



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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VFBV BOARD APPLICATIONS

Please refer to the advertisement that appears on page 3 of this month's edition of 'Fire Wise' for applications to the VFBV Board.

VFBV encourages any members who are interested in contributing to the 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.

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.

Also turn to page 3 of this edition for article containing further details.

AFSMs for Dawn and Paul

VFBV congratulates the five CFA members who were among almost 1,200 Australian's recognised in the first King's Birthday Honours list this year.

Captain Dawn Hartog AFSM has provided 18 years of dedicated and exceptional service to CFA, initially as a staff member and now as a volunteer and member of the CFA Board. Dawn has extensive emergency management experience both as a firefighter and within Incident Management Teams as an

accredited Level 3 Public Information Officer and has distinguished herself with her ability to effectively engage with a broad range of stakeholders to achieve outcomes which have made a significant contribution CFA.

Captain Paul Denham AFSM has been recognised as a highly experienced and respected firefighter in both urban and rural settings for more than 40 years. Paul has served in leadership roles with Boronia Fire Brigade, Knox Group and Buxton Fire Brigade as well as serving as a State Councillor with VFBV for more than 20 years and three years as a CFA Board Member. Throughout his service Paul has been passionate about training, the safety

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-support 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 the draft policy.

CFA's newest brigade

VFBV welcomes CFA's newest Fire Brigade at Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust in District 11.

This decision follows representation from the dedicated volunteer members who've protected their land for two decades as a satellite station of Toorloo Fire Brigade.

In accordance with the wishes of the local community and the principle of self-determination, an indigenous name for the new brigade will be determined following engagement with Elders.

A local CFA presence was established in early 2000s by a group of First Nations women who wanted to join CFA and be trained as firefighters following a series of blazes on the former Lake Tyers Mission in East Gippsland.

You can read about the history of CFA's newest brigade, via CFA members online.

The last several months have seen some significant items out for broad consultation, with the two most recent items eliciting a very high number of responses.

We sought feedback on draft changes CFA was proposing to its Radio Allocation policy and procedure, and feedback on a new draft policy that CFA was proposing to cover the consumption of alcohol at social functions and other activities.

First and foremost, I wish to thank every volunteer that took the time to submit feedback and comment. Our networks are designed to provide the opportunity for volunteers from every part of the State to provide feedback. This is important as a policy impact can be very different depending on the location of your brigade, how large or small it is, the makeup of the membership, and your own experiences which often provide different perspectives. To canvass feedback from 52,000 volunteers across 1,214 brigades takes considerable time, effort and hard work.

Our forums are also the perfect place for volunteers to discuss these impacts. Often there may be a perception of what a policy is saying that elicits strong feedback. Being able to discuss the policy in open forums such as our District Councils allows volunteers to hear feedback from their peers and often leads to a much better understanding and appreciation of what impacts may or may not occur in their own brigade.

Essentially, this elaborate and well-structured network is what drives VFBV to be determined to ensure decision makers use it, and treat volunteer consultation seriously to ensure issues are well understood, discussed and tested, with enough time for these discussions to be meaningful.

And yes, sometimes it can be difficult. No one likes hearing negative feedback, but if a

of protective clothing and equipment used by CFA members as well as advocating for improved amenities at fire stations.

VFBV congratulates Dawn and Paul for their outstanding contribution to CFA and the broader community.

Congratulations are also extended to fellow CFA volunteers Leslie Kelly and Ian Graham as well as CFA Board Member Tony Peake who each received the honour of the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM).

Transferring members

VFBV delegates have been raising concerns with the process of members transferring brigades. For some time now, there has been a changed process that has altered an operational member to non-operational status upon their transfer and has required the brigade to then specifically request their status be changed back to operational.

This has resulted in many members unaware their status has changed, and has the potential to impact on service records, insurance coverage and the like.

The Chief Officer has agreed to a VFBV request to rectify this anomaly, and the process has now been amended to ensure current operational members who hold a firefighting qualification retain their operational status upon a transfer, without the brigade having to submit a change of status form. Transferring members may not turnout or respond to fires until the Captain of the receiving brigade has endorsed that member to respond (as is the case now), but this no longer requires any paperwork and can be managed at the local brigade level.

FEEDBACK LOOP

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

draft policy has missed the mark, or has not prepared for a potential impact or other negative consequence, it is better for everyone to know that while there is still time to fix it.

In this sense, VFBV was inundated with feedback from members on CFA's draft alcohol and other drugs policy. Only 13% of respondents indicated a high level of support for the draft policy. It was clear from going through the feedback that the draft missed the mark and underestimated many of the impacts caused by loose wording and vague scope and intent.

Without declaring what problem the policy was hoping to fix, it was left open to interpretation, of which there was many. In an organisation the size of CFA, it is important that policy writers maintain strict discipline in crafting policy language, scope and intent.

