

VFBV QUARTERLY SUPPLEMENT



Welcome to the latest edition of our quarterly 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
CFA Social Media Support	https://tinyurl.com/vfbv-supp46

VFBV Quarterly Supplement Enclosures

This month's enclosures include:	Action Required:
1. Annual Vol Survey Now Open	Please table and note
2. Editorial: Cancer Support	Please table and note
3. State Firefighter Championships	Please table at your next meeting and pin to your noticeboard
4. Editorial: Feedback Loop	Please table and note
5. 2 Minute Briefings (Joint Committee's)	Please table at your next meeting and pin to your noticeboard



VFBV | VOLUNTEER FIRE
BRIGADES VICTORIA

Annual Survey



We want to know your views on your CFA experience, good and bad.

Our annual survey gives you the opportunity to provide feedback confidentially, but in a form that allows us to use your feedback to effect real change.

Tell us about CFA Training, your brigade, how well consultation is working, and whether you feel adequately recognised and respected by CFA and the Victorian Government.

Last year, more than 2,000 volunteers participated. Make your opinion count and take the survey today.

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





CANCER SUPPORT

By Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

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

This month I wish to shine a light on work that largely goes unseen and unrecognised, but that none the less makes a really big difference to those who need to avail themselves of this support from VFBV. A little like insurance, people often do not realise how important this support is until they need it the most. And while we hope no-one will ever need it, the sad reality is some of our members will be diagnosed with cancer, thought to be a direct result of their cumulative exposures over the years as a volunteer firefighter.

Victorian law currently recognises 15 presumptive cancers that have been scientifically proven to be associated with the carcinogens and toxins that firefighters are exposed to when fighting fires. VFBV continues to advocate for the expansion of the scheme. Other jurisdictions have revised their schemes with updated medical evidence and added additional cancers. QLD for example cover 22 cancers, while Tasmania covers 21. You will find a comparison table of all Australian States and Territories on our website.

The Victorian legislation covers CFA volunteer firefighters, FRV career firefighters, Forest firefighters employed by FFMVic and fire agency vehicle and equipment maintenance employees.

Under the presumptive scheme, a firefighter is generally not required to prove the cancer was caused by their firefighting provided it is one of the 15 cancers listed under the legislation and that the minimum eligibility/qualifying requirement is met for the specific cancer. The qualifying period (years of service as a firefighter) ranges from 5 years to 25 years depending on the type of cancer.

It is called a rebuttable presumption, meaning that while the firefighter is not required to prove the cancer was caused by their firefighting and therefore it is presumed, the insurer is allowed to rebut that presumption and pursue an alternate cause, however the onus is shifted to the insurer to have to prove what they think the other causes are.

However, the Victorian legislation contains a quirk that is not found in the majority of other Australian state and territory presumptive schemes.

Under the Victorian legislation, the presumption only applies if the "injury" (which is usually the date of diagnosis for cancer) occurs during the period you are considered a firefighter, or within 10 years after you cease to serve as a firefighter.

As members would recall, presumptive rights compensation was very hard fought for over a long period of time by both career and volunteer firefighters.

The Victorian legislation was controversial in the sense that it was tied to other controversial reforms to the fire services that had nothing to do with presumptive rights, but also because it created an additional hoop that Victorian volunteer firefighters need to progress through before their claim is even considered, which does not exist in any other State or Territory.

This extra hoop is by way of a special "Advisory Committee" which is established by the Minister - whose purpose is to provide an 'expert opinion' on whether a volunteer firefighter has attended fires to the extent reasonably necessary to fulfil the purposes of service as a firefighter under the presumptive legislation.

And while VFBV and other parties raised serious concerns around this element of the legislation pointing to the fact that no other State or Territory uses this approach - the government at the time refused all requests for amendment.

For these reasons, VFBV has been monitoring very closely each case that has progressed through the presumptive rights scheme to understand the impact of the advisory committee and whether it was having any negative impacts or unintended consequences.

Earlier this year, a volunteer was in fact rejected from presumptive rights based on the opinion of the advisory panel that they had not attended fires to the extent 'reasonably necessary'.

What made this case unique, was the advisory panel had interpreted the requirement for the date of diagnosis to fall within 10 years of their 'firefighting' service as a minimum eligibility requirement, and since, in the opinion of the committee, that this member was now in a 'non operational' role and CFA had not recorded any attendance to a fire in the last 10 years that they no longer qualified.

What made this decision so shocking, was the fact that CFA's records were incomplete, none of his recent turnouts were recorded because he had been incorrectly classified in RMS as non-operational, and this supposed 'non-operation' role routinely was deployed to the fireground. Even worse, this was a highly decorated firefighter, with close to



worse, this was a highly decorated firefighter, with close to 50 years of service, and who had attended hundreds if not thousands of incidents over their lifetime including extensive deployments during Black Saturday and Ash Wednesday. The very person presumptive rights was expected to cover.

This new inappropriate interpretation of the 10-year requirement to a current serving member is further highlighted when you consider the minimum qualifying periods for some of the cancers. For example, primary site oesophageal cancer requires a qualifying period of 25 years. Under this new interpretation, despite a current volunteer having met the 25 year requirement attending fires, if they hadn't been to what the advisory committee determine to be a sufficient number in the volunteer's last 10 years of service (for example years 25 – 35 of their service) despite attending thousands of fires prior - then this member's entire service history could be ignored.

