



VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

STATEMENT

30 September 2021

VOLUNTEERS WELCOME INDEPENDENT REVIEW

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria welcomes today's announcement by CFA of the commissioning of Dr Szoke to help lead a review into how to further strengthen CFA's systems and approaches to ensure CFA becomes the exemplar of healthy, safe and respectful workplaces across the fire sector.

Dr Helen Szoke AO has served as Australia's Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner and is the former Commissioner of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission. Dr Szoke will bring unparalleled credibility and expertise to the role. Most recently Dr Szoke has completed an independent review on behalf of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, where she considered measures to prevent sexual harassment, improve reporting and improve support for those who experience sexual harassment in Victoria Courts and VCAT.

Just like our courts, CFA Volunteers likewise expect their workplaces and fire stations across the sector to provide safe and welcoming environments that live up to the exceptionally high standards displayed and modelled by CFA members every day in protecting their communities from fire and other emergencies.

Our members deserve to be supported and protected by world class systems, policies and processes that provide every single volunteer and staff member with a work environment that is free from harassment and discrimination.

Dr Szoke has been requested to undertake an independent review of what more the CFA can do to support and create a welcoming, inclusive and supportive organisation which embraces diversity and deals effectively with cultural issues when they do arise.

This commitment and review is fully supported by VFBV and delivers on our strong advocacy for CFA's systems and complaint processes to be independently reviewed and improved to reflect the high standards that CFA members expect.

While this should have been completed years ago through the previous Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission review into the MFB and CFA, we are proud that CFA will take this courageous step to free itself from Government and sector inertia and forge ahead with its own work that will lead to CFA becoming the largest, safest and best practice firefighting organisation in Victoria.

We acknowledge the disappointment and hurt by all those members who feel abandoned by the previous VEOHRC process and the injustice of their stories and complaints never seeing the light of day. And while VFBV has staunchly advocated for VEOHRC to be involved and be asked to complete the work that was started, we acknowledge that CFA cannot continue to be held hostage to a process that has seemingly lost Government and VEOHRC support and has been relentlessly bogged down in legal and political fights.

This review will give CFA a solid baseline and framework to strengthen and support the vital goal of promoting diversity and ensuring all our members feel safe and have access to robust systems of accountability. A fire service where victims are supported, and all members are encouraged to speak up about the importance of a safe and respectful workplace.

As the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics personal safety survey reports, two in five people aged 18 years and over have experienced sexual harassment during their lifetime. Women are more than twice as likely to experience sexual harassment than men. Fire services are not immune to the issues faced across the broader community and public sector. But this should not be used as a reason to avoid or confront the issue head on.

As reports into Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria, Australian Defence Forces and the Victorian Public Sector have shown, these are complex and confronting topics to tackle. But by doing so, we set the example and raise the bar for all others to follow. VFBV accepts its leadership role to support this work and be part of that change.

CFA members, volunteers and staff spend their lives and careers protecting the safety and putting their fellow Victorians ahead of themselves. They deserve no stone to be unturned when it comes to- ensuring they themselves are protected and have safe and respectful workplaces.

Media: Quotes may be attributed to VFBV CEO, Adam Barnett on behalf of Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria. VFBV is the CFA Volunteer peak body and member association recognised under the Country Fire Authority Act.