It is important to note that while there was overwhelming criticism of elements of the draft policy, we did not receive any feedback that advocated inappropriate policy settings or suggested volunteers did not support an overarching policy context that encourages the responsible use and serving of alcohol. This is unsurprising given the extremely high trust and reputation that CFA volunteers have built and earned in their communities.

However, there was overwhelming feedback that CFA policy must first and foremost be framed in the context that CFA is a volunteer and community embedded organisation and creating six pages of red tape that sought to reach across into people's personal lives and simply tie people in knots was neither well received, nor appropriate given the very low incidence of issues. The point that many made was that the CFA behavioural standards, founded on the volunteer code of conduct that volunteers themselves designed and wrote - expressly outlines the behaviour expected of CFA members, so why the need for more bureaucracy?

The VFBV Board and State Council have considered the feedback received and have developed five high level principles to guide a future sensible policy. We have formally advised CFA that we cannot support its draft policy in its current format and have

offered to assist CFA revisit its base assumptions, proposing a more effective policy that incorporates volunteer feedback.

While CFA has not yet formally responded to VFBV's feedback, I have been informed that our feedback has been welcomed and is being taken seriously, with the intent of diligently considering the feedback provided before discussing next steps.

While we don't always have to agree, this is the mature and professional way to approach consultation. Neither side is served by digging in or ignoring the others perspective, and I remain optimistic that genuine consultation, and a culture of actively seeking, listening and acting on volunteer feedback continues, and I congratulate the CFA CEO and Chief Officer on their approach to working with us to ensure volunteer consultation is not merely lip service.

There are two further major pieces of proposed policy currently out for consultation. Given their potential impacts, we are seeking broad feedback from all brigades, groups, district councils and individual volunteers.

The first is a revised CFA Finance Policy suite that proposes to streamline the various financial management policies and clarify processes for the management of brigade and group finances. In many respects, the new policies simply pick up elements from the brigade management manual that have been in place for some time now.

To its credit, CFA embarked on internal consultation with VFBV as it was developing its draft policies prior to their release, which has resulted in a better developed draft for broader consultation. While much of our initial feedback has been picked up, we are keen to hear from brigades and groups about the practicalities of some of the proposed changes, such as leasing arrangements, the use of brigade derived income from commercial activities such as fire equipment maintenance and the use of brigade social and welfare accounts.

The second item out for broad consultation is a revised working with children clearances policy. While CFA admits that the majority of roles in CFA do not perform "child related activities" and therefore do not require a working with children clearance under the Worker Screening Act, it is proposing to expand its policy to mandate that all members must hold a working with children clearance by June 2026.

Again, we are seeking brigades thoughts about the appropriateness of this requirement, and whether there may be any unintended consequences. In particular we are keen to gauge from volunteers their feeling about the administrative burden this may create, especially in remote and regional communities and the likelihood of maintaining such clearances in the future, and the workload of brigades to monitor and support members meet-



ing the new requirements.

Interestingly no new funding or administrative support has been announced or proposed to accompany the modified proposal, so we are also keen to hear from volunteers on what additional support they or their brigade may require to support the proposed position.

While I suspect that every member supports CFA being a child safe organisation (of which it currently is), people may differ in how they think an organisation actually becomes child safe vs administrative processes that simply tick a box. I encourage members to have mature and robust conversations about the practicalities of the proposal, and provide your feedback, both positive and negative. It is critically important we don't only hear from those opposed, but also those who support. We are committed to representing the diversity of views that are likely to be found across the membership. But unless we hear from you, this is difficult.

We are also keen to hear your views on the timelines of each schedule, the roles contained within each, how to manage members who rarely attend the brigade and the role of brigade management teams in overseeing compliance with the proposed policy.

I often remind people that genuine consultation isn't simply about asking a question and then waiting upon a single response. It's a journey - not a destination, it takes time, involves many discussions and sometimes it is difficult and challenging. But in the end, you get good policy and the desired outcome that because of the support, is actively complied with.

Good consultation is about empowering and trusting volunteers, engaging them as equal partners in the journey and sharing the underpinning issue, challenge or opportunity that we are seeking to address. While I am not convinced we are quite there yet, I do see positive signs.

Robust and genuine volunteer consultation is achieved by the proper analysis of the issue in partnership with volunteers; consideration of alternatives; providing timeframes that are respectful and appropriate for a large dispersed volunteer-based organisation; as well as a commitment to show how feedback has been taken into account and considered before decisions or next steps are taken.

Your voice matters and will have an impact on decisions affecting the future, so please get involved. And while we will keep striving for improved consultation arrangements with CFA, your involvement in feedback requests is critical. Visit our website for the drafts and where to send your feedback. We want to hear from you.