All this despite cancer not magically appearing on an exact timeline. For the scheme to assume it does is deeply flawed, and we believe tying the sunset clause with the attendance criteria is an unintended consequence of the construction of the legislation which simply added volunteers to the scheme as an afterthought. To think a long serving firefighter could be excluded from a system simply based on their last 10 years in a lifetime of service is just plain wrong.

We do not believe this was the intent of the 10-year 'sunsetting' period. And while we didn't agree with it existing in the first place, it was always described to us as meaning the presumption would end 10 years after a firefighter left the service or retired. But to think it being used to exclude a current serving volunteer with decades of service to their community is very distressing. This magical 10-year period does not apply in most other State's or Territories either.

Fortunately, in this case, we were able to demonstrate significant errors which allowed for this member's case to be reevaluated. However, this and other recent cases have highlighted some recurring issues that are now forming a pattern, and that we are now seeking to educate members on.

For example, the accuracy of CFA's service records and incident attendance continues to be a significant barrier. As a result, we highly recommend that members request their records from CFA before they submit a claim, to ensure you have the time to correct those records and fill in any gaps.

CFA will also not supply any other records from other services. So if you have service history with another fire service, either within Victoria or elsewhere, it is important you request

those records from the respective agency first, so we can help you combine them with your CFA records.

It is also important to consider any significant events that might be missing from your service history. This is where brigade records may be more accurate than those stored on RMS or FIRS, especially historical records.

My main advice for anyone who is pursuing a presumptive legislation claim is to ensure you get in touch with VFBV so we can assist you with the process. The WorkSafe process can be very daunting for a volunteer, and the various forms and paperwork can be very confusing for CFA volunteers in particular, as some sections require you to document your private employer, whereas other sections assume that CFA is the employer in terms of your firefighting.

We now have extensive experience assisting volunteers through this process and can help you with all the relevant forms and processes.

We are also engaged in constructive discussions with government on some of the issues confronting volunteers as they navigate the presumptive scheme, and I remain hopeful that common sense amendments may be considered. We'll keep working on ensuring the system is working as intended and will keep you apprised of progress.

NEW CEO

In mid-October, CFA announced the appointment of Greg Leach AFSM as the new CFA Chief Executive Officer. Greg is well known to VFBV from his time with CFA where he originally joined as a volunteer in 1978, before applying to be a career firefighter. Greg went on to serve in senior roles within CFA, before broadening his horizons with senior roles with Ambulance Victoria and the MFB. He recently served as Commissioner for QFES in QLD, before returning to Victoria last year where he was appointed as the CEO for SES Vic.

On behalf of volunteers and VFBV I welcome Greg home, and look forward to working closely with him and Chief Officer Heffernan over the coming years as we continue to strengthen Victoria's most trusted and respected community fire service.

I would also like to extend my thanks and admiration for Robyn Harris who has acted as CFA's interim CEO following the departure of Natalie MacDonald back in July. I have enjoyed working with Robyn and thank her most sincerely for her service. The interim gig is always a tough ask, but I am confident CFA has been well served under her leadership.



STATE FIREFIGHTER CHAMPIONSHIPS 2025 TEAM ENTRIES NOW OPEN

In 2025 Mooroopna will again play host to the CFA-VFBV State Firefighter Championships for the fifth consecutive year. Across the two weekends there will be displays of teamwork, camaraderie and friendly competition between brigades from across the state.

State Urban Junior Championship	22 and 23 March 2025
State Urban Senior Championship	29 and 30 March 2025
State Rural Senior Championship	29 March 2025
State Rural Junior Championship	30 March 2025

To register your team entry or for judge and official nominations please visit <https://tinyurl.com/2025-entry> or scan the QR code.

Entries will close on Sunday 16th February 2025.

Any questions about the Championships or want more information?
Please contact championships@vfbv.com.au or call the VFBV office on (03) 9886 1141.





FEEDBACK LOOP

By Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

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

Consistency and remaining on message are two of the most crucial elements of successful advocacy. Given our principles and expectations of CFA are laid out for all to read in the Volunteer Charter, I am sometimes somewhat bemused at people who are surprised by volunteer reaction to some policy proposals. Anyone bothering to do a small amount of research should be able to roughly estimate whether something is likely to be warmly received, or alternatively detested and rejected.

Therefore, one of the things that makes me particularly cranky is when I hear people accusing volunteers of not embracing change. Rubbish.

CFA volunteers are not against change. They are against pointless change and change for changes sake, or change that has not been thought out, is not resourced or funded, or is simply unachievable.

The Charter provides six fairly simple principles: (1) Is it fair? (2) Is it just? (3) Is it reasonable? (4) Does it discriminate? (5) Is it practicable and sustainable? And finally, (6) Is it in the best interests of the community?

And when evaluating change against these principles, volunteers are not going to fall for corporate or political spin that asks them to suspend all reality, and they will not blindly just go along with something because someone thinks its trendy. And honestly, who can blame them?

Volunteer firefighters have protected their communities from fire and other disasters since time immemorial, and most reviews into disasters rarely find issues with the local response or brigade, but rather the systems, processes or interventions forced upon them by bureaucrats and administrators.

