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17 MAR 2010

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND
PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE**

The Research Director
Public Accounts and Public Works Committee
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Q 4000

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16th March 2010

To Whom it May Concern

Please accept my submission in regards to the Management of Rural Fire Service in Queensland.

I am a rural firefighter so I hope this will be accepted as its from the heart and my observations and experiences over 16 years

This is the first time I've done anything like this and so not sure if it is correct and acceptable.

I do hope you will understand my points of view and I would be happy to explain or Expand on any of the issues I have mentioned.

I hope you will consider this submission.

Yours sincerely

Vicki Avcin

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SUBMISSION TO PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND PUBLIC WORKS COMMISSION

I have been a volunteer firefighter for 16 years now. In that time I've seen changes to Rural Fires, but there has always been an issue about funding of brigades, retaining volunteers and Training.

Please forgive me if this seems 'simple' but I tend to see things in a simple light not tarnished with fancy words and half a dozen University Degrees. So I hope I explain myself in a way you can understand.

Firstly the funding.

From my knowledge, the funding of brigades begins at Government level. Brigades have to rely on the information fed back from Rural Fires and this determines their budget each year. The money from the budget is then earmarked for such things as PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), subsidizing brigades for vehicles, training etc. It also I believe includes funds for the 'paid' staff in Area offices and the people that work there. The information that Rural Fires submits is collated from the information put in from these Area Offices. This is totally aside from how Brigades are 'paid' via levy monies which I'll refer to shortly.

Now, these area offices of RFS are solely reliant on the information fed to them by brigades filling out RF14's. Either for structural fires, Road Traffic Crashes, Hazardous (until urban pumps arrive) or for Wildfire, Hazard Reduction burns etc. This information shows them what brigade activity and resources are being used, required and are supposed to be filled out after each 'incident'. This is all done on forms that then have to be posted to the Area Office. The problem here is that there is a big percentage of brigades that do not do this paper work. It is not mandatory/enforced that it is done. I know for a fact that the brigade I am in DOES NOT AND WILL NOT fill out this paperwork. The first officers and the other officers think because they are volunteers they don't have to do it. There are other brigades in our group that also do not fill these forms out. So unless the Area Manager knows of incidents or goes searching through Firecoms logs (which some brigades even don't call in at times), he has no way of knowing that a brigade has been to an incident. I know myself after being an officer of a large brigade in the SE corner, First Officer of a brigade in Nth Qld, the importance of the filling out of these forms to help collate information. Yet regardless of trying to explain to my current brigade about the significance of how the information is used, they just can't be bothered with the paperwork.

The brigade I was First officer of in Nth Qld had not put in RF14's for years either. So I am quite confident in saying that a high percentage of brigades in Queensland would not be 'bothered' in also filling out this paperwork. So how can Area Offices collate information and forward on, so that appropriate funding can be allocated to RFS in a budget?

The urban sector of QFRS however has everything logged, and everything is and has to be accounted for. So their funding can be worked out on the needs of areas and stations according to their requirements/incidents each year

Until brigade reporting is MANDATORY and enforced, there will never be an accurate way of knowing what funding is needed for RFS. This being 'hard' copy or via the internet.

The RFS funding by levy money for brigades that get it is still a huge strain on individual brigades. A lot of things factored into QFRS budgeting/funding is not covered into RFS.

Fuel, maintenance, and safety certificates of vehicles are NOT covered by QFRS. That is budgeted into their funding. For RFS, this has to be covered by the individual brigades....and the variables according to fire seasons are enormous.

Yet RFS is supposed to 'come under the wing' of QFRS. Without the filling out of the RF14's there is no real accountability of the costs of this. The brigades are supposed to do an audit each year, but those can be 'dodgey'd' up too. The audit is more for council to show that levy money is being used in brigades. Although copies are sent to each Area Offices, I don't think they are used as a guideline for how each brigade needs funding from up the ladder to Government Budgeting.

