



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

Address: 9/24 Lakeside Drive, Burwood East, 3151
 Email: vfbv@vfbv.com.au
 Telephone: 9886 1141
 Chief Executive Officer: Adam Barnett

Post: PO Box 453, Mt Waverley, 3149
 Website: www.vfbv.com.au
 Fax: 9886 1618
 State President: Nev Jones AFSM



POSTPONEMENT OF AGM

After reviewing the current Victorian Health Guidelines, the Australian National Plan to Transition National COVID Response and advice from Consumer Affairs Victoria, the VFBV Board have authorised a three-month extension and postponed this year's Annual General Meeting (AGM) to December 2021.

Planning has commenced to hold this year's AGM to coincide with the December State Council meeting, currently scheduled for Sunday 5th December 2021. Further details of arrangements will be provided closer to the date.

The Board has also endorsed and approved State Council's recommendation that all Board, State Council and Welfare Fund office holder's terms that were due to expire in October 2021, will be extended through to December 2021.

Survey pre-registration

This year's VFBV Volunteer Welfare and Efficiency Survey is about to open. Volunteers can pre-register now to ensure you are amongst the first to be notified of this year's survey.

Visit the VFBV website or use the QR code contained in the September quarterly supplement.

STRUCTURAL TRAINING CONCERNS

VFBV continues to receive communications from Brigades expressing concerns that access to structure fire-fighting courses is increasingly difficult with CFA not running enough courses to meet demand.

VFBV continues to raise this directly with CFA, sighting many reasons why this training is so important to

Essential Training

All members are reminded that core operational training and skills maintenance is classified as an essential activity for the purposes of CFA COVID Response level 2.

Training must be conducted in a COVID safe manner and must satisfy the requirement that it is core to maintaining operational capability.

There is automatic approval for activities required to meet the CFA Chief Officer's pre summer requirements and brigades should continue to use the adapted burn-over drill procedures that were introduced to apply physical distancing so the drill can be conducted safely within COVID safe protocols.

All formal skill acquisition courses and assessment are to be approved by the ACFO with essential training continuing to be available except in those areas operating under a COVID Response level 3.

Brigades are encouraged to discuss their requirements with their ACFO and consider modifying training activities to small groups on alternating days of the week to avoid large gatherings.

Training must be completed prior to curfew in metro areas operating under a curfew. Online resources are available to assist with blended learning.

VFBV District Councils are available to assist with any brigade that believes that their essential training request has been inappropriately denied.

Brigades and the safety of all members. CFA has reported that course and training planning/delivery is the responsibility of individual Districts with ACFO's being accountable for these activities.

We encourage brigades who are having issues with training plans or course scheduling to speak directly to your Districts in the first instance and escalate through your VFBV District Councils where required.

VFBV will continue to advocate for structural training availability to be increased in line with brigade expectations and will support any brigade requiring assistance with escalation.

JOINT COMMITTEE EOI

Expressions of interest are now open for volunteers to nominate as subject matter experts to the VFBV/CFA Joint Committee's for the 2022 calendar year.

If you feel you can contribute and have the time, are passionate about one of the seven streams and want to be an integral part of our Joint Committee process – then please talk to your local VFBV State Councillor or VFBV Support Officer for a nomination form.

Nominations are due to your District Council early November 2021.

ARE THEY REALLY OK?

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

R U OK? Day falls on the 9th of September this year. This year's message is 'Are they really OK? Ask them today.'

R U OK? is a national suicide prevention initiative that encourages Australians to connect with people in the community, your colleagues, friends, family, and loved ones – encouraging them to generate constructive discussion about issues such as suicide, depression, isolation and mental illness.

The aim is to encourage people to stay connected and have meaningful conversations that can help others through difficult times in their lives.

The R U OK? charity has some terrific resources to help equip you for those conversations, and some coaching to help get you ready to have a conversation which could literally change someone's life.

Available from www.ruok.org.au resources walk you through four easy steps of: ask; listen; encourage action; and check in. There are webinars and role plays to help you, and a really important section in the 'How to Ask' area that can help you get ready. Questions such as if you are ready to ask, are you prepared for where the conversation may go and how best to pick your moment and environment.

Remember, that all members including your immediate family members have free access to CFA's wellbeing and welfare services 24 hours day, 7 days a week. You can access these via 1800 959 232 or via cfa.vic.gov.au/wellbeing

This year's R U OK? day is a great reminder of the incredible power each of you have to make a real difference in someone else's life. You don't need to make a big song and dance about it, but if you have noticed someone in your life who might be experiencing some personal difficulties or is struggling with life's current uncertainties (COVID isolation for example) your genuine support and compassion can have a huge influence. Use R U OK? day to remind ourselves not to wait until someone is visibly distressed or in crisis before we act and check-in.

VACCINES

We are receiving some enquiries asking whether VFBV is pursuing mandatory vaccination for CFA members. At this stage, while we are not pursuing mandatory vaccination, we are very supportive of encouraging members to be vaccinated as soon as possible.

Early discussions at Board and State level have indicated it is still too early to consider mandating. The looming fire

season remains our focus, with national vaccination targets providing a good baseline and aspirational target for this year. Ensuring all members who want a vaccine have adequate opportunity to receive it remains the best strategy to drive the numbers up.

