



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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2025/26 SURVEY NOW OPEN

This year's VFBV Vol Survey is now open. Please see the article on page 3 of this edition of Fire Wise for the link and QR code.

ANNUAL ELECTIONS

Following the VFBV Annual General Meeting in early October, VFBV Board held its annual elections for officer bearers. Samantha Collins was re-elected as State President, Howard Smith re-elected as State Vice President and Libby Hay re-elected as Treasurer for the next 12 months.

At the October State Council meeting elections were also held for the two ex-officio members appointed to the VFBV Board by State Council for a one year term. Eric Smith (District 12) and Gerg Murphy (District 20) were both elected as the new State Council nominees to the VFBV Board. Both Eric and Greg have been long-standing members of State Council who look forward to contributing further as members of the Board.

The AGM also acknowledged the service of long-standing VFBV Board Members Graeme Jilbert and Andy Cusack AFSM who both retired from the VFBV Board this year. Andy had been a member of the VFBV Board since 2010 and held the roles of Treasurer and State Vice President during his 14 years as a VFBV Board member. Graeme had been a VFBV Board member since 2013 and held the role of State Vice President during his time on the Board.

Volunteer Leadership

Applications are now open for a number of leadership development programs across the state which are made available to volunteers through CFA's Volunteer Leadership Development project.

Members are able to express an interest in upcoming intakes of the Certificate IV in Leadership and Management course run by CFA. Further details on how to apply can be found on members online.

Expressions of interest are also open across the state for the Regional Leadership Program – Community Leadership Programs. The programs now accepting applications are: Future Shapers (Ballarat and Western regions), Fairley Leadership Program (Goulburn Murray Community Leadership Program), Leaders for Geelong, Gippsland Community Leadership program, Lead Loddon Murray, and Alpine Valley Community Leadership program.

Applications for the Leadership Great South Coast and Change Makers (Leadership Wimmera) program will open later in the year.

JOINT COMMITTEE EOI

VFBV is still accepting expressions of interest from volunteers to nominate to the CFA/VFBV Joint Consultative Committees for the 2026 calendar year.

If you have an interest in one of the 8 streams, feel you can contribute and have the time, are passionate about volunteers and want to be an integral part of our Joint Committee process – then please visit the VFBV website

2025/26 Affiliations

Thank you to all brigades and groups who have re-affiliated and helped VFBV stand up for volunteers.

Affiliation sends a strong message that volunteers are united and will work together to achieve positive outcomes that benefit not only brigades, but the broader community of which we all protect.

It also provides access to the VFBV Welfare Fund, which since its inception has distributed more than \$2.85 million in grants to volunteers who have fallen on hard times.

Brigades are reminded that 31st December is the deadline for paying this year's Welfare Fund subscription.

Subscription to the Welfare Fund ensures that all members of the brigades are able to access a grant if they find themselves in financial hardship if due to loss of work, family illness or accidental injury.

To avoid any waiting periods in accessing assistance from the Welfare Fund it is important that subscription payments for the 2025/26 year are received by VFBV before 31st December.

If you are unsure if your brigade's payments are up to date, please reach out to your local VFBV State Councillors or contact your VFBV Support Officer.

At October's State Council meeting, delegates reaffirmed our long-standing approach to advertise for expressions of interest to our Joint Committee's and approved the opening of this year's expression of interest process.

The embracing of the broader membership through our peak consultation forums is one of the key features of VFBV I am most proud and ensures our consultative arrangements are broad and consultative and not just an echo chamber or an endless self-affirming feedback loop.

For those who may be unaware, CFA and VFBV have established eight joint committee's that link CFA's key organisational units to VFBV and our members which facilitates CFA to meet its obligations set out in Section 6 of the Country Fire Authority Act.

Our joint committee processes embody the commitment agreed and enshrined through the Volunteer Charter, where we have committed ourselves to use and apply the Charter in the spirit of mutual respect and goodwill and to work together in that spirit to resolve any disputes which may arise between CFA and volunteers by reference to the key principles set down in it.

And while the third signatory to the Charter is still missing in action (government) with the closure of the sectors only volunteer consultative forum, CFA and VFBV have agreed to ensure we each live up to our commitments and obligations and continue to strengthen our relationship.

The scope of the CFA/VFBV Joint Committees is to ensure genuine volunteer par-

PTSD Trial

Monash University is conducting a clinical trial to evaluate a new online intervention for couples called Couple HOPES. Couple HOPES is designed to give you and your partner tools to improve PTSD symptoms and enhance your relationship.

They are seeking any current or veteran police officers, firefighters and paramedics with symptoms of PTSD and their intimate partner, who would like to improve their PTSD symptoms and enhance their relationship satisfaction. Couples who participate will receive FREE access to Couple HOPES.

If you would like to find out more about the study or submit an expression of interest to get involved, you can visit the trial website which is linked on the VFBV website.

backgrounds are highly encouraged to nominate. We also want to attract volunteers from as broad a range of brigade types and risk profiles as possible.

If you would like to learn more about the role of a Joint Committee delegate and how to get involved, please contact your VFBV Support Officer, State Councillor or VFBV Executive Officer Mark Dryden.

GETTING INVOLVED

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

participation, advice and involvement early in the decision-making process on all decisions intended to be made by CFA that impact or have the potential to affect volunteers.

