



10 December 2009

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2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission
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Dear Mr. Gostencnik,

I refer to your letter dated 5 November 2009 addressed to our legal representatives Duncan Lawyers where you seek our view on the question of payment to volunteers following the evidence provided to the Royal Commission by several fire fighting agencies from around Australia. In particular the evidence from Chief Officer Mike Brown of the Tasmanian Fire Service indicated that there are partial payments available to some volunteers in that State.

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. Our strong view is that the introduction of payment or even partial payment for service will destroy volunteerism. The strength of the volunteer model is that it integrates CFA into the community which is an essential building block for shared responsibility and engagement of the community as partners in their safety.

In 2003 VFBV distributed a draft policy on Volunteers and Payments to all Victorian volunteer fire brigades for comment. Comments on the policy that were received were incorporated into the final document which was approved by the VFBV Board in June 2003 (copy attached).

Our position is consistent with the position of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteer Forum (AEMVF), a national forum that represents the volunteer emergency management sector. The VFBV views were represented to this forum via the Australasian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC) and Australasian Assembly of Volunteer Fire Brigade Associations (Inc) (AAVFBA). The AEMVF position is clearly outlined on their website:

"Emergency sector 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."¹

It is important to note that Chief Officer Mike Brown stated very clearly in his evidence that his experience, gained over a long period of time, was that payments or otherwise to volunteers

¹ <http://www.aemvf.org.au/default.aspx?s=whatwedo>

“makes little difference in terms of the reliability and timeliness of a response”² from a brigade. Thus any proposal to make payments to volunteers cannot relate to enhanced performance from brigades. He also indicated that the volunteer associations are “very strong on the volunteer ethos” and “on the position of being volunteers in the true sense”.³

Notwithstanding the above, VFBV is of the view that volunteers should not be out of pocket for the contribution they make to their communities. Items such as transport costs, personal expenses and communication costs legitimately incurred in undertaking their volunteering should be considered for reimbursement. In some cases CFA does recognise the financial impost that carrying out a volunteer role in CFA can incur and does seek to assist where the cost is significant. However our experience is that the day to day costs incurred as a volunteer, including the expenses incurred above, are borne by the volunteer. In some cases, this can be substantial, particularly in a busy brigade.

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 offsets. The introduction of tax breaks and insurance premium 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).

It is recognised however, that many incentive programs which involve financial offsets or reimbursements would bring with them some complex administrative issues.

Employers

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.

Effects of Payments to Volunteers

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 training and where as a result, volunteers cease to become true volunteers and become employees.

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. The current model gives us the benefit in Victoria of surge capacity and contingent capability. For example, if CFA volunteer numbers decreased to perhaps 10 to 15 members per brigade, our overall numbers might decrease to 20,000 at most compared with the existing 59,000.

Any move to consider a different regime of reimbursement for out of pocket expenses must be carefully considered due to the administrative complexities involved; for example in determining

² Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission transcript, Day 74, p. 10377, 28-29

³ Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission transcript, Day 74, p. 10378, 4-8

reimbursements between those active on the fire ground, those performing a myriad of support roles or those who remain within their brigade area to ensure ongoing service provision within their local community.

Another reason to be careful about benefits and payments stems from an administrative perspective. Apart from the impact that perceived payment would have on volunteerism, there is the difficult question of distribution.

- How do you justifiably differentiate between operational and non-operational volunteers?
- How do you determine who should be included and who should not? Will it be for the active few? Will it apply only after a level of attendance is reached?
- How would you deal with the equity of the situation where some volunteers contribute many hours per week, but others contribute a few hours per month?
- How would you control the *fair weather* volunteers who join only for the benefits with little commitment to the true spirit of volunteerism in their communities?

Some organisations like AFAC and EMA are arguing 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.

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

These include but are not limited to:

- Easy access to training
- Effective use of volunteer time
- No cost cutting at the expense of volunteer time
- Respect and recognition for what they do
- Constraints and limitations imposed by industrial processes & bureaucracy
- Marginalisation of volunteers by paid staff rather than support by paid staff to maintain and strengthen volunteer capability.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Royal Commission with our views on this serious matter and should we be able to assist further please feel free to contact me.

Yours faithfully



Andrew Ford

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER