



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 advertisement on page 3, in this edition of Fire Wise. Follow the the link and QR code.

STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS

A reminder that team entries and judge and official nominations for the 2026 State Championships are now open and will close on Sunday 15 February 2026.

VFBV has again waived the entry fees for the 2026 State Championships in an effort to encourage more brigades to enter a team in any of the four state championships. To enter your brigade or team or to nominate as a judge and official for the 2026 State Championships visit www.tinyurl.com/2026-entry

The 2026 State Championships begin with the Urban Junior Championship held on the weekend of 21 and 22 March 2026, with the Rural Junior and Senior Championships and the Urban Senior Championship taking place on the weekend of 28 and 29 March 2026.

The popular torchlight procession will also take place on Saturday 28 March through the centre of Stawell. Participation in the Torchlight Procession is open to all brigades taking part in the 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 contact championships@vfbv.com.au to register your interest.

For information about the 2026 State Championships including updated rule books for both the rural and urban championships, details of location competitions being held around the state and links to enter your team or nominate as a judge or official visit the VFBV website or contact the VFBV office via championships@vfbv.com.au or (03) 9886 1141.



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.

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 was 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. Waiting periods apply for subscription payments received after the 31st December 2025.

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.

MAKE IT COUNT

by Adam Barnett, VFBV Chief Executive Officer

Five years ago, I welcomed in the New Year and said good riddance to the one just gone.

One can't help but be reflective this time of year, but if I'm being honest, I'll admit it's getting harder and harder to remain optimistic that government will finally see the error of its ways and adjust its current policy settings to better support and enable CFA to be all it could be. Given we are one of the most fire prone places in the world, I dare say the Victorian community would very much appreciate it as well.

There is only so long our warnings can go unheeded until a day of reckoning. An under resourced, under supported CFA is akin to cancelling your home insurance policy straight after you get robbed.

As I remarked on Premier Allen's ascendancy to the Premiership, the change of leadership would either be an opportunity to be part of the solution or part of the problem. Sadly, on all reasonable measures it would appear to be the latter.

And thankfully - while the days of all out contempt for volunteers and CFA through their reform agenda is largely behind us, there is yet to be substantive movement on the key policy areas setting CFA up for failure. We've told them, CFA has told them and their own independent fire services implementation monitor has told them in no uncertain terms. What more can we do?

Maybe you've heard that parable about a man clinging to his chimney on the roof of his house as flood waters surround him. He prays to God for help. A man in a rowboat comes by and tells him to jump in. The stranded man yells "its ok, I'm praying - God will save me." A short time later as the waters continue to rise, a motorboat comes by and tells him to hop aboard. The stranded man repeats the same refrain that he's praying and God will save him. Finally, a helicopter comes by and drops a rope to rescue him, and he again waves them away, saying he has faith, he's praying and God will save him.

A short time later, the flood waters completely overcome him and the stranded man dies. In Heaven, he asks God - given his faith and his prayers - why did God abandon him in his time of need and not save him? God replied - "What are you talking about. I sent a rowboat, a motorboat and then a helicopter. What more did you expect?"

So, have I given up optimism as this year's New Year's resolution? No - far from it. I'm actually more determined than ever.

As Martin Luther King Jr said "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope." On the other side of the pond, eighteenth century English poet Alexander Pope wrote "Hope springs eternal in the human breast" referring to our insatiable appetite to think something better is always coming.

At the end of the day, a volunteer organisation relies on optimism to survive. Our fore-

bears served as wonderful role models in constantly pursuing improvements and to always keep trying, no matter the difficulty. They too at times had to wait for natural disasters to finally spur governments into action. Human inability to learn from history is sadly a common affliction.

If anything - patience and persistence are one of our defining strengths as a volunteer association. Long after topics and issues come and go, our pursuit for strategic meaningful long-term improvement that places community safety above all - never wanes.

Speaking of learning from history - in the July 2004 edition of 'The Fireman', Fireman Sam asked the question "Is red tape killing vols?"

He opined: "where would we be if it were not for the volunteer effort that has helped to make Australian life what it is today."

"We are fortunate that many in the community are still that way inclined. But I fear the number is dwindling. It is certainly more difficult to attract volunteers. Sadly, it is also more difficult to be one."

"What was a trickle of change has developed into a flood."

"Over the past four or five years there has hardly been a month go by when there wasn't some new piece of legislation, local government by law, Code of practice, government department procedural process, statutory authority requirement, or competency requirement that somehow impacted on the numerous volunteer organisations that help keep a community running on a day to day basis."

He summarised that far from seeking payment or reward, volunteers seek the satisfaction of seeing good results for their efforts and the feeling that it has all been worthwhile. He also said the other form of 'reward' that volunteers would really appreciate is that their efforts are facilitated and supported by government and administrators.

How is it then, that 20 years later government and bureaucrats are still not able to grasp the simple concept of valuing and respecting our volunteers?

The most recent example are last months media releases heralding the announcements of this year's VESEP grants. Don't get me wrong - VESEP is a wonderful program that was developed in partnership between government, CFA and VFBV before being extended across the sector. The government should be congratulated for continuing with it, and boosting it significantly. Given its roots, and the collaboration of the three signatories to the volunteer charter - it should not be surprising that it is immensely popular and has grown year after year.

Unfortunately, far from any acknowledgement of this partnership, we were served a release bereft of any such modesty or humility and instead given vulgar self-congratulation and spin.

Worse - the government

media releases took credit for more than \$30 million in grants, and the "biggest ever grants for emergency services volunteers"

Hiding in plain sight of course, was every dollar that CFA, SES, LSV and Coast-Guard volunteers donated as a VESEP contribution. The omission is both stark and insulting.

Not a single reference to the fact that this year for example, CFA volunteers contributed a new record of almost \$4 million in brigade funds earned from fundraising and hard work.

Is the government so indifferent that the men and women making immense sacrifice to serve their communities in their time of need just might be looking for some form of acknowledgment or basic understanding of what they do and what motivates a volunteer based organisation?

Can you remember a time that police chipped in for their police vehicles? Or paramedics for their ambulances? Can you imagine a group photo of departmental public servants posing for a photo with the Minister to hand over the keys and celebrate the governments replacement of their government fleet vehicle every 3 years?

And we can't even manage a simple thank-you or acknowledgement that volunteers - rather than simply accept a handout, worked hand in hand with government to fund and replace millions of dollars' worth of trucks and equipment?

Let's not forget that for many brigades, these contributions represented decades of painstaking fundraising and sausage sizzles to build up the funds to eventually apply for a grant in the first place.

Or is it the embarrassment of the inconvenient truth that volunteer fire brigades must actually scrimp and save to buy their own essential pieces of trucks and equipment their communities rely on simply because the State does not properly fund them to begin with?

So, allow me to say a heartfelt thank-you. I can't profess to speak on behalf of all Victorians, but I'm yet to meet one that doesn't respect and appreciate the incredible contribution that emergency service volunteers make to the State.

To put the volunteer contribution into perspective, CFA volunteers have contributed more than \$41 million in funds to the program over the past 20 years alone. An incredible achievement and legacy worthy of acknowledgement.

Add this to the conservative indicative value of the \$2.5 billion dollars that Victoria's emergency management volunteers contribute to Victoria each and every year through their volunteering, and you really are left with an obvious answer to Fireman Sam's question of where would we be without it? Think creek and paddle.

Which brings us to the



metaphorical creek without the paddle.

VFBV continues to draw attention to the complete inequity of CFA's budget, and the governments prolonged attack on CFA's resourcing and support. Despite government media releases spruiking "record funding" - our reality is far from the nirvana they falsely proclaim.

In January last year, I walked members through our analysis tracking the governments lack of investment in CFA over the past five years. We found that despite increased costs and high inflation, government have inexplicitly invested less and less in CFA's base funding year after year since reform in 2020.

We must continue to maintain the pressure on highlighting the smoke and mirrors being played with CFA's budget, and the inescapable aging CFA fleet that sees volunteer firefighters stuck on the back of almost 700 old single cab tankers breathing in the smoke and fumes on 40 degree days and sweltering in the sun.

Don't forget that of the \$500M extra in tax revenue the government is due to collect this year from their new Emergency Services Tax hikes, only \$10M of that extra has been allocated to the CFA truck replacement base budget. That is less than one-tenth of the funds required to maintain CFA's fleet of 2,389 trucks.

We must continue to educate decision makers and the general public about the escalating risks of relying on such an ageing fleet and the inherent safety risks this represents. The grounding of the entire FFMVic G-Wagon fleet late last year should be a stark warning to those that dismiss the ageing CFA fleet and convince themselves that a well-maintained fleet of trucks can last forever.

A single volunteer injury (or worse), is far too high a price to pay for government inaction.

For all members that were called to duty over the Christmas and New Years break, a huge thank-you. For those that covered your absences at home and work - thank-you also.

And while we face numerous challenges, we should never lose sight of the incredible difference you each make every day in your communities. If last year culminated in celebrating the first 80 years of the formation of CFA, January 2026 represents the first steps of our next 80 years. We owe it to not only our forebears but ourselves to make each of them count.

Stay safe.