VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

STATEMENT

29th December 2019

STATEMENT FROM CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER ADAM BARNETT
COMMONWEALTH PAYMENTS TO VOLUNTEER FIREFIGHTERS

The Federal Government have today announced a scheme to compensate NSW volunteer firefighters with payments of $300 for volunteer service exceeding 7 days up to a maximum of 20. Other State's are allegedly being told they can also join the scheme, which is to be funded through a Federal Government/State Government co-payment.

VFBV is not in favour of volunteers receiving income for their voluntary firefighting service.

If benefits and payments to volunteers are expected by individuals, the spirit of volunteerism could be destroyed. Such an argument ultimately leads us to the retained fire-fighter model where members are paid an allowance to attend fires and where as a result, volunteers cease to become true volunteers and become employees. As demonstrated in other State's a consequence of the retained fire-fighter model is that volunteer numbers would decrease over time which would reduce the number of trained fire fighters available throughout the state. As one of the most fire prone places on earth, the Victorian model gives us the benefit of immense volunteer surge capacity and contingent capability larger than the Australian defence forces to deal with large scale, long duration concurrent fires.

Volunteers are proud to be volunteers. They do what they do out of love for their communities and as a way of giving back. Their bravery and selflessness lie at the very heart of the enormous respect and trust that the community has for them. And while we are deeply humbled that the public may support volunteers being paid for what they do, it is fundamentally against everything we stand for. It is for this reason that CFA and other emergency service volunteers have such a special and honoured place in the Victorian public's hearts.

From a national perspective, there are around 6 million volunteers in Australia, with over 500,000 in the emergency management sector, and over half of those being involved in fire and rescue services.

Volunteering Australia defines volunteering as "***time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain.***"

The United Nations defines volunteering as "'An action carried out voluntarily, according to an individual's own free will, not undertaken for financial reward nor stipulated by law, contract or academic requirement, and done for the common good." (UN 2011:3-4).

VFBV supports this definition and our fundamental view is there should be no payment to volunteers for their service as volunteering one's time is a gift to the volunteer's community. When income is attached, the service is no longer given freely, and it is no longer volunteering.

PO BOX 453 Mt Waverly VIC 3149 · Unit 9, 24 Lakeside Drive Burwood East VIC 3149 · Tel. 03 9886 1141 · Fax. 03 9886 1618 vfbv@vfbv.com.au

Results from VFBV's annual Volunteer Welfare and Efficiency survey confirms that overwhelmingly CFA volunteers contribute their time for one of two main reasons; to help protect the community they live in; and a sense of fulfilment in supporting their community in a meaningful way.

I am incredibly proud of our volunteers and the amazing work they do year in and year out. And while I appreciate the support and good intent evident in the Federal Governments initiative, I feel it is misplaced and has the potential to undermine the volunteer ethos of which Australia's volunteer movement relies.

VFBV is incredibly disappointed that such a significant policy shift could be made on the run and with little to no consultation directly with volunteer firefighter peak bodies involvement. I can confirm VFBV has not received any detail or was approached by the Commonwealth to discuss the scheme prior to announcement. Nor has our national volunteer firefighters' body been approached - the *Council of Australian Volunteer Fire Associations* (CAFVA). CAFVA alone represents over 250,000 volunteer firefighters across Australia and is designed specifically to provide the Commonwealth a direct link to the State's and Territories volunteer firefighter peak bodies, where the enormous knowledge and experience of volunteers is at the ready to provide input to federal government policy.

Out of Pocket Expenses

While CFA volunteers are firm that they do not want to be paid for their services, they are however, just as firm in their view that being a volunteer should not be a cost to the individual. VFBV is of the view that volunteers should not be out of pocket for the contribution they make to their communities. Policies therefore need to be well designed and considered so they are sensitive to these factors ensuring addressing expense reimbursement does not undermine the volunteer ethos.

Items such as transport costs, personal expenses, clothing and equipment reimbursement and communication costs legitimately incurred in undertaking their volunteering should be considered for reimbursement.

There is some interest within the volunteer movement for an analysis of the other opportunities that may exist for the improved recognition of volunteers through economic support, for example tax incentives and insurance premiums or fire service levy offsets. The introduction of tax breaks and offsets and the like would reflect a token recognition of volunteer commitment rather than being a true compensation for voluntary contribution made (or encouragement incentive).

Any move to consider a different regime of reimbursement for out of pocket expenses must be carefully considered and well thought out due to the administrative complexities involved; for example in determining reimbursements between those active on the fire ground, those performing the equally important myriad of support roles or those who remain on call within their brigade area to ensure ongoing service provision within their local community.

Some organisations like AFAC and EMA have advocated for tax breaks for volunteers through a flat rate tax rebate. If supported by government, this could be applied consistently across all volunteers regardless of their level of contribution. The tax break would more likely reflect a token of volunteers' commitment rather than truly compensating for the hours involved.

Employer and Self Employed Recognition

The support of employers and the self-employed is crucial to the work CFA volunteers do in protecting Victorian communities from fire.