So, know - that when you propose a changed policy or arrangement, volunteers will evaluate it with full candour and unapologetic pragmatism. If you are only interested in policy that works, is sustainable and makes a positive difference – then this should not alarm you.

As volunteer firefighters, we work in a complex and dangerous sector and are dealing with risks that constantly change and require dynamic risk assessments. Our assessment of corporate policy is not going to be any different.

Therefore, it should surprise no one that simply proposing changes based on the “vibe”, and without any evidence base, without sharing any research or analysis about the problem trying to be solved, how the solution will supposedly fix it or the simple matter of bringing people along on the journey – the only people that should be surprised by volunteer resistance are the people probably most to blame for their idea flopping in the first place. Themselves.

What if the reason volunteers rejected the idea was simply because it was a dumb idea or simply wouldn't work. Sounds like a pretty reasonable reason to me.

Volunteers are actually champions of change – changes that makes things simpler, quicker, more efficient and achieve better outcomes. Why then is it always so hard to get agencies to adopt these changes when we ask? So if you ask me who is more resistant to change – the agency or its volunteers, I know which one I'd pick.

In fact – brigades adapt faster to the changing risk profile of their communities than anyone else. In fact – the fire services as a whole often take years to catch-up. Almost every single retrofit or statewide program has followed one or more brigades proving a concept or demonstrating a need that finally leads to a statewide program or funding.

The fact that volunteers did their own tests, procured and fundraised for their own equipment to make something work – often gets overlooked – but make no mistake – these are the ingenious origin stories to which most of the big advances in technology or fire service processes have sprung.

Therefore, I would like to sincerely thank members for their continued discipline in responding to our feedback requests. I read almost every single piece of feedback given, so I come from a unique vantage point to say I know and appreciate that many of you are sick and tired of the same old proposals being regurgitated with each change of personnel, or changes being proposed with no discernible improvement or outcome in mind.

Yet – you continue to be involved – and this is the most valuable lesson of all. Volunteering isn't a job that you just tire of one day. That's not to say you don't get tired. But volunteering is a vocation and a passion. It comes out loud and clear from your feedback.

Your desire for the “system” to work for the benefit of your brigade and your community. Your wish that arrangements will actually encourage, support and strengthen the ability of volunteers to deliver CFA services. And your hope that your feedback will actually make a difference and may actually improve things.

And it is on this final point, I would like to digress.

Your feedback does make a difference. I read enough of your feedback to know many of you often don't think it does but trust me when I say it makes a much bigger difference than you think. Even when the immediate results don't appear that way – the sentiment and knowledge contained in your feedback outlasts single requests. So, even when CFA does not respond to the feedback or does not modify their position – your feedback is used to build VFBV's organisational memory and is what heavily influences formal VFBV positions, and our continued advocacy for further change.

We don't give up, and you can lose the battle without losing the war.

In a good news story, and to illustrate my point - I wanted to share with you the progress made on CFAs revised Brigade Finance Policy which CFA has recently finalised.

Members would recall that CFA first released its initial drafts in June of last year. Back then, CFA released a brigade finance policy “suite” that consisted of six interrelated policies, totalling more than 21 individual pages of associated requirements. It would be fair to say that the ‘suite’ fell very flat on brigades, many of whom responded most unfavourably to the proposed arrangements, including the tone and needless complexity proposed. Very prominent in volunteer feedback was the principle that volunteers joined CFA to support an emergency service, they did not join to donate countless hours as unpaid public servants to the Victorian Government's Treasury department.

After undertaking broad consultation with volunteers, VFBV provided formal feedback to CFA in October last year. And while I make no apologies, our feedback was rather forthright and candid and made the point that there was significant volunteer backlash to CFAs proposals. But rather than just reject and criticise the policy, VFBV provided more than 10 pages of feedback and suggestions of how the arrangements could be adapted and improved to respond to volunteer concerns.

To be honest – it would have been much easier just to provide the criticism.

But what kind of partner would we be if we didn't try to use our deep organisational knowledge to try and improve the outcome and help CFA improve its proposals and respond to the criticism? This is where your feedback was critical. Without people taking the time to explain why they did not support something – we would not have been able to provide the level of detail and analysis to help explain to CFA the reason behind the overwhelming rejection.

To CFA's credit, the incoming CFA Chief Financial Officer (Sam Costanzo) who inherited the draft policy when he started in November last year, took all the feedback very constructively. In fact, both he and Robyn Harris as his direct line manager, committed to VFBV that they would diligently go through all the feedback and would methodically work through each of the areas of concern, checking back at regular intervals. And over the proceeding 10 months – that is exactly what they did – not just with VFBV, but also their internal teams so they could better understand why specific policy outcomes were being sought in the first place.

Which leads us to the new policy. A seven-page policy that replaces the six policies and 21 pages previously proposed. Key to the changes are;

- A tiered requirement for brigade financial plans, based on risk and providing simplified processes for brigades based on the level of their funds.
- Enhanced authorisations for brigade/group decision making and empowerment
- Easier to understand record keeping and reporting requirements
- Streamlined fundraising approval processes, and more practical processes for assessing donations and offers of sponsorship.
- Much clearer guidance on operating bank accounts and the use of debit cards
- A commitment by CFA to supporting Secretaries and Treasurers, minimise compliance burdens and provide tailored advice to volunteers

Significantly, CFA reversed and dropped its plans to charge volunteers for annual recognition events, prevent brigades from donating to natural disaster recovery charities, and stopping brigades from being able to lease office equipment like photocopiers and the like.

