



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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MEMBERS' STRONG SHOW OF SUPPORT

Again in 2022/23, CFA Brigades and Groups showed that it is more important than ever that volunteers have a strong, united, independent and credible voice with more than 95% of Brigades demonstrating strong support for VFBV's important work representing and advocating for all CFA volunteers. Thank you to all brigades and groups who affiliated last year.

2023/24 renewal notices for your Brigade/Group's VFBV Affiliation and Welfare Fund subscriptions and have been mailed out to Brigade and Group secretaries with a due date of 30 June 2023.

All Brigades and Groups that pay their VFBV affiliations before 30th June will automatically be entered into a draw to win one of four extremely worthwhile prizes valued at approximately \$4,000. The prizes have for the third-year running been donated by GAAM Emergency Products and Powdersafe and we sincerely thank them for their continued generous support. Further details of the prizes on offer are detailed on the flyer included with your renewal notices.

As well as affiliating, we strongly encourage Brigades to subscribe to the VFBV Welfare Fund. The Welfare Fund is a capital fund and an exclusive benefit to affiliated members with VFBV funding all the administration and operating costs ensuring 100% of funds received go directly to CFA volunteers experiencing personal hardship. The VFBV Welfare Fund provides small grants of up to \$5,000 to assist volunteer members and long serving ex members. The grants support members and their families experiencing personal financial hardship/crisis by providing welfare grants, on a needs-assessed basis, that may help alleviate stress impacting their ability to maintain involvement as a volunteer.

NOMINATIONS FOR TRUST FUND

VFBV is calling for nominations to the CFA and Brigades Donations Fund.

The purpose of the fund is to raise and receive money and donations of goods and services from the public for distribution to brigades to assist with costs of purchasing and maintaining firefighting equipment, facilities, training and administrative expenses which are associated with their firefighting functions.

Following nominations, five new or reappointed members will be appointed by the VFBV Board to serve as VFBV Trustees on the fund for a term of two years.

All current trustees are eligible for re-appointment. Please visit the VFBV website for details. Nominations close on Monday 19th June 2023

VESEP

Applications are now open for the 2023/24 Volunteer Emergency Services Equipment Program (VESEP). Applications are due to your District ACFO by the 16th June 2023.

VFBV has updated its VESEP Help Pack to assist brigades and groups with their VESEP applications. This pack is available from our website, or paper copies can be obtained by phoning the office.

VESEP provides grants of \$2 for every \$1 of Brigade or Group funding to assist brigades and groups in acquiring a wide range of operational equipment.

VFBV wishes all CFA Brigades and Groups well with your applications and thanks you for your untiring service to Victoria!

MANDATORY WWCC

Feedback is being sought on a CFA proposal to update its policy covering Working with Children Clearances.

This draft policy extends the requirement for all volunteers to hold a current working with children check (WWCC). The policy proposes a phased approach, requiring all members of a brigade management team and various other roles to hold a WWCC by June 2024. The policy then extends this requirement to all group and deputy group officers, as well as all members of a brigade that has members under 18, requiring them to hold a WWCC from June 2025. The final phase requires every volunteer to hold a WWCC from June 2026 as a condition of membership.

VFBV is seeking feedback from volunteers to help inform a VFBV response. Feedback can be provided by individuals, brigades, groups and District Councils.

Please visit the VFBV website for more information, including copies of the draft policy.

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Board applications

Please refer to the advertisements that appear on page 3 of this edition of Fire Wise newspaper for applications to the CFA and VFBV Boards.

VFBV encourages any members who are interested in contributing to a Board to review the materials available on the VFBV website to understand the roles and obligations.

Volunteers from all backgrounds and walks of life are welcome to apply. In particular, VFBV is seeking greater gender diversity, and encourages women in particular to consider applying.

VFBV Trustees on the fund for a term of two years.

All current trustees are eligible for re-appointment. Please visit the VFBV website for details.

Nominations close on Monday 19th June 2023

FINANCE POLICIES

Feedback is being sought on a proposed CFA Brigade/Group Finance Policy Suite.

The suite encompasses six draft policies that seek to clarify the processes surrounding the management of brigade and group finances.

The draft policies cover things like approvals required for purchases, restrictions on the number of bank accounts, how funds can be spent and records required etc.

While many of the topics covered are similar to those that currently exist in the

brigade management manual, there are several areas of changed policy.

Brigades and groups are encouraged to go through the policies and provide any feedback to help inform VFBV response to CFA.

Feedback from members ultimately leads to either VFBV support or non-sup-

port for a specific policy, as well as contributing to our advocacy around amendments.

Feedback can be provided by individuals, brigades, groups and District Councils.

Please visit the VFBV website for more information, including copies of the draft policy.

The change makers

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

In this month's edition of Fire Wise, members will find a copy of the 16-page VFBV Quarterly Supplement. As well as the usual updates from our Joint Committees, we have also included the summary results of our most recent volunteer survey.

Now in its eleventh year, our annual survey is the largest of its kind. The longitudinal nature of the survey along with its consistent questions and themes, provides a robust snapshot of volunteer views and opinions over time and allows for trend and other analysis to be conducted.

At a high level the results give cause for optimism, with incremental improvement in volunteer satisfaction with CFA across most of the survey themes, with 22 questions recording an improvement. Five questions recorded a drop in satisfaction and six questions recorded no change.

Not surprising, the main areas of volunteer dissatisfaction with CFA continues to be around training, consultation, and the need for greater support for recruitment and retention.

