



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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SURVEY LAST CHANCE

This year's VFBV Volunteer Welfare and Efficiency Survey will shortly close.

The survey is an annual snapshot of volunteer opinion, using questions on issues chosen by CFA volunteers. All responses are confidential, but de-identified results go straight to decision makers. Help us make a difference.

The survey measures volunteer opinions on what is important to them and how well CFA is performing according to what they are experiencing, the gap between the measurement of importance and performance is referred to as the Volunteer Welfare and Efficiency Level (VolWEL) outcome.

Scan the QR code (right), or visit the VFBV website to do the survey. Paper copies are also available by calling (03) 9886 1141.



2024 State Champs

A reminder that entries and judge and official nominations are now open for the 2024 State Championships to be held in Mooroopna in March and will close on Sunday 18 February.

The State Championships will kick off with the Urban Juniors competing on the weekend of 16 and 17 March. The following weekend, 23 and 24 March, will see competition for the Rural Senior and Junior and Urban Senior Championships take place.

The evening of Saturday 23 March will again see the popular Torchlight Procession take place. Entry in this is open to all brigades competing in the Urban Senior and Rural Championships as well as brigades who are not competing at the State Championships. If your brigade is interested in taking part in the Torchlight Procession as a non-competing brigade please contact championships@vfbv.com.au

To enter your team or nominate as a judge or official for any of the four state championships visit the VFBV web-

Mallacoota has been chosen as the trial site for a CFA pilot program called "Vols on Hols" aimed to encourage CFA volunteers who are on holidays and travelling during summer and staying in the area to consider signing up as a co-responder with Mallacoota Fire Brigade.

Mallacoota is a small and remote coastal destination in far East Gippsland that is roughly halfway between Melbourne and Sydney when travelling via the Princes Highway. The town significantly increases in population over summer with an influx of up to 10,000 visitors during peak season.

The pilot program is for operational responders and members who have skills in community education and

SOP reminder

We are seeking feedback on revisions to six Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's) covering Driving.

These SOP's include: 12.01 Driving or Travelling in CFA and ESO Vehicles; 12.04 Collisions involving CFA Vehicles; 12.05 Safely Recover Disabled CFA Vehicles; 12.06 Non CFA Members in CFA Vehicles; 12.07 CFA Members Driving Private Vehicles; 12.08 Driver Endorsement.

Given the importance of SOPs in CFA's operational doctrine, VFBV encourages all senior volunteers to make themselves familiar with the proposed changes and provide feedback ASAP.

site tinyurl.com/2024-entry

The VFBV website also has information for competing brigades, dates of local competitions in the lead up to the State Championships and copies of the updated rule books for both the urban and rural championships. If you want any more information about the 2024 State Championships contact the VFBV office via championships@vfbv.com.au or (03) 9886 1141 for more information.

VOLS ON HOLS

engagement. Interested members are requested to provide an Expression of Interest. The application is then reviewed, and the member is sent a welcome letter and contacted by the Brigade Captain who will inform the next steps to introduce and induct the visiting member into the brigade.

The brigade is welcoming vols on holidays with open arms and is keen to hear from anyone planning a visit to the area over summer. For more information you can contact volsonhols.d11@cfa.vic.gov.au or call D11 Headquarters on 03 5153 7400.

WHAT'S IN STORE FOR 2024

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

My inspiration for this year is a quote from English theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking. "I have noticed that even people who claim everything is predetermined and that we can do nothing to change it, look before they cross the road."

The point being, while there are still many questionable policy remnants that will continue to negatively influence the coming year, they are not written in stone. And yes, while there are elements that are written in legislation, legislation can be changed. It just requires a willing hand and some political will.

To temper expectations, I can't claim to hold an abundance of optimism that this will in fact occur over the next 12 months, but I firmly believe that one cannot remain perpetually unswayed by the glaring and mounting evidence that is piling up over the short sightedness and inappropriateness of some current policy settings.

Take the CFA/FRV secondment arrangements as a case in point. And while I could never grasp how anyone in their right mind could have thought that those arrangements would ever work - even discounting brash optimism, rose tinted glasses and questionable political goals, one cannot brush away the stench of a policy that is simply not fit for purpose and proving itself so.

Reviewing the fire services implementation monitor's (FSIM) third annual report which was quietly tabled in Parliament on 29 November, one cannot escape the polite, but nonetheless scathing assessment of the secondment agreement which is at the core of the government's fire services reforms.

The FSIM diligently maps out each of the intersections of the secondment agreement and the resulting incapacity of the CFA to manage its own seconded workforce. Given the cost of these services (approximately \$64M), it should send a shiver down the spines of Victoria's legislators that CFA faces significant and documented legislative barriers that routinely limits CFA's ability to "be apprised of, investigate, and resolve matters relating to performance, occupational health and safety or disciplinary issues relating to personnel working in CFA in a seconded role."

Shame on those who did not heed our warnings and advice that this was exactly what was going to occur and be the outcome of rushed and politically motivated reforms.

FSIM then describes the ludicrous agreed consultation workflow between CFA and

FRV, noting that any decisions or proposals are required to be agreed to between FRV and its industrial body first, describing the impacts of a policy setting that languishes from complete paralysis and stone walling. These industrial arrangements do not exist in any other emergency service across the whole of Australia, and for good reason.