And while one could argue these were stupid proposals to begin with, I have been impressed with the good will, patience and scale in which CFA was prepared to completely re-write and reconsider its policy in order to respond to volunteer concerns.

A great result, and a good example of us working constructively together to work through the issues and improve the policy.

But this approach requires at least two things. A willingness by both sides to commit to genuine dialog that includes an open mind to reconsider previous positions, and the generous support of volunteers to entrust VFBV with their feedback and the reasons they think something will or will not work that supports our continued advocacy for a result that helps us argue for the changes required.

So, to those that contributed to the feedback on this and other items of late – thank-you. Don't lose hope, and I hope this gives you confidence that your feedback can in fact make a difference – more often than not - a really big difference.

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

BUSINESS/INDUSTRY FIRE SAFETY

Recently there has been an increasing trend in the number of fires impacting businesses. In 2023 there were 157 significant fires that impacted a place of business. A significant fire is one that interrupts the primary business activities and has the potential to substantially affect the business from trading or interrupt its services. These fires are considered important enough to be reported to the CFA Chief Officer so that frequency and trends can be closely monitored. While all fires have an impact, not all business fires significantly interrupt the business activities.

Trends include an increase in the number of fires from rubbish bins, cooking or cooking equipment, electrical equipment, heating (internal and external) and from stored combustible materials. Small to medium size businesses are often more vulnerable to fire due to larger business often operating over multiple sites creating redundancy and already having a fire contingency plan in place. Small businesses with less capital and fewer people often also face a greater challenge to rebuild when impacted by fire.

CFA is the lead agency to promote fire safety amongst business and industry located in CFA areas and work is being undertaken to work develop enhanced resources for businesses to promote greater awareness of the risk of fire as well as proactive steps to minimise fire risk and precautions for businesses to promote a safety conscious culture.

This project will also provide brigades with resources to allow them to confidently interact with their local businesses and promote fire safety messages. Delegates are keen to ensure the resources are easily accessible and that brigades are supported in connecting with their local business and industry groups.

PREDICTIONS IS PUBLIC: NATIONAL RESEARCH

CFA is participating in national research to improve the way public facing predictive fire spread products are used during an emergency and how this information is communicated and disseminated to the public.

The use of fire prediction maps has received increased attention since the 2019/20 fire season with recent inquiries recommending greater use of fire spread predictions in public messaging. Currently each jurisdiction provides maps that appear differently and contain different symbols, colours and information. This can cause confusion, especially for people living close to state and territory borders.

Implementing these recommendations has been difficult due to the lack of research into how these maps should be designed and communicated to the public and when they should be issued. The project aims to ensure that the right information is being placed in the right hands and at the right time so that people can make informed decisions for their safety. The project involved representatives from each State and Territory as well as AFAC and the Bureau of Meteorology.

The project will be completed in three stages. The first phase involved understanding what agencies current communication practice are and how this is interpreted by the community. This phase resulted in 23 evidence-based principles to build upon, benefits and barriers in different ways of displaying information and better understanding of what information people look for in maps.

The project's current phase seeks to develop fire spread prediction maps and test them with the community. The intention of these maps are to provide clear information so that the readers can easily understand where they are in relation to the fire, current area of risk and predicted area of risk as well as uncertainty.

The final phase will develop policy and practice based on previous two phases. More information can be found at <https://www.naturalhazards.com.au/predictions-in-public> CFA will continue to update and engage with the Committee throughout the project, and we look forward to sharing further details soon.

December 2024

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

FLEET FUNDING

VFBV has continued to highlight the significant impact on the fleet, stations, and equipment that the cuts to CFA's budget are having. As a result of a question from VFBV District 11 Council, State Council has pursued clarification on CFA's policy of vehicle mid-life refurbishment. The need for vehicle refurbishment at their half-life point, is noted in CFA's Strategic Asset Management Plan (SAMP). Delegates sought clarification on what constitutes the "half-life" of vehicles and what actual refurbishment occurs.

CFA Fleet has informed the Committee that when vehicles are cascaded, they undergo maintenance to address any existing issues and make minor improvements, such as upgrading lights. However, there is no documented refurbishment process or program in place.

VFBV will continue to raise these concerns but also encourages brigades to engage with their local Members of Parliament about the deteriorating CFA budget and the aging fleet. In your correspondence, please request their support for a Government commitment to maintaining the CFA budget without further cuts and inquire about the allocation of the additional \$186 million collected this year from the increased Fire Services Property Levy, noting that none of this increased funding is flowing to CFA.

Your support is essential in helping us raise these concerns more widely. VFBV District Councils are requesting brigades with trucks older than 25 years to please get in touch and send photo's so we can continue to advocate for fair funding.