This year we also piloted four new questions. Three of those questions help us delve a little deeper into the long-term dissatisfaction around training, and asked members if CFA's training expectations were fair and reasonable for the roles that you perform; if CFA's online training courses were easy to use and effective; and if members had access to adequate internet in order to participate in online training.

On the internet question, 86% of survey respondents indicated they had access to adequate internet. And while this may sound like a good result, in an organisation the size of CFA, having 14% of members not able to access adequate internet is a reminder that CFA must continue to offer flexible ways for people to stay connected.

While the survey results are highly credible from a sample size perspective, it should be noted that given most of our survey respondents choose to do the survey online, the number of people who still have trouble accessing online services is likely somewhat understated in these results. Even taking the 14% as a conservative figure, that still equates to more than 7000 volunteers.

This is precisely why when CFA advised they were moving to electronic multi-factor authentication for all CFA online services later this year, it was VFBV that was left to argue that while the majority of members were likely to have a mobile phone, not all would be capable of running an authenticator app, leaving potentially thousands who would be locked out of all CFA online systems.

Rather than use this as a reason not to do something – we argued the case that it is incumbent on CFA to ensure it finds flexible ways for these members to remain connected without weakening security to ensure we don't leave anyone behind. To its credit, CFA was able to identify an alternative method resulting in a good outcome. This again highlights not only VFBV's commitment

to working collaboratively with CFA to solve problems, but also highlights the importance of genuine and robust consultation with volunteers before CFA embarks on significant change.

BUDGET WATCH

VFBV remains highly vigilant in monitoring developments on CFA's budget post fire services reform. With the Victorian Government handing down its state budget late last month, there was very little good news for CFA volunteers. For the first time in many years, there was no new funding for any new fire stations, trucks or equipment. The only announcement was for the redevelopment of three fire stations.

This lack of capital funding is devastating given the poor shape of CFA's capital works budget, and the unsustainability of CFA's asset pool. Funding three fire stations out of 1,214 stations across the state means it will take 404 years to get around to all. Given we are now pushing fire trucks well past their 20-year age limit, with many well over 30-years old, CFA is facing a rapid deteriorating asset base that is very concerning.

And while we hear a lot from the government about the \$126 million that was provided to CFA back in 2020, there are a lot of little facts that keep being left off the brochure so to speak.

First of all, it was \$126 million over five years, so \$25.2 million a year. Second of all, just weeks after making the announcement, the CFA annual budget from government grants went from \$807 million, to \$351 million, a reduction of \$456 million dollars overnight. One needs to go back 14 years in time to 2009 to find government contributions to CFA dropping to this level.

And thirdly, under the terms of fire services reform, CFA was forced to transfer another \$229 million in property, plant and equipment off CFA's books, and gifted free of charge to FRV to account for the 37 co-located fire stations, land, building and equipment.

This marks a particularly poor record on funding for CFA over the last three years, and there is no way to spin it otherwise.

Incidentally, FRV's revenue grew from \$461 million to \$859 million over the same period.

Now if we work that out by fire station, CFA runs 1,214 fire stations on its \$351 million or approx. \$290k per station per year, and FRV runs its 85 fire stations for \$807 million working out at \$9.5 million per station per year.

The only highlight from this year's budget papers was the output measurements of the fire services which confirmed CFA delivered a 90% outcome for response times to structure fires over the 2022/23 period, with FRV delivering an 87% outcome for structure fires. An interesting outcome for those who argue that response time performance measurements are the be all and end all.

The government has not revealed CFA's base budget



for this year in the budget papers, so VFBV will continue to monitor developments closely. Volunteers will no doubt anxiously await confirmation of this year's CFA budget and any impacts of reduced funding. Given the cuts already made, any further cuts will be nothing short of devastating, and will require strong volunteer advocacy.

As the most efficient fire service in Victoria, and following decades of underinvestment, it would be irresponsible to think that the world class emergency service provided by volunteers could possibly be subjected to any further cuts or tightening. It is a brave Government indeed to choose not to fund fire stations and fire trucks at a time where large scale emergencies like fire and flood are predicted to occur more often and with higher intensity due to a changing climate. On behalf of a future Royal Commission, allow me to pre-empt the very first question a future Commission is likely to ask – what were you thinking?

Readers would recall our advice that the VFBV Board has now elevated EMV to an organisation of concern over their appalling record of non-compliance with their obligations under the volunteer charter and following their ill-advised disbanding of the volunteer consultative forum. Given the current financial environment, our investigations on the amount of money that is now being redirected from the fire services to EMV to fund this burgeoning bureaucracy remains a high priority. We will keep you updated on progress.

NATIONAL VOLUNTEER WEEK

National Volunteer Week ran from 15–21 May this year. This year's theme was 'The Change Makers' to recognise that volunteers dedicate their time and energy to effect real and positive change in their communities, a theme that CFA volunteers had no trouble identifying with.

On behalf of VFBV I wish to pass on our deep gratitude and respect to all CFA volunteers and other emergency service volunteers across the sector. Over the last 12 months our members have dealt with fire and flood and everything in between.

Victorians are safer because of the work you do each and every day, and we could not be more proud of you.

Not only did we say thank-you to our volunteers during Volunteer Week, we took this opportunity to also thank all those who support and encourage CFA volunteers. In the words of Ulysses S. Grant, the 18th American President "The friend in my adversity I shall always cherish most. I can better trust those who helped to relieve the gloom of my dark hours than those who are so ready to enjoy with me the sunshine of my prosperity."