



# VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

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In late November, the Minister for Emergency Services the Hon. Vicki Ward announced that 168 brigades and groups have received a grant in the latest round of Volunteer Emergency Services Equipment Program (VESEP).

VESEP was co-designed by VFBV and is now in its 25th year. This year - CFA brigades and groups have received \$18.9M in grant funding for projects and initiatives. Most importantly, volunteers have contributed almost \$4M in co-contributions for these projects, representing the unique value proposition that volun-

## VESEP

teers make to our emergency services sector.

The VESEP program helps fund much needed new and upgraded operational equipment, vehicles and appliances, volunteer amenities and minor facility improvements for brigades and groups across the state.

The full list of successful recipients are available from the VFBV website. Congratulations to all the successful brigades and groups who received a VESEP grant this year.

## STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS

Entries have now opened for the 2026 State Championships to be held across two weekends in March 2026 at Stawell.

Available on the VFBV website is links to submit your team entry for each of the State Championships as well as links to nominate as a Judge or Official for the Rural or Urban State Championships. Entries and judge and official nominations will close on Sunday 15th February 2026.

Both the rural and urban championship committees have made a number of changes to their respective senior championships in an effort to encourage more participation from brigades. The rural committee have decided to fix the ladder in place for events 1 and 3 which means these events will require just 4 competitors instead of five. While the urban committee have removed 8 competitor events from their schedule and introduced more 4 and 6 competitor events as well as more events for female competitors.

Please visit the VFBV website for more information on the 2026 State Championships including links to register your team, updated rule books and information for competing brigades. If you have any further questions about championships contact the VFBV office on [championships@vfbv.com.au](mailto:championships@vfbv.com.au)

## International Volunteer Day

In 2025 International Volunteer Day, acknowledges that every contribution matters highlighting the important role volunteers play in the world. This year's theme is "Every Contribution Matters" acknowledging that every act of volunteering, whether big or small, contributes to a stronger and more connected world.

International Volunteer Day is held annually on 5 December and is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly as a unique chance for volunteers and organisations to celebrate the efforts of volunteers and promote the work of volunteers in their communities. The day was established in 1985.

VFBV recognises the contribution that all CFA volunteers make to ensuring that their local communities right across Victoria are safe and protected from fire and other emergencies. It's not just those on the front line who serve as firefighters who contribute to community safety

## Rebate scheme

A reminder that the eligible volunteers rebate scheme is now open for eligible volunteers and life members to apply for a rebate on an eligible property under the Emergency Services Tax.

CFA volunteers intending on claiming the volunteer rebate will be required to first log-in to their CFA online account, to complete the CFA eligibility test.

To check the rules and eligibility requirements, you can visit: <https://www.vic.gov.au/evrs> If you are eligible and own an eligible property, head to <https://www.members.cfa.vic.gov.au/> to start the process.

but includes all members who play vitally important roles behind the scenes. Together we all help CFA in its mission to protect lives and property.

The 3V's project conducted by the former Volunteer Consultative Forum estimated that emergency management volunteers contributed between \$1.9 and \$2.5 billion to Victoria each and every year across all emergency service agencies.

On behalf of VFBV, thank you to all our amazing CFA volunteers for the work you do each and every day keeping Victorian's safe.

## 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

The last couple of months is supposed to be the reporting period for all Victorian government bodies and entities and is a useful barometer of government transparency.

William Stanbury, a Professor Emeritus of the University of British Columbia, published a fascinating paper through the Canadian Fraser Institute headlined: 'Accountability to Citizens in the Westminster Model of Government: More Myth Than Reality'.

I appreciate my use of the word fascinating may be a generous term for some.

In his paper, Prof Stanbury opines "It is the necessity to exercise power in the form of delegated authority in the context of a democracy that generates the need for accountability. Power is a conundrum. It is necessary to get things done and to do so efficiently. It is necessary to use coercion to ensure peace and order for the vast majority in the face of the disruptive behavior of the few. At the same time, power can be used improperly. The clear evidence is that power tends to corrupt all who possess it, and, as Lord Acton so famously put it, "absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely." The exercise of power without accountability is likely to lead to tyranny. Thus it is necessary to (a) justify the moral basis for the existence of power (might does not make right), (b) constrain the use of power, and (c) hold those who exercise power responsible for its exercise. Accountability is what makes delegated authority legitimate; without accountability, there is nothing to prevent abuse."

It is a frequent misconception that Australia uses a pure Westminster system, that lends its name from the home of the UK Parliament. While the Australian system is most certainly heavily based upon the Westminster tradition, the framers of our Constitution deliberately borrowed some principles from the United States model that makes our system unique. Westminster is often used to describe the pairing of Westminster and Washington DC influences.

Our lower house is lifted straight from Westminster but we then depart radically from the UK by borrowing from the US in the form of our upper house with powers virtually equal to the lower house modelled on the US Senate via a proportional system of voting that results in an equal number of representatives from each state.

We also adopt the Westminster principle known as "responsible government", which is based on the principle that government is responsible to the people through the parliament, and the creation of an independent public service that provides non-partisan neutrality, stability through a career structure that develops policy expertise, and embeds the Westminster principle of accountability.

Having sat through parliaments public accounts and estimates committee hearings into the 2024/25 financial and performance outcomes this

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

## JUDGE FOR YOURSELF

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

week you really cannot walk away with a strong feeling of confidence that we have either transparency or accountability in Victoria.

I will spare you the details of the theatrics of this committee other than to say I fully endorse journalist Richard Willingham's annual exclamation of the parody of these processes where government Dorothy Dixers are allowed to chew up the allotted time. Sensationally, public servants are cued and ready to rabbit on in pre-prepared diatribes spinning the government's achievements, while any questions that scrutinise the department are met with a sudden case of deafness that requires questions to be repeatedly re-asked, and performative incompetence worthy of an oscar where the minutes of the clock are run down while they mysteriously lose the ability to open a simple document to a quoted page number to answer a direct question.