It is our belief there is a need to consider the role played by employers in permitting volunteers to respond to incidents and attend specialist training courses during their working hours. The real and hidden cost to many employers is significant and we believe there is an opportunity to recognise this by way of incentives such as tax relief or a form of reimbursement for lost productivity similar to the army reserve model that was

recommended in the 2011 *Independent Inquiry into Effect of Arrangements on Country Fire Authority Volunteers*, led by retired County Court Judge, the Honourable David Jones.

Just as volunteers have a right to choose to offer their services, employers should have the same right to choose to support employees who are volunteers. The guiding principle is ***choice***. Employers could be encouraged to provide leave arrangements to employees who are registered emergency service volunteers. This would allow employees to negotiate and agree leave conditions with their employers beforehand and provide timely notice of absences for being reasonably absent from work to attend emergencies. Government rebates or co-payments could support these efforts.

Maintenance of an existing employee benefit of income can be seen as being fundamentally different from the provision of additional income. Payment for emergency service leave could be seen as an employer donation that supports an emergency service volunteer by maintaining an existing benefit. It upholds the principle that volunteers should not be out of pocket as a result of their volunteering while at the same time providing recognition of best practice employers who equally support their communities during crisis.

Diverse Views

VFBV's position on payment for volunteers has been well documented and broadly consulted on over many years.

VFBV represents 55,000 CFA volunteers. Our membership is large and diverse and there will always be a broad range of views on any given topic. Historically however, when the issue of payment for volunteer service has been raised, CFA volunteers have overwhelming rejected this proposition.

It must be acknowledged that in the current climate and following some very hard years where CFA volunteers feel they have been very unfairly treated and their professionalism disrespected through the approach of recent Victorian fire service reform debates and enquiries, VFBV has consistently warned of the significant detrimental impact on volunteer morale and resulting diminution of volunteer good will.

It remains to be seen how this demoralisation and drop in good will translates to shifting volunteer attitudes. I urge decision makers to not concentrate on short-term one-off type reactions, and instead work collaboratively and in good faith with peak volunteer representative bodies to strategically address the barriers and difficulties currently experienced by volunteer firefighters.

Welfare Services and Safety Net

One of the most fundamental responsibilities of Government and the Agencies is to ensure the health, safety and welfare of its emergency service volunteers. And while many do the best they can with the resources available to them, in many cases this is simply not enough. There remains a very large gap between standards for paid employees and the conditions that volunteers are often expected to just endure, simply because they are not paid.

Improving safety nets and welfare support services is also a priority. While there has been much progress, there remains a lot to do.

Almost all Australian volunteer firefighter representative bodies and associations run welfare grant type programs to assist members suffering from serious financial hardship or injury. These programs like so many others, rely on government grants, subscriptions or public donations to survive. For example the last Government grant to our Welfare Fund was back in 2008. These programs could easily be expanded by long term investment and support that would strengthen the support and protection for volunteer firefighters and future generations.

Technology systems to better track volunteer deployment and utilisation would greatly assist in identifying over commitment. Systems and processes that can detect peak demand and over commitment could then be

used to supplement these areas with immediate relief crews and support which would prevent volunteer firefighters feeling they cannot step away and take a break from the fire line.

Future

Notwithstanding all of the above, in the overall context of key issues currently facing CFA volunteers and volunteerism, we believe there are matters of far greater importance to recognising and retaining volunteers than payment for their services.

CFA volunteers and Brigades are still overly reliant on fundraising and one-off Government grants programs to fund the provision of essential equipment and tools of trade.

Consider that CFA volunteers are running one of Australia's oldest tanker fleets, with trucks approaching over 30 years' service. We have volunteers fundraising for basics like trucks, station upgrade and maintenance, uniforms, torches, first aid supplies, heavy vehicle driver licenses, emergency alerting smartphone applications and turnout systems to improve response times and workwear garments to wear for training and station duties to name just a few.

Practical initiatives aimed at directly supporting volunteers could include but are not limited to:

- Sustainable truck and station capital works programs
- Easy access to new and replacement personal protective clothing and equipment
- Easy access to training and skills maintenance
- Improved insurance and income protection
- Effective use of volunteer time and better volunteer management practices
- No cost cutting that impact volunteers and front line services
- Respect and recognition for what they do, and recognition of their professionalism
- Support and investment for volunteer welfare funds
- Increased access to counselling and peer support services including PSTD treatments
- Protections from constraints and limitations imposed by industrial processes & bureaucracy
- Protection from unintended marginalisation of volunteers by arrangements for paid staff
- Support by paid staff to maintain and strengthen volunteer capability
- Fair, independent and effective complaint and issue resolution processes

Working with volunteers to understand these pressures and empower them to co-design the solutions is the most effective way to respect our firefighters and the thousands who support our front line activities every year.

Dialog, communication and genuine consultation is vital to ensure long term strategies are put in place to deal with Australia's future natural disasters and emergencies. Bad fire seasons are not new, and the years of complacency between quiet and busy seasons is crippling long term investment, planning and sustainability into our volunteer fire services.

VFBV and volunteers in general stand ready to assist with this work. I urge decision makers to take notice and engage with the very organisations best placed to provide practical and well informed advice on what will benefit volunteer firefighters the most, not just in the coming days, weeks or months – but for future generations as well.