CREW PROTECTION RETROFITS

The crew protection modifications to the Ultra-Light fleet continues with the Nissan Patrols now commencing. When the vehicle is returned from undergoing the modifications a copy of instructions on how to use the crew protection systems is provided and CFA has also produced a video for each type of vehicle. Reports back from brigades has been critical that there hasn't been enough communication from CFA to advise brigades on what resources are available to them on how to use the system or train. In some districts brigades have been instructed not to run the crew protection for training that has angered brigades wishing to familiarise themselves with the system. Concerns have also been raised about potential for foam being inhaled through the reconfigured snorkels, plastic cable ties being used on some variants, and how the passenger side of the retrofit can be lifted by almost 25mm in some instances. These issues are being pursued and has been raised with the committee who is now awaiting a response to the concerns raised.

CAPITAL PROJECTS

Delegates continue to advocate on behalf of brigades still awaiting planned station builds or modifications. Concern continues to be raised about ongoing delays with capital projects managed by the Government's new Community Safety Building Authority (CSBA) and questions surrounding timelines not being met and cost escalations remain. The Government created the CSBA to address what they at the time perceived to be CFA delays and cost overruns, with the CSBA promising to address these issues and deliver projects on time and cheaper. Unsurprisingly to VFBV, these grandiose commitments do not appear to have been achieved, and the problems associated with timelines and cost escalations appear to be worse than ever.

CFA has recently completed work on a revised two-year station modification plan, that it hopes will address the issue of scheduled appliance replacements not being coordinated with necessary stations improvement and modifications that have resulted in brigades receiving trucks that do not fit in their existing stations. VFBV continues to raise these concerns, and CFA has informed the Committee that it is optimistic that their new approach will eliminate these occurrences in the future. The committee will continue to monitor.

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

TAP AND GO IS THE GO!

Members would recall VFBV has been pursuing a modernisation of approved methods for brigades to access when running fundraising events. CFA committed to trials of 'tap and go' payment methods, reviewing different terminals but most importantly the different contract arrangements most suitable to how brigades would use the platforms. Providers need to be compatible with tax donation receipt reporting, as well as appropriate fee schedules. Many early adopters have unknowingly entered arrangements with high transaction fees, or high monthly minimums or service charges not suitable to occasional use. The trials will identify the most effective arrangements with the least overhead and service charges. CFA Financial Services have been reviewing current terminal providers with 50 Tyro Terminals provided to Brigades across the state to trial. Tyro was chosen for the trial as at present it offers the most cost-effective terminal system, with no monthly leasing fees, and a set fee on each transaction. It is hope that the trial will enable a central contract decision to be made so that brigades can easily transition to a modern fundraising option with no hidden catches.

VICTORIAN CONTAINER DEPOSIT SCHEME

CFA Financial Services have successfully negotiated with the VCDS, achieving donor status, with any funds collected initially needing to go into the CFA & Brigades Donations Trust to comply with the charity rules. Currently the organisations collecting the containers are Tomera, Visy, and Clean Away, with Tomera and Visy negotiating with Brigades to deposit any returns directly into the brigade's donation account. Clean Away to date are not offering this option for direct deposits to Brigades. Unfortunately, Clean Away currently covers the majority of the west of the state however it is hoped that they will come on board with further discussions.

POCKETBOOK APP ARRIVES

The new CFA pocketbook app requested by members for many years has finally entered its final testing phase. The long-awaited beta testing has been released to specific Brigades for field testing. Delegates are very keen for the final version to be made available to all members across the state. Key features of the app will be key incident tactics and safety messaging, access to Standing Orders and SOPs as well as calculators and converters, member contact details and operational topics. In the cases where connectivity is an issue the app has been designed to work offline as well as with internet access. Delegates are keen that once final testing is completed the Pocketbook App will be available to all members, which CFA advises is expected before the end of the year.

MEMBER PULSE SURVEYS

CFA's volunteer sustainability team are looking to develop pulse surveys to be sent to members during various times of their volunteer journey to assist with retention activities. The intent of the surveys is to try to understand what is working and where there are pinch points or barriers in a member's service to the organisation and to try to improve so that members don't get to the point of leaving disgruntled. Once the data is analysed it will give CFA the opportunity to address the issues hopefully before they get to the point of leaving. The current volunteer exit survey is sent to members after they leave CFA and figures presented currently indicate that not feeling valued and brigade culture as well as management style are three of the top five reasons members are leaving. Current trends indicate members are leaving CFA between 3-5 years. The first pulse surveys are intended to target this cohort to identify key issues to address to turn this trend around. Delegates were pleased to hear that CFA will de-identify the data so that privacy can be maintained and will continue to report to the committee. Volunteers are requested to please ask for a volunteer exit survey should they decide to leave and please provide open and honest feedback so that CFA can continue to improve in this area.

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

FIRE MEDICAL RESPONSE (FMR) COMMENCING

After extensive training, the first nine brigades that have volunteered to provide FMR services will shortly commence delivering this vital service to the community. The first brigades are due to commence in December with public comms scheduled in each of those communities to coincide with the launch, explaining how it works and to educate the community why a fire truck may be turning up to a medical incident. Each brigade has spent the last few months undertaking extensive joint training with Ambulance Victoria and CFA to ensure they are qualified to assist with emergency first aid until a paramedic or ambulance is available. The brigades will not be transporting patients to hospital or medical appointments, however will remain on scene with a patient until the ambulance or paramedic arrives. FMR brigades will only be responded to certain serious "Priority Zero" events such as cardiac and respiratory arrest. Research shows that early intervention to a patient suffering from these conditions within the first 10 minutes increases the chances of survival and recovery exponentially. There are currently 28 brigades in the first round with the aim to have 50 brigades offering this valuable service statewide. FMR was offered to brigades and members identified by Ambulance Victoria as priority areas via an extensive consultation process. Congratulations to the teams that voluntarily added this to their brigade's capability.

