



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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VFBV Volunteer Welfare & Efficiency Survey

This year's survey will open on Friday 23rd August to coincide with this year's AFAC Conference being held in Melbourne.

The VFBV Volunteer Welfare and Efficiency Survey, now in its 8th year - is an annual snapshot of volunteer opinion and welfare. It has become a critical tool in monitoring short- and long-term trends, and the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at improving CFA volunteer engagement and wellbeing.

The survey is made up of 33 questions chosen by volunteers and takes just 10 or 15 minutes to complete. It is the largest survey of its kind in Australia, and VFBV supports the other Australian States and Territory volunteer associations in running the same survey within the other fire services to gain a national perspective.

Visit the VFBV website to pre-register for this year's survey so you get notified the minute it opens.

Fast feedback needed

All members are asked to provide VFBV with feedback on the draft CFA Training Strategic Plan 2019-2024 by Sunday 25 August.

CFA commenced consultation on the draft plan on 26 July and copies can be sourced from your VFBV District Council or direct from the VFBV website.

Your views have already made a difference: strong feedback from the VFBV Volunteer Welfare and Efficiency Survey (VolWEL), which placed training as one of the top two frustrations and areas of dissatisfaction for volunteers, is quoted by CFA as a key influencer of the approach to the plan. CFA says the plan "responds to the 2018 VFBV Welfare and Efficiency survey feedback by ensuring that we provide sufficient training opportunities in formats and at times which in turn will make it easier for our people to complete their training."

A number of commitments and statements of how activity will be delivered are included in the plan. Members 'on the ground' know best whether the strategic intent will deliver practical benefits on the ground, so your view is important.

Feedback can be sent direct to; email c.dent@vfbv.com.au; Post 9/24 Lakeside Drive, Burwood East VIC 3151 or Fax: (03) 9886 1618

Executive Officer appointed

VFBV continues to strengthen its skill base and our deep commitment to supporting CFA volunteers with the appointment of Mark Dryden to the VFBV Executive Officer role. Mark started his role on 1 August.

Mark is well known to members, having worked as a VFBV Support Officer in the South East since early 2016. Mark is also a long serving volunteer with more than 25 years' service. He has served with multiple brigades throughout his life, such as Yackandandah (D24), Kialla (D22), Moorooduc and Skye (D8). He is presently settling in to his new home in Drouin in District 9.

Mark's deep insights into the needs of volunteers, his experience liaising with many different stakeholders, his organisational and consultation skills and his in-depth knowledge of CFA will be greatly appreciated by VFBV and volunteers alike.

Thank-you to all applicants who applied: they have demonstrated the very high quality of competency and knowledge in candidates who have an interest in working for this unique and very important organisation.

VFBV has commenced advertising for the VFBV Support Officer - South East position, which is vacant as a result of Mark's appointment. If you know of someone who would love to make a difference for CFA volunteers and who has the skills to facilitate good consultation, issue resolution and volunteer engagement, please refer to the advertisement on this page. Mark will continue to support the South East while the position remains vacant and as he transitions to

his new role.

Bullying high but reporting low

The CFA complaints process continues to be one of the most serious and contentious issues dealt with by the Joint HR, Welfare and OH&S Committee. VFBV delegates are strongly pushing for volunteers to be fairly, equitably and appropriately treated in any complaint process, and for proper transparency about the process and tracking of cases to ensure they are resolved in a timely manner.

At a recent meeting the committee was informed that data received by CFA consistently indicates that rates of bullying and harassment are unacceptably high, however levels of reporting are low.

There is a perception that many volunteers feel there is little point in raising an issue as they believe it will not be dealt with adequately and fairly, or that there will be negative consequences for the complainant. The committee was told CFA is working on simplifying the process.

VFBV will continue to advocate for fundamental changes to CFA's current discipline and complaints processes and is seeking an overhaul that will improve confidence amongst volunteers that members will receive natural justice and procedural fairness.

VFBV would advise any member who wishes to lodge a formal complaint to access: <https://cfaonline.cfa.vic.gov.au/mycfa/Show?pageId=display-Doc&docId=005323>

I am pleased to report on the positive progress made in developing the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation Regulations 2019 and the work of VFBV in advocating strongly for CFA volunteers.