Given the government claimed these arrangements would magically solve all industrial disquiet and dispute, one cannot help but observe the complete insincerity those statements appear in hindsight.

The FSIM further observes that while the secondment agreement provided for a review of the operation and effectiveness of the secondment arrangements by 31 October 2021, no such review has been initiated, which is markedly telling of the current political will to sort these arrangements out.

And to finish where I started, am I feeling optimistic that great progress will be made to addressing these fundamental legislative barriers? No, but a new Premier and a refreshed cabinet does provide a face-saving opportunity to set some wrongs right and ensure the Victorian public and volunteer firefighters alike are served by fit for purpose legislation.

The alternative is to squander the opportunity and be publicly lambasted by a future Royal Commission that will no doubt go through the mounting evidence that will expose the rabid political interference that has thwarted and hamstrung one of Australia's largest and most respected volunteer fire services.

CFA BUDGET

We continue to monitor budgetary developments closely and were disappointed to learn that government have finally advised CFA of its base funding for the current financial year, announcing it to be \$310.43 million. This represents a further \$3 million cut to CFA base funding, and now requires the CFA executive to find efficiencies and savings over the next six months.

This cut also masks the additional cut in real terms that comes from increased costs like wages and conditions flowing from recently agreed industrial bargaining arrangements. And while few would begrudge dedicated and loyal CFA personnel from receiving annual increases to address cost of living pressures, the fact that budgets are not increasing to CFA base funding to cover these additional costs means any increases in expenses have to be absorbed by cuts elsewhere.

I fear many of these cuts will come from reduced staff numbers, as this is the only discretionary cost within CFA's full control.

VFBV has put both government and CFA on notice that any cuts that affect volunteers and front-line service delivery

will be documented and raised by whatever means necessary to apply maximum political pressure and ensure the public is aware of what is being done to their emergency services to pay for other follies.

In further news, the government has created an Emergency Services Organisation Finance Board made up of bureaucrats from three government departments including Premier and Cabinet to act as a razor gang of sorts to identify further savings into the future.

All at a time when Victorian's are relying on their emergency services more often and for increasing more frequent, severe and simultaneous natural disasters and other emergencies driven by population growth and our changing climate.

We will keep brigades appraised of developments and will need your assistance in demanding that governments live up to their promises of supporting and backing Victoria's selfless emergency service volunteers. Statements of "record funding" are as absurd as they are false, especially when reviewing the ever-decreasing sustainability of CFA's fleet funding over recent years.

The reality of their support appears very different to the endless quotes and platitudes delivered by our politicians and will require volunteers to call it out.

QLD FLOODS

On Christmas eve we received a request from QLD for 100 emergency service personnel to be deployed to QLD to assist them with their flood recovery operations.

Twenty teams of four were deployed on 30 December comprising 40 CFA volunteers and 40 SES volunteers equipped with working from heights and chainsaw qualifications. CFA, SES and FFMVic supplied the remaining incident management team and liaison positions.

Given more than 500 CFA volunteer firefighters had only just returned from supporting Queensland's fire season, these incidents demonstrate the increased demand for our professionally trained volunteers, and the increased occurrences of CFA supporting our SES colleagues with storm and flood, not only at home but interstate.

The fact these weather events are increasingly intersecting with fire season activity should sound the alarm of the critical need to ensure each of our volunteer emergency services are well resourced and supported to ensure they can continue to come to our communities' aid in times of disaster.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Needless to say, I think we are going to have a challenging year ahead, but one I feel we are well prepared for. A little bit like that saying that the strongest steel is forged from fire and being repeatedly struck, I hold the same confidence in our volunteers



and our association.

Because we are used to working in emergencies, we are well equipped to face a dynamic ever-changing environment. In my experience, we not only rise to meet the challenge, but usually surpass all expectations. People underestimate us at their peril.

In this vein and in an effort to try and finish on a positive note, I am somewhat buoyed by the increased volunteer participation in our feedback requests and mechanisms. In recent times we have had a number of items out for broader consultation that have elicited significant feedback and comment. And while more controversial changes tend to illicit higher amounts of feedback, I have been really impressed with the depth of feedback and the seriousness in how people have reviewed proposed changes. Blunt yes, but no doubt sincere.

It's easy to hate as they say, but I continue to be humbled by the respectful and well thought out positions and oppositions to what can sometimes be a complex interplay between various CFA proposed policies, procedures and our volunteer culture.

Know that when you provide this feedback through VFBV channels it is treated with respect and confidentiality and significantly influences VFBV's advocacy.

Please keep it coming. We'll continue to develop short surveys on specific changes or policies to assist people provide feedback. It really helps us improve CFA policy, and the more voices the more powerful the weight of our argument. And the more detailed your feedback, the better it equips us to navigate any pushback from on high.

But don't be discouraged if you don't want to write pages and pages of feedback. Your questions, simple markup, or even a comment or two can provide really helpful insights.

Don't forget that our current annual vol survey is open, and will be closing shortly. This is the most simple and most effective way of letting us know what is working and what isn't. So, if you haven't yet completed it, please pop over to vfbv.com.au/cfa or use the QR code on this page. You can even ask us for a paper version should you wish and we'll post one out to you.

Your association is only as strong as your contribution to it, so please help us help you and get involved today. With choppy financial winds on the horizon, I have a feeling we are going to need each other more than ever before.

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