SPECIALIST RESPONSE

Delegates have requested CFA ACFO Specialist Response to brief the committee on brigade specialist response capabilities. There are numerous specialty roles that brigades undertake including road crash rescue, high angle and steep angle rescue and large animal rescue to name just a few. CFA has reported that road crash rescue brigades have continued to be busy with over 722 extrications over a nine year period and CFA is negotiating an updated agreement with TAC who fund the road crash rescue capability. CFA has 16 brigades trained in steep angle rescue and six brigades trained in high angle rescue and two brigades trained in large animal rescue even though CFA is not the lead agency in large animal rescue. Members have requested timelines on training material review, with some specialist response brigades advising many of the training packages for specialist response needing to be updated. Responding to increased brigade appetite to expand their capabilities, delegates were very interested to discuss CFA's plans for an increased specialist capability across the state with CFA developing five specialty response plans. Hazmat, Rescue, Marine, Alpine and Respiratory Protection. The 10-year specialist capability plan will be written with a risk based approach that will concentrate on ensuring a long term response to the areas of focus. This type of forward planning will assist CFA in setting priorities and investment initiatives as well as giving a base document when applying for grants, investment and funding submissions. We have reported in the past on the whole of life asset plan and the areas of change identified by the Chief Officer. The specialist capability plan will work alongside these initiatives. The committee have requested they be updated regularly on the project's progression, and we will communicate updates to members.

SEASONAL UPDATE

Many districts have already had their FDP declared with many parts of the state experiencing difficult conditions. The annual summer fire season campaign was rolled out in the past few months by Government and helps communicate to the community their fire safety responsibilities as well as providing fire safe messaging. CFA's messaging works closely with partner agencies to encourage Victorians to plan and prepare for the summer and actions to take on high-risk fire days. CFA has reported that aviation resources for the State have been confirmed and are expected to be fully operational by the start of December. You can view the CFA pre summer briefing by logging into members online and visiting LMS.

CFA publishes a quarterly update and the December edition is highly focused on brigades response as well as member safety. Many forecasts are pointing towards a drier than average summer with temperatures hotter than average for many parts of the state. Reminder for all operational members to ensure they have completed the CO mandatory requirements and be aware of fatigue management and hydration.

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

DPC CONSISTENCY

In the March edition of our 2-min-briefings, we reported on inconsistencies with the structure of DPCs and how despite the trial of “District Strategic Advisory Teams” (DSAT) pilot ending three years ago, there was still a DSAT operating. We can now report that after consultation with the affected groups in the district involved, they have passed a motion to wind up the DSAT and revert back to operating as a DPC. Members have indicated that this will improve consultation and discussion amongst the group and makes for a more collaborative approach.

JSOP REVIEW

In light of the recent reviews into CFA SOPs and related doctrine, the committee have turned their attention to understanding how Joint Standard Operating Procedures (JSOP) are reviewed and consulted on across the sector. Delegates are particularly interested in understanding the process of JSOP reviews and how the agencies are acquitting each of their own consultative obligations to affected stakeholders. CFA has a Performance Improvement Senior Coordinator who is now seeking information from EMV on where CFA sits in the review process, when the reviews are happening and how other agencies are able to collaboratively provide input. Experience has shown that often the feedback window and review timelines are very short and don't allow for volunteers to consult with groups and brigades before entering feedback. Timelines that do not account for this level of engagement would not be compliant with statutory obligations and is a matter of emerging concern. We will continue to seek updates and provide information when it becomes available.

SOP CONSULTATION

CFA has continued to review its backlog of policies and procedures over the past 12 months with 29 SOPs reviewed and updated. Thank you to all volunteers who have provided feedback in any form, it is always a difficult task to provide feedback on every SOP however members have been generous in their time to give honest proactive feedback when requested. VFBV has tried to make the task as easy as possible with surveys and comprehensive comparisons of new and old SOP's. Please continue to monitor your emails and VFBV's Consultation Dashboard on our webpage. VFBV has asked CFA to minimize feedback requests over the Fire Danger Periods as we are aware members attention is not focused on administration tasks. If you have any feedback on the raft of SOP's that are current being reviewed please talk to your District Council, State Councillors or visit the VFBV website vfbv.com.au to provide feedback.

DRIVER'S LICENSE UPGRADES

In reviewing SDS performance and monitoring the increased numbers of heavy vehicles being introduced into the fleet, VFBV has been advocating for greater support from Government and CFA in ensuring funding for members to upgrade their driver's licenses to heavy vehicle licenses is provided. VFBV continues to be made aware of volunteers being forced to pay for these upgrades themselves, or relying on the brigade to use fundraising to try and cover the costs which can amount to as much as \$1,000. This is completely unacceptable, and there should not be any instances where a volunteer or a volunteer brigade is being forced to pay for license upgrades.