Which brings me to Brigades in areas that have levy's. As you'd be aware each Council has its own \$ value that ratepayers pay. Some areas apparently still don't pay levies. So those brigades either have to pay from their own pockets or fund raise to cover fuel and operating costs relevant to their brigade. However how this levy in those areas that get it is calculated and then passed onto brigades varies greatly also. Some divide total amount collected by the rateable properties in brigade districts and then distribute accordingly. There fore particularly in the Izone areas some brigades in the 'closer to town' area will get a lot more than brigades that are further out in the more rural areas, yet they might be the brigades who tend to have more larger fires in acerage paddocks than those where it is a more residential type properties close in. But because they have less rateable properties, they receive less than the 'inner' properties where there are more rateable properties.

Some Councils, distribute the levy money like that. Other areas the Group (in consultation with Area Office) decides who gets what out of the total \$ collected by the levy. So again nothing is set in concrete on how brigades receive funding if they in fact even get funded.

Again in the brigade I am currently in, there is questions as to how that money is used also. As there is no 'paper trail' it leaves it wide open to misuse and abuse to those who handle it. So again because there is no mandatory reporting of things being enforced, it leaves it wide open for members to take 'advantage' of brigade funds. Eg: fuel being recorded for brigade vehicles, but going into personal vehicles. Equipment being used by members for their personal use eg GPS

I am sick of hearing from people 'we don't have to do anything because we are volunteers'.

That may have been the case years ago, but in todays age of litigation and accountability the current standard of reporting brigade activity, accountability of funding, and all of the reporting back so that a true and clear picture of just what is going on within RFS and someone made responsible for it all, then nothing will change in RFS. Either QFRS needs to step in and take charge under their guidelines and workplace practices or RFS becomes a separate entity, either way something has to be done.

I am not a mathematician, but I do know that there are a lot of people currently being employed by RFS, that shouldn't be. They have no idea what is going on 'in the real world' and are filling jobs and just waiting it out for a few years till they retire. Well if they are there they should be doing their job. They aren'tsome don't even return calls when complaints of misconduct or misuse of brigade funds are raised. Its only when pushed that they do something. Their jobs need to be looked at closely and their performance put under scrutiny, save RFS some \$'s and if need be, given the push to perform proactively. And then by getting the information from Brigades maybe funding can be made a lot easier and money spent in places where its needed. At the moment there seems to be this culture that when a training plan, or a constitution, or manual, comes out, before people have even had a chance to complete it or implement changes that these seat warmers are already changing the 'rules' again. Which brings me to Training.

The money spent on Training could be much better spent that it is. Queensland is 15 years behind other states in the implantation of a 'course' that volunteers need to do. Again, it is not mandatory to train. It is 'suggested' that volunteers train but it is NOT mandatory. No other state that I know has a basic firefighter skill (FMS) course that someone can go to a one day (or 2 day) theory session, turn up the next week for the assessment and be deemed 'Competent' because they did what they had to do with someone standing there telling them what to do!!! No minimum amount of going out and doing Hazard Reductions, doing x amount of hours training or having someone mentor them for 3 months or other amount of time. Instead they do 3 days (2 theory and 1 assesment day where they see fire) and get their certificate saying they are now a firefighter!!!! How no ones been killed to date is more good luck than good judgement. There is so much money put into supposedly 'training' yet we are so far behind other states it is ridiculous.

And if you ask the hierarchy they'll say what I just described doesn't happen. Well IT DOES.

I have so many instances where they bring in a course in more advanced areas, and before assessments are done they've changed the pre requisites, course requirements/guidelines, before anyone gets to sit their assessment – this also is just a waste of money. This means printing of more books/manuals and teaching material for each course they change.

For example, and this is my experience over the past 2 years in the area I'm in now....I have done my theory nearly 2 yrs ago for Isolated Remote Structural Firefighting, haven't done the assessment.

I have done my Crew Leader theory, haven't done the assessment over 6 months later. Yet I have been a Crew Leader/Officer/First Officer for 9 years...but I still have to redo this course. Now it has been changed again, and I still will have to either redo the theory again and hope that I can get to do an assessment so I'm deemed 'capable'. This goes on year after year that they spend hundreds of thousands of \$'s on courses that get scrapped or changed. Besides the fact that Volunteers are fed up with it, it is just a waste of money.....BAD MANAGEMENT.

They will not RPL although I had done all those things and had been doing (on the job) these things for just on 15 years!!! And I had done training and courses to be deemed competent for those things too.