Presumptive Legislation provides a rebuttable presumption for volunteer and career firefighters suffering from specified forms of cancer. It legislates that these cancers are presumed to be due to the nature of their service as a firefighter for the purposes of claiming compensation. It is intended to reverse the onus of proof so the sick firefighter does not have to needlessly face the almost impossible task of proving which specific fires, incidents or toxins caused the cancer.

The presumptive rights part of the legislation formed Part 2 of the Government's Fire Services Reform Bill, and, unlike the remaining parts of the legislation, the presumptive rights portion of the Bill came into operation on the day after the Act received Royal Assent.

One of the first priorities for VFBV was to influence the Firefighters' Presumptive Rights Compensation Regulations that were to be developed immediately following Royal Assent. While the Bill provides the framework for the law, the Regulations provide the detail and specifics that are required to give practical effect to how administrative processes would actually work. For volunteers in particular, the Regulations are even more critical, as they deal with the workings of the controversial 'advisory committee' required for all Victorian volunteer firefighter claims.

VFBV's concerns and objections to the additional barriers and processes that only volunteer firefighter claims must go through are well known and documented. I am not going to repeat them here. However, while the regulations are not able to completely cure those problems (as they have to operate within the framework of the principal legislation), we saw an opportunity to work with Government and stakeholders to develop the regulations in such a way that could minimise the harm while hopefully mitigating the potential bias that the legislation creates. The goal was to influence the regulations as best we could to ensure volunteers received as fair and respectful treatment as possible under the circumstances.

Making recruitment and retention easier

VFBV has formed a joint working party with CFA following repeated requests from brigades for a way to easily share and find information about existing and tested recruitment and retention strategies used by fellow brigades around the state. The working party will aim to ensure programs developed for brigades to retain and recruit new members are user-friendly.

Initiatives under review include editable marketing templates and knowledge-sharing platforms (which includes case studies direct from brigades about how they have re-engaged, recruited or retained members). Programs may include a variety of word style documents, brochures, still images and videos, and even a suggestion of podcasts. Rural decline is also part of the program, with a pilot underway in Edenhope (District 17) and Wedderburn (District 2).

CFA is also looking at youth retention and recruitment initiatives in other organisations, such as other emergency services, Scouts and the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. It is believed that CFA has around 4000 operational youth members (aged between 16-17 years up to 24 years old). CFA is currently working through the seven key areas of child safety to ensure that the organisation is compliant and meet legislative requirements, which has caused some programs to 'slow down', such as the cadet program, Duke of Edinburgh Award, and La Trobe University visits.

CFA committed to continue supporting, maintaining and growing junior membership and ensuring that members under 18 years are made to feel safe at all times.

That is why I am so pleased to report that our hard work and collaboration over many weeks with the Minister, the Hon. Lisa Neville, her staff, EMV and Worksafe on the drafting has had some positive effects. The Regulations have consequently now been made by the Governor and were given effect on 9 July. And while there were, of course, compromises along the way, I am pleased with the result and very grateful for the hard work and good faith displayed by the Minister's office in particular.

Discussions were very productive and respectful and gave me increased confidence that the much-needed healing of divisions of the past is on the right track.

One of VFBV's primary objectives was to gain increased transparency in the advisory committee process and its outcomes. In this vein, the new Regulations require the advisory committee to provide its expert opinion (and the reasons for it) within 10 days of receiving the request from WorkSafe. The Regulations also now provide an opportunity for the claimant firefighter to provide their own information to the committee should they wish to - and the firefighter can request a copy of the expert opinion and the reasons for it, which must be provided within 7 days of the request being made.

These were key criticisms of the original legislation and these changes are important safeguards that volunteers will welcome as they significantly increase the transparency and accountability of the committee.

Other areas of importance was the ability for the nomination and activation of the three-person panel to be tailored to best suit the nature of the application they are to review. For example, the panel that reviews whether a volunteer firefighter has 'attended fires to the extent reasonably necessary' could be made up of just fire service experts, which may be different to a panel established to review an exceptional exposure event that may require scientific knowledge. This starts to lay the groundwork and shape the working of the panel closer to the simple 'tick and flick' process that was promised to us.