As a result of our and CFA advocacy on this issue, additional government funding was provided to CFA to increase the availability of license upgrades. As part of the funding bid, every CFA District was requested to estimate how many license upgrades they needed over the next five years, and funding is being provided. Members can apply for a license upgrade (medium rigid or heavy rigid depending on your brigades appliance) by logging into CFA Members Online, going to the “Learning Hub” and search for a course called “CFADRIVE Heavy Vehicle Licence Training”. You then sign up for the “course” like you would any other course, and your Captain will be requested to endorse you for a license upgrade, which then sends the request to your District ACFO. Once approved, the District will arrange a spot with one of CFA's contracted driver license training and testing partners.

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

HEARINGS, APPEALS AND ADVOCATES

Following discussions with brigades and members, it is clear many have little understanding or appreciation of CFA's formal charging process and subsequent hearing process that volunteers are exposed to when they are accused of serious wrongdoing. With approximately 125 discipline matters currently open, our advocacy for process improvements is critical to support not only those volunteers facing a CFA Hearing, but also brigades who are sometimes dealing with challenging behaviour. A CFA hearing is somewhat similar to a court hearing, where CFA - then the respondent – each call their witnesses and present their case in front of a Hearing Officer. The Hearing Officer then makes a decision, based on that evidence. Unlike a court however, the CFA process does not have as many checks and balances and in our view is over reliant on the personal attributes of the Hearing Officer to ensure a fair proceeding.

At the completion of a hearing the Hearing Officer hands down their decision as to the guilt or innocence of the respondent and an outcome/punishment. A respondent has the right to appeal this decision, the punishment or both. An appeal is dealt with by a panel of three, with two people selected by CFA and one person nominated by VFBV.

VFBV has been raising process concerns for some time now, and the committee regularly discusses potential process improvements. Delegates continue to provide strong advocacy for "Hearing Advocates". As the CFA regulations currently stand, a respondent (volunteer who has been charged with offences) must appear before the Hearing Officer, self-representing or potentially paying for a lawyer. A complainant (volunteer making the complaint) is supported and represented by CFA. Due to the imbalance and unfairness of this process, VFBV has posed the idea of CFA training volunteers, to the same level as its Charging and Hearing Officers, educating them in the hearing process, and to act as advocates for respondents to ensure the Hearing Officer (like a judge) is exposed to both sides of the argument. Our aim is to ensure every volunteer receives natural justice and procedural fairness. This idea had been met with much resistance from CFA over recent past, however, during more recent discussions with CFA, CFA have agreed to revisit the concept.

While VFBV cannot provide personal advocacy for a complainant or respondent, we are available to all volunteers and brigades involved in the complaints and/or hearing process for guidance and support. VFBV takes a neutral position, but ensures CFA follows its own processes, and that all parties have an opportunity to be heard and treated fairly. All members should have the benefit of the presumption of evidence, and VFBV feel strongly that CFA has an obligation to remove bias from its disciplinary processes. VFBV will keep members updated on how these discussions progress.

VOLUNTEER COMPENSATION SCHEME

The Volunteer Compensation scheme remains a contentious subject amongst volunteers and delegates, given a recent Supreme Court decision, which found in favour of the volunteer and criticised CFA's decision and process to terminate a volunteer claim based on an outlier Independent Medical Examination (IME). Delegates felt compelled to question the thought process and decision making within the CFA team that would lead to such a poor outcome. Members have continually raised with VFBV concerns around what sort of culture exists now in CFA where this kind of outcome could occur. Whilst CFA continues to decline to discuss specifics of the case, CFA has stated that this decision does not reflect the whole scheme, noting that CFA have handled over 1300 claims in 10 years and less than 59 have been rejected or terminated. VFBV agree it is only one decision but have pointed out it is also the only one of the 59 that has been independently reviewed by a court, and therefore we are seeking confidence that this case is not emblematic of a broader problem, noting it was a defining decision that has resonated with volunteers and significantly impacted CFA's reputation. Looking at the broader picture, VFBV believe that all volunteers must be able to trust in the knowledge that ongoing care and support will be available to them through the CFA Volunteer Compensation scheme, should they injure themselves physically or mentally, in the course of their service to CFA and their communities. CFA have agreed to commission an end-to-end review of the volunteer compensation scheme and committed to VFBV involvement in the review. VFBV will remain vigilant and continue to pursue these difficult discussions with CFA to find consensus, resolution and the best possible outcome for all volunteers - restoring their confidence in the arrangements.

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

MULTI FACTOR AUTHENTICATION (MFA)

Members will be aware now about CFA's Multi factor authentication that was launched in October for all members to provide an increase in security of the IT systems. As at time of publishing, almost 11,000 volunteers have activated their MFA. All CFA members will now need to activate MFA before they can access their CFA members email or access CFA online systems such as Members Online. Members who have not yet set-up MFA, will be prompted to do so when they next try to login. If your account is locked but you still remember your password, click on the "Unlock Account" link at the bottom of the sign-in page. Alternatively, you can contact the ICT Service Desk on 1300 883 734. Still to be finalised is work involving Local Control Facility (LCF) systems such as the potential of setting up role-based logins. With the upcoming roll out of CFA's Mobile Data Capability Project, the project team are investigating the use of a token instead of individual user log-ins. Where there is no, or unreliable, mobile connection members can use free applications such as OKTA, MS Authenticator, or Google Authenticator to get a code to enter that works offline.