They are a key mechanism for CFA to discharge its statutory obligation to consult with the elected representatives of volunteers on all matters which may impact upon them including proposed policy, legislation and the adequacy of resources to enable volunteers to deliver CFA services.

In late 2021 - CFA and VFBV entered high level discussions about how we could strengthen our consultative processes, and uplift accountability, transparency and collaboration. The intent was to better align our consultative structures with the IAP2 spectrum of public participation and increase our participation goals to the higher end of the spectrum towards the involve and collaborate tiers.

This involved a considerable restructure and an affirmation that in order to overcome the historical issues of CFA departments often working in separate silos, that each of our committees would remain subject matter based, and the terms of reference would enshrine an obligation on CFA to ensure appropriate subject matter expertise and authorising environment through the provision of executive level chairs.

This restructure breathed new life into our joint committees and went a long way to restoring our confidence that the CFA executive was serious about pivoting to a more volunteer centred workforce and living up to its consultative obligations.

As I reported at last months AGM, our committees are the engine room of our consultative structures, and on reflecting on the previous twelve months - they collectively met 32 times throughout the year, which is a conservative figure as we have not included working parties. Our committees involved more than 85 volunteer delegates across the state, with every district and region represented, and accounted for more than 10,000+ volunteer hours freely given to working with CFA to improve things and make things better.

And to put the massive year we have had in perspective, over the past 12 months VFBV has consulted and reviewed 24 revised standard operating procedures, one new CFA policy, overseen the remaking of the CFA regulations, facilitated 2,115 volunteers to complete our annual volunteer survey, and gathered and considered more than 4,300 items of individual feedback.

Our joint committees progressed over 100 individual issues throughout the year, many out of sight and out of mind, but collectively amounting to significant progress on topics raised by brigades through our statewide District Council networks. Eighty-eight of these topics are covered in our annual report.

On my dark days I despair how long some things seem to take to progress, until I

remind myself that CFA has not been master of its own destiny for a very long time now. Many of the improvements require government support through investment or resources, and the diverse makeup of our 1,200+ brigades present a challenging environment to find solutions that suit every community.

And its not all smooth sailing. There are still topics where we find ourselves at loggerheads with CFA, but one of the strengths of our relationship and shared history is that we continue to work through these issues with each trying to understand the perspective of the other.

Overall - a massive year all up, and one where volunteer unity also reached new levels with our highest rate of brigade support in our 140-year history – proving that there is more that unites us than divides us. And while we can't possibly please every single person every single time, this is more a reflection that sometimes we are simply unable to find consensus among volunteers due to the broad diversity of our brigades and number of individuals. But I think it speaks volumes that brigades are able to put these differences aside and appreciate that we are stronger together – even when we do disagree.

In total, a record 1,239 brigades and groups affiliated last year representing in excess of 95% of all brigades sending a strong message to government and the sector that volunteers will always back volunteers.

Strong advocacy to government also reached a new peak, with VFBV being required to advocate on numerous issues such as the expansion of presumptive cancer legislation following our successful work that saw Victoria's scheme expanded to include three female reproductive cancers. And while good progress, we have been required to continue our fight for fair treatment for volunteers suffering mental injury with our continuing work to see PTSD added to the presumptive scheme similar to other states across Australia.

Victorian firefighters should not be any less protected than other firefighters across the country, and sadly under current arrangements they are. Our National Body, the Council for Australian Volunteer Fire Associations also continues to advocate to the federal government, asking them to take a leadership role in bringing the list of cancers covered by the State's disparate schemes together. Cancer does not discriminate so why should our legislation. But the sad reality is depending on where you are in Australia, what you are covered for, for how long and how you access it are all very, very different.

Other topics requiring a large amount of effort has been our continued advocacy on the deteriorating CFA budget and ageing CFA fleet; the controversial emergency services tax and volunteer rebate scheme; the ministerial



determination on the Fire District Review Panel's recommendations; the Fire Services Implementation monitors annual workplan and monitoring; the EMV volunteer engagement review; the CFA regulation 10 year sunset review; and volunteer treatment under the Fiskville redress scheme.

And while consultation requires patience and endless good will, it is also some of the most rewarding work we do. Many of the things and threats we are able to influence never see the light of day, as we are committed to working with CFA in a spirit of solving our differences quietly. It is a relationship built on respect and trust and has stood the test of time.

But every now and then, when our consultative processes have been exhausted, we are left with no choice but to expand our advocacy broader or to more public facing comms. Our commitment to our members is to exhaust all other options first, but if we are simply unable to achieve some kind of consensus with CFA, then we reserve the right to take the matter further.

You have seen this over the last 12 months in our work on volunteer compensation in particular with CFA having now returned to the table and discussing improvements in line with the concerns we raised last year. I will have more to say about this as discussions progress, but is a wonderful example of our persistence on a matter close to volunteer hearts. In many respects members rarely think about what's in place should they become injured while conducting CFA activities, so it is very much up to VFBV to be proactive to ensure if you do find yourself in need, the systems and processes are fair, and best support you returning to a full life post injury and recovery.

To finish up where I started, I would urge members to consider whether they have the desire to contribute to our joint committee processes for the year ahead. District Councils have been encouraged to have nominations returned to them by Monday 17th November 2025, to allow time for the District Council prioritisation process prior to submission to the VFBV Executive Officer by Monday 24th November 2025.

If you have an interest, I would urge you to discuss with your local State Councillors, VFBV Support Officer or District Council Executive member. You can also find out more via the VFBV website.