

SECTOR REFORM AGENDA.

The document – “A Safer Community” Discussion Paper – September 2014 is a glossy document that simply documents the desired position of the government. This is set out in the recommendations of the “Holloway Report”. “One does not set up an inquiry without knowing the outcome first”. This document is the end result of the process started before the “Holloway Report” to achieve the outcome the government desired. This document only captures the issues identified by volunteers that look like they support the outcome.

Many volunteer fire fighters are frustrated by the fact that many of the issues that have been raised through the consultation process appear to be missing from this documentation. How will these changes expressed in the document address these frustrations and the issues raised? All of these issues were being documented at the consultations that I attended. Here are but a few:-

- Frustration with the inefficiency of our System(s).
- A severe lack of support for senior volunteers in Leadership and management positions.
- Increase administrative work load on volunteers (after the gutting of SAFECOM).
- A lack of training resources and positions. Some courses cannot be offered due to the lack of finance.
- Inadequate facilities, vehicles and equipment
- A Lack of Morale.

In addition to the above we need to consider a range of other issues that affect the volunteers:-

1. We have a down ward trend in the number of people volunteering into the range of emergency services
2. The age of volunteers is growing with few of the community young people joining.
3. The younger generation is tending to move to the cities away from small country communities seeking higher education and work.
4. Community members are finding it more difficult to commit time to the emergency services.
5. We need to address the ever increasing commitment for operations, administration and training.
6. Many country volunteers are committed to 2/3 other emergency services in the community.

At present each emergency service has its own training structure. If we carry the thought of combining the 3 training into 1 system – then there are a large number of issues that this alone highlights.

- The emergency services will lose a large number of highly trained and experienced training officers and Volunteer trainers.
- The various courses on offer at present meet Differing National Standards. There will have to be a “heck of a lot of negotiations” done to combine the courses to satisfy the 3 services. Will 3 in to 1 go?
- Standardising equipment and modifying various training grounds to suit the new model will have to be achieved.
- Need to standardise the training given to Staff and volunteers to become trainers and assessors.

Another issue revolves around the CFS CRIIMSON system and the various systems that MFS and SES use. I believe that none of the 3 systems would be able to be converted into one system – more work and expense and the loss of experience.

I wonder how the proposed structure of the 3 services into one will address these and many other issues. At present when I go to region 1 headquarters, I know that I will speak with a paid staffer who knows and has experienced the wide range of experiences and training that I have experienced. If this new structure comes into being, when I approach the headquarters at the government zone – I cannot have any confidence that the person that I am speaking with will have the experience and knowledge to support me in seeking answers. How will the new structure significantly benefit/support the front line volunteers? At present – by using the chain of command – the volunteers have a voice to the Chief Officers door – with these changes the volunteer will have their voice increasingly silenced the further up the chain of command they push an issue.

Within the new structure – I cannot see – a consistent pathway for the “Front Line Volunteer” to follow up the command line. Also within this new structure where will the COAG, RVMC people be accommodated to support the decision making and the volunteer? Is there a structure within the new structure that will allow a volunteer to be involved at the level of COAG etc? If we end up with a commissioner or whatever they are called – then it needs to be split immediately beneath commissioner with a deputy head of each current service or at least a career and volunteer structure. The new structure appears to squeeze the volunteer out of support work and be diminished. You see that the cultures of the organisations are so far apart at this point it appears that some sort of amalgamation would need a huge amount of work and funding to bed down the new organisation. We only have to look at how the changes from the Emergency Fire Service to the Country Fire Service was - handled exceptionally very poorly.

The Model put up by the government so far will leave the 3 services with names on trucks only and everything above them looking totally different. Is this the thin end of the wedge to make the MFs, CFS, and SES one service a one Fire and Emergency service? I am not

saying that this idea is good, bad or plain ugly. The case was put at many consultation meetings that "Our frontline services are fantastic as they are" - "I would correct this statement to say that the Volunteers that provide our current services are fantastic"

The consultation group visited 3 /4 states - of which some had a one service system. In the systems of Western Australia the voice of the volunteer is well and truly suppressed. Queensland has come to the realisation that volunteers need a voice and will put in place a deputy to look after the volunteers. We need to learn a lot more from other organisations – both here and overseas - before we jump into a model of service that will not support the volunteers effectively.

The Government seems set on pursuing this course of action – a new consultation process must be put in place to keep paid staff and the volunteers heavily involved in the designing developing and implementation of the new structure. Failure to do this will not bring the people along in this process. The Minister has promised to listen to the volunteers and now is the time to keep faith with the community.