FIRS UPDATE FOR PLANNED BURNING ACTIVITIES

VFBV continues to advocate and encourage updates to CFA's Fire Incident Reporting System (FIRS) to support more accurate volunteer activity records. These records are essential if a member has need to submit an injury or compensation claim through presumptive legislation for example. Along with these changes the first phase of recording Planned Burn information in FIRS went live. In this phase, state Vegetation Management personnel can create reports in FIRS to log planned burn activities. The aim is to enhance reporting on the resources and hours committed to CFA and DEECA Planned Burns. One key advantage of this phase is the consolidation of data into a single, CFA-friendly system, reducing duplication between the Fuel Management System and FIRS by linking both through a shared burn number. Future plans include automating the creation of burn information from the Fuel Management System and Permits Vic into Triple Zero Vic CAD, capturing appliance details through CAD, and enabling Brigades to record their members' involvement in the planned burning program.

FEM FIELD MANAGEMENT APP

Following extensive feedback over the years about the barriers that CFA's old and paper based Fire Equipment Maintenance (FEM) systems are having, CFA is developing new tools to transition FEM activities to digital. A new FEM Field Management app will notify FEM members of jobs, site and maintenance tasks, contacts and allow service logs to be completed electronically. The data will automatically be sent to SAGE for invoicing as well an improvement to the reporting will be available. The app is currently being scoped with the development and release dates to be confirmed.

FOV/MCV UPDATE

The FOV / MCV Working Group has been formed with the purpose to address the aging Field Operations Vehicles (FOV) and Mobile Command Vehicles (MCV) and develop a strategy to determine fleet requirements, scope of works and funding. The Working Group is chaired by the Assistant Chief Fire Officer Operational Communications and have met both online and face to face. The Joint Technology and Innovation Consultative Committee is pleased this Working Group has commenced and looking forward to the future outcomes of the Working Group.

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

OPERATIONAL ENDORSEMENTS

Following many comments and discussions between volunteers, delegates and members CFA has commenced updates to the Learning Management System (LMS) to enable it to store operational endorsements. Using the Brigade Snapshot function in members online, Captains have been requested to record members that they have currently endorsed for the following roles: Internal BA Operator, Hazmat Operator, Protective Equipment Operator, Code 1 and/or 3 Driver and Crew Leader.

In varying degrees of formality this information is already maintained by Brigades, but having a “single source of truth” will be of benefit to brigade management teams and Districts alike. Having this capability information also provides Brigades an extra lever when requesting training. VFBV often gets comments from Brigades that members are knocked back from training because the BOSP shows that they already have enough members who hold a particular competency. However, this is not a true indicator of capability as some of these members may no longer be performing that particular role and VFBV reminds members that BOSP was intended as a minimum number, not a maximum. Brigades should refer to the number of endorsed or actively practicing members when making a case to get members on to a particular course.

TRAINING PATHWAYS

For many years members have had difficulty navigating what training was required for a particular role and the order that it should be completed in. Only finding out you are missing a prerequisite when you enrol for a course is most unhelpful. Over the past 12 months CFA have been developing, consulting and now implemented a set of training pathways. While it is still early days, and the pathways require a lot more development, delegates have put a large amount of work into providing feedback to CFA on the pathways and future refinements. Volunteers have often been frustrated by the fact that CFA were developing pathways to roles that had no formal definition or role statement. Therefore, assumptions had to be made during the development as to what skills were operationally required for a particular role or even if that role should exist at all. CFA has committed to continual revision of the pathways once roles have been defined through projects such as the CFA Operating Model Review which is being led by the Chief Officer.

Delegates have also commented that the current way the pathways are represented in the LMS is somewhat clunky and sometimes confusing to use. CFA has indicated that they will be implementing a graphical representation of the pathways showing them as a “roadmap” where members will be able to click on the desired courses for enrolment information. For roles that require formal endorsement, the interface will also include links to the appropriate SOP that defines this endorsement process. VFBV will be actively pushing for this to be implemented as soon as possible as this ease of use will be where members receive the most benefits of the system.

RECOGNITION OF EXTERNAL QUALIFICATIONS

Over recent years VFBV has received many complaints from members expressing difficulties in getting CFA to recognise competencies obtained through external organisations. As a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), CFA is required to recognise and record national competencies issued by any other RTO and has committed to do this. However, CFA communicated that the recognition of a particular competency may not result in the member automatically being endorsed to perform the role that the competency relates to. For example, a member may obtain the Operate BA Open Circuit competency through another organisation but will not be endorsed as a CFA BA Operator until they have undertaken a challenge test to demonstrate they are familiar with CFA operating procedures and equipment.

Further to this process, CFA is planning to introduce a system where a “gap analysis” can be performed between what skills the member has obtained in their external training and what skills are required for the related role. This will enable CFA to design a form of gap training so the member will not have to complete an entire training course, repeating what they have already learnt. VFBV delegates will monitor this process to ensure that the ‘gap’ training is relevant to the task and does not mean a member is doing more training to gain endorsement than the original course required.



VFBV | VOLUNTEER FIRE
BRIGADES VICTORIA

SURVEY OPEN

This Year's VFBV Vol Survey is now open.

Be part of improving CFA and help us make a difference.

Your views are important - we want to hear from you, please have your say.



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