA investigate a volunteer's fitness for duty, or when an ailment or condition is identified during a members initial application to CFA or when they are transferring brigades. At present, CFA request an independent medical examination from their contracted provider. All relevant medical reports from the volunteer's treating specialists, doctors or hospitals etc. are then supposed to be forwarded to CFA's provider by CFA. The IME is then supposed to consult with the volunteer after which they then provide CFA with their report outlining their determination of the volunteer's condition.

Volunteers have told VFBV that during some of the IMEs, the IME appears ill informed or confused about the volunteer's injury or condition, sometimes no physical examination took place at all and more concerning, some volunteers have reported feeling the IME is going into the consult with a predetermined outcome. Whether this bias is real or perceived, for some it has added considerable anxiety and stress to the volunteer.

VFBV is current investigating these matters and instances where IMEs have then overruled the previous diagnoses of volunteer treating specialist(s) and in some cases, overruled the reports of previous CFA engaged IMEs. For example, when an IME orthopaedic surgeon overrules a volunteer's orthopaedic surgeon or an IME cardiac specialist overrules a volunteer's cardiac specialist, this becomes very confusing for volunteers and makes a mockery of the qualified clinicians who are treating them. This overruling opinion can and has, ultimately resulted in a volunteer's entitlements being terminated. Given the lack of an appeal process under the CFA Regulations, VFBV is advocating for the use of medical panels (three or more independent doctors) to be engaged in lieu of, or in conjunction with, IMEs. Workcover currently engage medical panels in their practices and appeal processes. VFBV is also advocating for an appeal process, and in the spirit of full transparency and to perhaps allay volunteer concerns of bias, VFBV has requested the volunteer be provided the full final IME report and the CFA letter of request so the volunteer has full knowledge of what has been asked and what has been provided.

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

MOBILE DATA CAPABILITY PROJECT UPDATE

Progress continues on this project which will eventually see the allocation of 950 tablets to brigades. With more than 2,300 emergency vehicles spread across 1,200 brigades, the project has had to try and develop a methodology for how the tablets are to be fairly distributed across the state. Delegates raised concerns with some of the early methodology, due to the reliance on brigade classification, noting that CFA has not reviewed the classification of Brigades for many years. The project has now finalised the allocation per District, and the District catchment teams in consultation with brigades and DPC's are now responsible for allocating tablets to brigades.

The Committee has also discussed the use of an RFID option for logging into the tablet to assist with the ease and speed of logging into the tablet which addresses the concerns raised by volunteers during the pilot about the need to enter long passwords into devices during the initial stages of an incident (turnout).

Delegates were pleased to hear their concerns about noncompliance with Australian Design Rules (ADRs) were being taken seriously by CFA who advised they were continuing to look at options for securing/mounting the device in Field Command Vehicles. In a related matter CFA has advised that the tablet installation in the state based ground observers vehicles are no longer considered compliant with the ADRs despite only being installed a couple of years ago. VFBV will continue to monitor the project as it progresses the rollout.

STARLINK SATELLITE REPLACEMENT ROLLOUT

Sustained advocacy from volunteers has resulted in CFA announcing that the existing satellite service in the nine FOVs and two MCVs are being replaced with a StarLink FLAT kit. The benefits of the StarLink kit are a higher bandwidth and improved WiFi signal around the vehicle regardless of the location due to its wider field of view and enhanced GPS capabilities. The StarLink also has WiFi extenders that will provide added benefit for building penetration. Each Region will also receive a spare StarLink Kit (including the WiFi Extender) for shared and as-needed use at incidents and is expected to be rolled out shortly.

ELECTRONIC PATIENT CARE PORTAL UPDATE

The Committee is monitoring updates to CFA's electronic Patient Care Records (ePCR) portal for Emergency Medical Response (EMR) and Fire Medical Response (FMR) programs. The portal is expected to automatically create draft PCR's from Triple Zero Vic data received, transfer data to Ambulance Victoria for reporting, and allow brigades to request stock replenishment. Once the portal is fully operational, it is anticipated that there will no longer be a requirement for members to separately upload data from Member's Online and will discontinue the information sharing via email or post.