EMQ implemented a First Aid /CPR course that 'was going to be rolled out all over the state'. They would've spent tens of thousands of dollars or more setting it all up, getting the paperwork for those doing it but because there were some complaints about the delivery of the course they scrapped the whole thing. Which meant that it left a whole lot of people without follow up refreshers. Why not keep the course and the material but look at the way in which it was delivered.....not just throw it all away. Who was held accountable for that ????

Whilst on Training..... The money for training materials and modules etc is one issue. The other is the lack of 'structure' in RFS. Fortunately like I said no one has been killed here in Queensland, but it is only a matter of time before it happens. (It very nearly did with some crews in Rockhampton recently) When one joins a brigade, one does a minimum of 1 or 2 days theory and then does an assessment, which I touched on earlier. Now with that FMS (Firefighter minimum skills) under their belt, a course comes up. So newbie puts up his hand to do the course. Only requirement....he has his FMS. So off he goes and does the course. Few months later another course comes up....off he goes and does that too as only requirement is FMS. Doesn't matter that since he began with RFS, he's been to maybe one or 2 Hazard Reductions or a couple of log piles burning at a Controlled Burn and its rained for the other 4 months. Up comes the AGM where they vote in Officers, newbie puts his hand up....and gets elected!! Woohoo...he's an officerin charge of maybe 5 or 10 or more maybe people. But that's OK he has the bits of paper to say he has done these courses!! This is absolutely stupidity as far as Workplace health and Safety go.

The 'heirachy' say but we can't retain volunteers so we need people to be trained up. What good is the piece of paper if 'newbie'/now an Officer has never seen a decent fire, hasn't got experience of wildfires. Its been proven that a lot of them just freeze up when things go 'pearshape' and decisions have to be made quickly yet responsibly.

And why does this happen.....because it is not mandatory to train and 'climb the ladder' with experience and 'time in the brigade'!!! That is like giving someone a carving knife, letting them do their whittling badge at Scouts and then saying here you can be a Surgeon now!!!!!! Which leads to the next thing.....retention of volunteers.

In the 16 years I have belonged to brigades, the thing I hear most often is 'I want to feel like I actually belong to something'.

The reasons they feel like they 'don't' belong is

1. Lack of Structure/Ranking
2. The bullying, discrimination and harassment that runs rampant in brigades
3. The cronyism that is in brigades.

When volunteers join a brigade they do it because they want to be part of a group of people who freely and happily give up their time to do something for their community. The first thing is they think that they would need to train (they expect that), but the training in the brigade they have joined is non-existent or very disjointed with no one really knowing what they are doing so it isn't really an organized training. They expect to be able to go and do a course, then follow up with 'hands on' training. Then when they are competent and comfortable they can strive to reach a level where they can 'step up' to the next level, do some training and then do the course and assessment. Instead they see the First officers next door neighbour or Joe Bloggs mate who's only been there a couple of weeks get chosen over them to do the course. No matter how hard they try they always get left behind in favour of someones friend. So they have several people who have been there half the length of time more 'qualified' than them. That's the first reason.

Second reason.....They try and integrate into the brigade but are shouted down when they ask a question..inferences of the fact that they are female, or they are 'dumb' because they repeatedly ask about something because they simply don't understand or because they have a slight impediment in their speech or because someone simply doesn't like them. So the humiliation just becomes too much and they leave.

Third reason.....As there is no structure in the brigades, and therefore nothing to set a goal to try and reach, the cronyism arises come Voting time, The First Officer goes round telling 'his mates'/clique who to vote for. Although other people would like to have a go and fulfilling a position in the brigade of maybe an Officer/crew leader or Secretary or Treasurer, the vote stacking happens. And of course the person with the Best standover tactics dictates to the rest who they want voted in. So the 'volunteer' knows theres no way they will ever get to be part of a 'lawful' brigade. They leave.

The examples I have quoted are REAL.....not just in one brigade but I've seen it in a lot of brigades. People go to one brigade and for one of the above reasons they leave. So they go to the next nearest brigade, maybe one or all of the 'reasons' are in that brigade too. They leave that brigade too. So there is two communities/brigades that have lost good valuable members who want to do the 'right' thing and become a volunteer firefighter.