There is also provision for the panel to help the applicant firefighter obtain relevant records

PRESUMPTIVE REGULATIONS

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

or local knowledge - an important safeguard should agency records be incomplete or insufficient.

With the Regulations now complete, VFBV's next priority is to review the actual claims forms and process to ensure a sick firefighter is not delayed or confused by complicated paperwork. Our preliminary analysis indicates current forms are likely to be somewhat confusing for firefighters submitting a presumptive claim for cancer. This is mainly because the forms were primarily designed to report common workplace injuries where exact causes are known. We will now direct our efforts at working with WorkSafe and CFA on possible solutions. We are also investigating options for additional support for volunteers as they go through the claims process, and I'll report back on progress shortly.

In summary, this is a positive outcome considering our starting point, and demonstrates the value of working cooperatively and in good faith with stakeholders to achieve a good outcome.

The proof will be in the pudding so to speak, so while good progress has been made on the intent and design of administrative processes, we will need to remain vigilant and monitor the progress of future claims that will test these processes. Despite the inherent weaknesses of the legislation, we will need to see whether these measures can, in fact, mitigate the different treatment of volunteers and career staff simply because one is paid. The ultimate measure of success will be that there is parity of results and all firefighters who go through the system receive fair, equitable and compassionate treatment. We will all need to monitor the situation closely to ensure those commitments and promises are kept.

Rob Gibbs

Most of us know the story of Rob Gibbs, who has courageously spoken up about his treatment by CFA and the authorities over the last three years as he has battled for compensation to support his medical expenses and care.

A few short years ago Rob was a healthy, active firefighter,



filling key leadership roles, a regular first responder including attendance at many significant and well publicised incidents. Today Rob, 48, is wheelchair-bound and in constant pain from leukaemia. He is battling this terrible, painful illness and has clear advice from a medical specialist that his firefighting was the primary cause. And yet he continues to be forced to battle insurers and lawyers when he should be concentrating on his health and his family. Rob has been left out in the cold because the legislation that passed Parliament in June this year contained a clause that only backdated presumptive rights to diagnoses occurring after 1 June 2016.

VFBV will continue to support and campaign strongly for Rob, who deserves a fair and just outcome - not just for himself but for his wife and young daughter. We will keep working for the best, but Rob's experience remains a cautionary tale and one I hope gets addressed as quickly as possible - not just for the trust of CFA volunteers but for the simple humanity, compassion and fairness that Rob is due. We will continue to monitor progress of Rob's case and will keep you apprised.

AFAC

Just a reminder that if you're in Melbourne for this year's AFAC Conference, pop in and say hello. VFBV will be on Stand #595 in the exhibition space at the Melbourne Exhibition and Convention Centre in Southbank throughout the conference. Members are welcome to drop by and have a chat. We will have laptops on hand so volunteers can complete this year's VFBV Welfare & Efficiency Survey while they are there.

POSITION VACANT VFBV SUPPORT OFFICER

VFBV is seeking to appoint a VFBV Support Officer to work in regional Victoria with VFBV District Councils, Brigades and volunteers to facilitate consultation, issues resolution and volunteer engagement.

The position is a State role, with emphasis and focus on providing support throughout CFA's South East region (CFA Districts 8, 9, 10, 11 and 27)

This is an existing position, with the incumbent moving to another role within VFBV.

In addition to relevant skills and experience, candidates will need to understand CFA and volunteerism, be good listeners; be able to facilitate good consultation; ability to establish productive networks; navigate through complex issues resolution; be self-starters and have a passion to improve arrangements that benefit the welfare and efficiency of CFA volunteers.

Extensive regional Victorian work travel is envisaged and flexible work base locations will be considered for the position, with the priority focus to assign a work location within the CFA South East Region.

Flexible working arrangements, to cater for extensive evening and weekend work, will be tailored to match the needs of our volunteer membership base.

This is a full time position giving the right candidate an opportunity to really put his/her stamp on the VFBV of the future.

All applications must include both a current resume and a cover letter addressing the key selection criteria outlined in the position description available from the VFBV office or website.

Send applications to the attention of the CEO, VFBV, PO Box 453, Mt. Waverley, Vic. 3149 or email c.smith@vfbv.com.au

Applications close Sunday 15th September 2019.

For further information please contact Cathie Smith on 03 9886 1141