CESSATION OF 3G MOBILE PHONE NETWORK

It has been communicated for some time that the remaining telcos' (Optus and Telstra) will be disconnecting the 3G mobile phone network (31 August for Telstra and 1st September 2024 for Optus). It has recently been communicated that this closure has now been extended to the 28th October 2024. TPG Telecom and Vodafone have already switched off their 3G Networks. Information has recently come to light that some older 4G devices may also be impacted, due to some early model devices not being VoLTE capable. (Voice over LTE). Phones that are not VoLTE capable will not be able to make calls or call emergency services after the switch off. Members can check their own devices by searching 'how to check VoLTE' on the internet, where you will find some guides by Optus and Telstra. Telstra has confirmed that Apple iPhone 6 onwards are VoLTE capable, as well as Apple Watch 3 onwards, Samsung Galaxy S7, Note 5 and A5 onwards, LG G5 onwards and Sony Xperia Z5 onwards. CFA advised they have done the necessary works on all CFA equipment in preparation for the cessation of the 3G service and will monitor the outcomes once the final shutoff occurs.

OFFROAD DRIVER TRAINING

VFBV continues to receive complaints from volunteers about the lack of offroad driver training courses across the state. At present, the off-road driver training is one of the more sought-after courses in CFA's training catalogue. Given this, delegates were extremely disappointed to learn that since the course was handed over to Districts to deliver the training at the end of 2023 less than 5 courses have been delivered so far.

The reason for this low number of completed courses is the fact that there is currently only one fully operational off road driving track where the course can be delivered in the whole of the state. In CFA's defence, the lack of appropriate funding and unsuccessful government funding bids have significantly affected CFA's ability to make the necessary repairs to the other offroad tracks at VEMTEC sites. It is equally frustrating that the Districts did not make contingency plans for where the courses could be carried out given the issues with these tracks have been known for a long time having been raised by VFBV on numerous occasions in the last couple of years.

CFA has consequently advised that the course does not have to be carried out on a purpose-built track, but can be delivered at any location that has been risk assessed and has the required inclines, declines, cross slopes, etc. Identifying and documenting local sites where Drive Offroad can be delivered also has the added benefit of enabling members to undertake the course in their local area, rather than having to travel to a VEMTC to complete. VFBV continues to raise this issue about inadequate course numbers and have requested CFA provide updates at each JTC (Joint Training Committee) meeting as to the number of locations the Drive Offroad course can be delivered and how many courses have been completed. Brigades and Groups are encouraged to reach out to their District Training Departments and pursue them to identify appropriate sites within the District where the courses can be conducted.

IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEER INSTRUCTORS

Members of the committee have been pleased with the progress CFA has made for volunteer instructors to be better utilised over the last 12 months. There have been improvements in CFA's engagement with, management of and record keeping for volunteer instructors. There also appears to be some improvements at a District level for the utilisation of volunteers to deliver courses. The importance of volunteer instructors will only increase as CFA works towards a full suite of courses available for delivery. There has been further improvement in CFA's training department recently with signs that a full catalogue of courses will be available for delivery soon. Given that the paid Instructors are fully utilised delivering currently available courses there will be much higher reliance on volunteers to help meet the training needs of members. VFBV will continue to ask for appropriate support and recognition of the valuable work volunteer instructors fill in ensuring members receive the training they need. If you are interested in stepping up into the volunteer trainer and assessor role please talk to your brigade training manager and district training personnel.

FIRST AID TRAINING

In an example of history repeating itself, delegates were extremely frustrated to learn that CFA would again have a period where there will be no provider of First Aid Courses for volunteers. As happened just 2 years ago when the organisation changed from St John to Allens Training for delivery of first aid, CFA has been unable to complete the procurement of a new supplier before the end of the existing supplier's contract.

While there is expected to be a 2-to-3-month gap in general First Aid Training, CFA has made "one off" courses available to high priority brigades such as Road Accident Rescue and rehab providers. These brigades should contact their District Training Departments to have their course arranged. The JTC will continue to pursue a speedy resolution to this problem and have requested regular reports on the number of First Aid courses delivered once the new supplier has been appointed and a clear plan on how CFA expects to clear the significant backlog in the shortest time possible. We will keep you updated on progress.