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CFA VOLUNTEERS’ CANCER PETITION TABLED IN PARLIAMENT

CFA volunteers have presented the first batch of their petition calling for cancer compensation changes for volunteer and career firefighters in Victoria to catch up with other States.

The 16,000 signatures collected so far by CFA volunteers were presented to the Legislative Assembly this morning by Labor MP Luke Donnellan and Coalition MP Neale Burgess.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) Chief Executive Officer Andrew Ford said Victorian volunteer and career firefighters are frustrated that Victoria is lagging behind other States on this serious matter.

“The evidence of firefighters’ exposure to cancer causing toxins as they carry out their duties, and problems with previous compensation arrangements, has been accepted and acted upon by the Commonwealth in 2011 and by Tasmania, Western Australia and South Australia since then”, Mr Ford said.

“A few weeks ago the Northern Territory also accepted the need to make the same reforms to their compensation arrangements for firefighters with cancer,” he said.

“But we are still waiting for action in Victoria.

“Under current Victorian law firefighters are theoretically entitled to cancer compensation, but in practice the requirements of that same law make it almost impossible to obtain.

“In Victoria, the sick firefighter is required to provide sufficient evidence to prove the cause of the cancer arose from particular fires or incidents or other work duties - events that might have happened 10, 15 or more years ago.

“For most firefighters, this is close to impossible because of the absence of sufficient records, data and analysis held by the CFA on each event a firefighter attends.

In other States, the law lists 12 cancers accepted as being more common in firefighters and presumes them to be work related if the firefighter has sufficient years of service – that leaves the burden of proof up to the Government if it chooses to challenge the claim.

More...

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“This is a question of making it easier for firefighters to access their existing entitlement, not introducing any extra entitlement,” Mr Ford said.

“In the three years since the Commonwealth passed its firefighters’ cancer legislation, other States have taken action, but not Victoria.

“For three years the Victorian Government has insisted it is not ruling out this kind of legislation, but will wait on further studies on any link between firefighters’ work and their incidence of cancer before coming to a final decision.

“This is despite the evidence of a sufficient causal link between firefighters’ duties and 12 primary cancers that has already been accepted in Australia and overseas.

“In August 2013, the State Government introduced its Firefighters’ Assessment Panel (FAP), promising it would ensure ‘prompt, compassionate and fair assessments for all claims’, but since then, VFBV and volunteers with cancer have found it does none of those things. Volunteer experience shows the only thing this new process has done is add to the bureaucracy for handling cancer claims. It does nothing to address the core problem, which is an almost impossible process of proving which fires, which toxins, caused a particular illness.”

“Volunteers feel the system seems lengthy, bureaucratic and weighted towards preventing their claim succeeding, instead of helping the sick firefighter in their time of need.

“Frankly, volunteers are sick of waiting, especially when sick Victorian Firefighters are being denied compensation already available to their interstate colleagues,” Mr Ford said.

A copy of the CFA volunteers’ cancer petition is attached. It calls on the Victorian Parliament to follow the Commonwealth and other States in passing legislation for simpler and fairer firefighters’ cancer compensation.

VFBV plans to build on the 16,000 signatures lodged today. Our campaign for fair and just firefighter cancer compensation laws will continue across Victoria in the days and months to come.

Brigades across the state are continuing to collect petition signatures, and members of the public are also welcome to download a copy of the petition at www.vfbv.com.au/petition

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