VFBV was at the forefront of vaccine advocacy, leading the charge for the inclusion of all emergency management volunteers under priority 1B of the national vaccination roll-out plan.

And while we have had access to Priority 1B vaccinations since the 22nd March 2021, not everyone has had the same access and opportunity. Early vaccination hubs were predominately only available in metro areas while vaccine supply has only markedly improved over recent times.

In essence, CFA is an essential service whose sole role and purpose is to protect lives and property. Therefore, any discussions that start excluding people or creating artificial barriers that have the potential to impact on our essential service delivery to our communities is not something to take lightly. It deserves deep thought and analysis and respect for the complex policy setting that such decisions exist within.

CFA is also not an island. We work alongside many other partner agencies on the fireground, meaning we must adopt a sector wide approach.

Philosophically, we also need to consider whether it is the role of organisations, agencies or private enterprise for that matter to be stepping into the health space and introducing what amounts to potentially a significant incursion into the right of people to withhold consent for something affecting their bodies.

This isn't an anti-vax position. In fact, for context - I've been fully vaccinated for many months now, and by the time you read this the entire VFBV Board is also fully vaccinated. But there is a big difference between encouraging vaccination vs mandating it.

CFA is the largest emergency service in Victoria. We are a broad and diverse organisation.

We have room to always strive to be as inclusive as possible. There may well be a time when mandatory vaccination is well supported, and our public health bodies make the recommendation like what is happening in high-risk sectors such as health. But the place for those decisions is squarely within the institutions of our parliamentary democracy with appropriate checks and balances in place,

including judicial review and oversight.

There may very well be some activities where vaccination is going to be preferred.

For example, there have already been recent occasions where residents have requested smoke detector installation by fully vaccinated members due to the resident having some underlying health concerns. And where we can - we should respect these requests.

It is also likely we will see some preferences emerge for vaccinated members for some activities like cross border and other potential higher-risk settings.

We should also not ignore other tools such as rapid antigen testing, air monitoring, and pre health screening activities that are already in use right now across the world where our northern hemisphere agencies are already well advanced in their summer fire seasons and dealing with much larger outbreaks.

I acknowledge some of these discussions are already occurring. A fellow volunteer remarked to me recently that they would only be going on a strike team if every single other member on the strike team was fully vaccinated. I'm sure this position is shared by many.

The question is - what if it was your community on fire or under threat and we couldn't send enough fire trucks because we were standing around figuring out who should and shouldn't attend? With recent drops in vol numbers, extended fire seasons and increased requests for mutual aid, we need to think very carefully about anything that reduces our response capacity.

Emergency response activities have not been super spreader activities to date. In fact, in all settings where there are strict COVID safety protocols, proper use and discipline of wearing PPC, physical distancing and proper hygiene controls – these have all proven very effective. Our brothers and sisters in Victoria Police and Ambulance Victoria are dealing with thousands more occasions where they are interacting with potential cases every day. I say this not to understate the risks, but rather put them into perspective. As far as fire brigade activities are concerned, you're more likely to be involved in a road accident on your way to the call than catching COVID. Our policy response needs to be proportionate to the risk.

I guess what I am trying to say is there are already enough things that try to pit us against each other without having to add to the list. It is a very 2020 type notion that these days people are either only 'for' or 'against' things. Public discourse and debate seem to be led by what can fit on a meme or in a 140 character insult, with victory deemed to the 'loudest'.

Let's respect the inherent complexity of the issue and commit to some genuine and robust discussion and dialog to help inform our views.



Please use your brigades and District Councils to start the discussions so we can understand the pros and cons.

I would urge people not to try and hastily reach consensus or positions, but rather encourage participatory discussions where we can learn from one another. Conversations that promote divergent thoughts and thinking, allowing alternate views to be respectfully considered, and genuine informed discussion that respects and acknowledges the broad diversity of thought amongst the membership.

Having said all that I would ask that all members please seriously consider being vaccinated. If you are unsure or have concerns or family histories that make vaccination high-risk, they are all legitimate concerns. Informed consent is just that. Informed.

And with the greatest of respect - social media or the internet is not always the best source of reliable and factual advice, so if you are hesitating - please discuss your individual circumstance with your doctor. And for those waiting for something better - the best vaccine is likely the one you have access to today.

To those who are vaccinated, please be kind and respectful to those who may not be. Vaccination is a very personal decision. You won't change minds by simply insulting people or driving them away.

The strength of VFBV is the willingness of members and delegates to challenge, be inclusive, inspire, and pioneer new ways of doing things - all the while maintaining our compassion and empathy.

This month I have chosen two quotes fitting of this month's discussion. The first from Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the second by Eleanor Roosevelt.

FDR is the only US President to have served more than two terms, having been elected four times and serving as President between 1933 and 1945, encompassing the Great Depression and World War II.

Eleanor served as First Lady to FDR, but earned the tribute 'First Lady of the World' by President Truman in recognition of her work as a diplomat to the United Nations and her human rights achievements.

"Human kindness has never weakened the stamina or softened the fiber of a free people. A nation does not have to be cruel to be tough."

Franklin D. Roosevelt

"Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people."

Eleanor Roosevelt

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