So, what have we learned?

The Department of Justice and Community Safety Annual Report showed a further drop in trained level 3 incident controllers, with only 57 between CFA, FRV and SES combined. Given we have more than 100 on Black Saturday in 2009 and following recommendations of the bushfires Royal Commission had built this up to 152 by 2015, no one in authority seems the slightest bit concerned that we go into a challenging fire season with just one-third of this capability. In fact, rather than prioritise training and accreditation, the department simply lowered its own performance targets to 129 in 2015, 96 in 2018, and then 70 in 2022.

The refusal to support and encourage senior volunteers moving through the level 3 accreditation systems continues to create what I call a self-fulfilling prophecy that I reported on back in May 2023 where it was evident from EMV's Operating Model Review that the proposal was for public servants to be used to replace agency sourced IMT personnel to fill the shortfall. Think back to the COVID-19 Hotel Quarantine Inquiry to see how well that worked out.

Despite the Victorian Financial Management Act 1994 requiring the relevant annual reports be transmitted to Parliament by the 31st October, both CFA and FRV annual reports continue to be hidden from public scrutiny.

Given how afraid they are of showing that funding to CFA continues to reduce year after year, PAEC has given us advance notice of the new little tricks I predict will be used to try to inflate CFA's grant numbers. As I have referred to previously, in addition to the grants withheld, the long con being played is to try and treat any reimbursement for fire season expenses as if it's part of CFA's base operating budget. These unexpected and unforeseen expenses as defined - do not form part of CFA's budget appropriations at the start of the year - yet they are added to CFA's total grant income at the end of the

year following the fire season.

This is why the government has refused to disclose CFA's base budget. PAEC documents have revealed that last financial year - these additional costs associated with declared events during the 2024/25 fire season was \$20.36M. I predict that CFA's share of these reimbursements will be used to try and cover up other falls in funding to spin the lie that technically CFA has received more funding this year than last. It is a very sad day indeed where hoping that natural disaster reimbursements will hide your funding shortfalls is now what we have come to expect from government.

Which leads us to the Year 5 Fire Services Implementation Monitors annual report.

CFA volunteers will have very little cause for optimism that the structural and systemic issues identified in previous reports have any hope of being fixed. I echo the monitor's concerns that resolution of these issues has been painfully-frustratingly-slow, arduous and ultimately unsuccessful.

The monitors acknowledgement of the revolving door of relievers and the impact that has on volunteers is welcome but pales in comparison to the on-the ground reports from volunteers who frequently speak to me about the problems they face as a result.

In last year's report the monitor documented there was an average deficit of 17 senior operational leaders per week (ACFO and Commanders). The lived experience of volunteers on the ground leads us to estimate these vacancies have actually risen to new highs over the last 12 months. And this is despite considerable work being done in good faith by all stakeholders to try and address the gaps and vacancies.

Most alarming to volunteers is that despite last year's stark warnings of the risks these gaps would expose during high potential fire seasons like the ones fast approaching - there has still been no intervention by government to address these fundamental concerns. In fact, the government's own Fire Registration Board that was established as part of its reforms to specifically allow external applicants to apply for vacant positions has been a monumental failure. The Registration Board's annual report gleefully reports on its "notable milestone" at registering just two people during the last financial year. I just couldn't make this stuff up.

And while the monitor has perceptually expressed sympathy for the agencies doing their best with what they have been handed by government, volunteers remain steadfast that CFA has simply been thrown to the wolves and the current situation sets CFA up for failure. As the monitor repeatedly warns - these new arrangements have yet to be tested under similar catastrophic conditions like those experienced in the past. But to ignore the warning signs is simply unforgivable.

Which leads me back to where I started. It should not



be left for us and other stakeholders to be raising the concerns about lack of government funding, transparency, and the ageing and decrepit fire trucks that still leave volunteers having to ride on the outside in the hot sun surrounded by toxic fumes.

To those that think perhaps I'm being a little hyperbolic in my assessment, let me finish with the explosive findings of the independent Victorian Ombudsman from her December 2023 investigation into the alleged politicisation of the public sector.

"Forty years ago, the British political satire *Yes, Minister* depicted a public service that paid lip service to the government of the day while civil service mandarins ignored the politicians and pursued their own agenda.

Today, the boot is on the other foot. Numerous reports around Australia, particularly the recent Robodebt Royal Commission, have revealed a public service overly responsive to the elected government of the day, whatever its colour. Concerns widely shared by retired public sector luminaries, academics and political commentators reveal the erosion of a core Westminster principle: an apolitical public service that serves the government while providing it with 'frank and fearless' advice.

...Creeping politicisation is a reality in Victoria, and requires urgent attention.

...Whatever the truth of the question at the heart of this investigation, that so many people were concerned and fearful should be a signal to this Government that all is not well. A culture of fear in the upper echelons of the public sector does not support frank and fearless advice.

...But nothing will change without a recognition at the highest levels of government that change is necessary.

Around Australia public trust in government has been falling for years. If this report does not convince those with the power to make changes, I must leave it to the public to judge for themselves."

I do not believe it to be an understatement to say volunteers have largely come to the same conclusion as the Ombudsman. This is why VFBV will continue to raise the issues that many people seem fixated on trying to hide from public scrutiny.

Here's hoping for a quiet fire season, and I wish all members a safe Christmas and New Year. For those called away from family and loved ones during the fire danger period, please know you have our and the Victorian communities' eternal gratitude and appreciation.