I also know they are REAL because I have had to fight long and hard as a 'female' as a person who fought and proved myself over and over just to 'earn' the right to step up and do a course. I wasn't asked to do it because I had earned it by a 'structure' but because I stood up and challenged them on the discrimination point. I have also been pushed from 'grace' because I raised an issue of fraud by the First Officer of a brigade. And I am now battling a brigade that is fraught with ALL of the above issues. I won't give up as easily as a lot do....although I'm about at a point now where I just don't know if I can take it any longer as I can't see RFS doing anything about it. To speak out means the hierarchy just ban you from everything so you keep your mouth shut. A group of people up near Rockhampton a couple of years ago will attest to that.

I also know they are REAL because my daughter and my son joined a brigade. They did their (what was then) Level 1 Firefighting ...equivalent now to FMS.....and to this day, some 8 years later they do not have their certificates for doing all the theory and their assessment. They and half a dozen had their 'paperwork' lost. My husband was told when he wanted to do his FM1 (which was the new Level 1/nw FMS) that he could do it but he'd never be given his competency because the person doing the training 'didn't like him'. He has a different nationality background.

But all of those issues also fall back to the issue of funding. The money spent on a new volunteer, PPE, boots, helmet, gloves, goggles being handed out. They can't do an assessment without it so they have to get it. Plus the book work (6 min modules). All that money is spent on a new volunteer only to have the above issues happen and they walk away. Sometimes RFS gets their gear back, a lot of times they don't. A lot of money is lost in RFS this way.

They have now got this brilliant idea....spend more hundreds of thousands of \$'s to put training sessions on the Portal. So members can sit in front of their computer and learn how to fight fires, how to do first aid, then front up and do an assessment. They are spending money on making up CD's to distribute as well as the books, and still expecting the level of safety for volunteers to be of a high standard.

What we do as volunteers, needs to be nurtured and given the highest priority in regards of the volunteers safety. What we do is life threatening potentially. So why isn't the Government implanting good WHS policies by way of training and looking at why volunteers are leaving in droves. They are saying to justify their jobs, it's to do with work and family life. They refuse to look at the real reason people are leaving and don't want to know about it. It can be a 'family' activity as far as social activities too.

My passion for the past 16 years has been volunteering as a firefighter. I have seen a lot of good people leave, I know a lot of good people who'd love to do it but because of members and issues in their local brigades they will not join. It is extremely disheartening to see QFRS/RFS not even recognize those who have managed to stay for what in most workplaces would be eligible for Long Service. But in RFS it's not 12 yrs...it's 15 years. And the paid people are the ones who get the certificates/medals because RFS 'loses' members files/records. Even when nominated the 'paid' staff in RFS aren't interested in making sure their members are recognised.

I also have issues with something that has appeared recently. Members who went on the taskforces in October last year had 'critical stress incidents' and received severe injuries have not had the support and assistance that a 'paid' firefighter gets. Volunteers who try and do the right thing for theirs and others communities are being ignored and forgotten. I know of 2 people who I have had to seek aid for in one way or another, because the promises and assistance that they were given or told they'd get hasn't happened nearly 6 months later.

If this sounds like sour grapes..no its not. Its just what I've seen happen since joining and in all those years nothing really has changed. 16 years!!!!!! Always not enough funds. Always 'no one listens' to the people on the ground. Always ignore the 'little' people...being us the volunteers.

Yes I'm angry and its good that someone is apparently 'looking into' the Management of the RFS. But I'm cynical that anything will come of it. The Government will sweep it under the carpet or sugar coat something that sounds too good to be true and in 16 years time what will have changed???? The RFS heirachy, will they be held accountable and open to listen and hear what the volunteers want/need and are suggesting? I seriously doubt it. They want their high salaries and to hell with any reports or recommendations. That's the way it's been for years and years.

I hope I've explained myself in a manner that you can understand.....its not full of statistics and clever words, but just my submission as a volunteer firefighter. I've fought long and hard for the rights of many within the service and been subjected to a lot of things. I don't think I can do it much longer. The cronyism, the discrimination just seems to be getting stronger and stronger these days and sadly volunteers are looking at other ways to give their time to the community.

Unless something major happens to shake RFS up, they'll go on missing out on good people who want nothing more than to serve their community, knowing that they made a commitment but then having their enthusiasm and good will knocked down in one way or another. And that goes from the very top all the way down the line.