VFBV | VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADES VICTORIA

MEDIA RELEASE

PAYMENTS COULD DESTROY THE SPIRIT OF VOLUNTEERISM

Victoria's peak volunteer firefighter body says payments could destroy the spirit of volunteerism.

Volunteer Fire Brigades Victoria (VFBV) CEO Adam Barnett said the VFBV was 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," Mr Barnett said. "This would ultimately lead to the retained firefighter model where members are paid an allowance to attend fires and as a result, volunteers cease to become true volunteers and become employees."

Mr Barnett said this model had led to volunteer numbers decreasing in other states. "As one of the most fire prone places on earth, the Victorian model gives us the benefit of immense volunteer surge capacity and contingency capabilities when combined with our eastern states is larger than the Australian defence forces to deal with large scale, long duration fires," he said.

While CFA volunteers are firm that they do not want to be paid for their services, VFBV says volunteers should not be out of pocket for the contribution they make to their communities.

"Well-designed and considered policies are needed to address expense reimbursement while not undermining volunteer ethos," Mr Barnett said.

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

Mr Barnett said there was some interest within the volunteer movement for an analysis of other opportunities for improved recognition of volunteers through economic support, such as tax incentives, insurance premiums or fire service levy offsets. However, any move to consider a different regime of reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses must be carefully considered due to the administrative complexities involved.

VFBV, which represents 55,000 CFA volunteers, also believes there is a need to consider the role played by employers in permitting volunteers to respond to incidents and attend specialist training courses during 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," Mr Barnett said.

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“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.”

VFBV also called for improved safety nets and welfare support services for emergency service volunteers.

“CFA volunteers and brigades are still overly reliant on fundraising and one-off Government grant programs to fund essential equipment and tools of trade,” Mr Barnett said.

“We need sustainable truck and station capital works programs, easy access to protective clothing, equipment and training, improved insurance and more respect and recognition of the professionalism of volunteers.”

Mr Barnett said volunteers 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.”

“I am incredibly proud of our volunteers and the amazing work they do. While I appreciate the support and good intent in the Federal Governments initiative, I feel it is misplaced and has the potential to undermine the volunteer ethos on which Australia’s volunteer movement relies.”

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