



MEDIA RELEASE

UNITED FIRE FIGHTERS UNION

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INDEPENDENT REPORT INTO VICTORIAN FIRE SERVICES WORKPLACE CULTURE

Today the United Firefighters Union (UFU) Victoria Branch has released independent research conducted by the University of Newcastle Centre of Full Employment and Equity (CofFEE). The research included a survey of CFA and MFB firefighters and staff on discrimination, bullying and sexual harassment and found:

- Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB) firefighters overwhelmingly do not tolerate discriminatory or improper behaviour
- The repeated public vilification of career firefighters in the media as an industrial relations and political tactic has damaged workforce morale, negatively impacted psychological health, and undermined trust in the leadership of the organisations
- 100% of female respondents did not support any compromising of recruitment standards. Instead respondents support long-term education and promotional activities to encourage more women into the fire services.

The UFU presented the findings of the University of Newcastle report to CFA and MFB management in 2017 and has actively engaged with them on the issues raised in the report.

As a result of those discussions the UFU, CFA and MFB announced a tripartite partnership agreeing to ongoing independent culture analysis and to taking a joint approach for making improvements to the working lives of CFA and MFB employees. That work is ongoing. Other proactive measures include:

- Improvements to complaints handling
- Establishment of a diversity committee
- Changes to recruitment processes to encourage greater diversity by making recruitment processes more accessible
- Rollout of “Road to Mental Readiness” (M2MR) resilience training Development of a firefighter wellness program.

Additionally, the UFU has:

- Created a position of Welfare Officer
- Hosted two national conferences on firefighter wellbeing with Fire Chiefs and Fire Services senior management from around Australia participating
- Actively driven the establishment of firefighter wellness programmes reflecting international best practice.

UFU Secretary, Peter Marshall, said, “The UFU welcomes this independent report and is working closely and collaboratively with the CFA and the MFB to ensure the fire services have a safe, inclusive and supportive workplace culture. The people in the fire services are great people who forgo their quality and quantity of their lives in protecting the community”.

Dr Victor Quirk of the University of Newcastle who led the research said, “The University of Newcastle Centre of Full Employment and Equity was pleased to undertake this independent study into workplace culture and morale within the MFB and CFA. Overall, 885 personnel participated in the survey and the survey showed CFA and MFB firefighters overwhelmingly do not tolerate discriminatory or improper behaviour”.

-ENDS-

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Background

The “Building a just and equitable fire services culture” report is an analysis of an independent survey of UFU members. It was commissioned by the UFU in 2016 after the 2015 Fire Services Review found morale at an all time low and likened senior management-staff relationships to “trench warfare”.

The Government response to the 2015 Fire Services Review was to commission the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VHREOC) to undertake an equity and diversity review of the fire services.

The UFU considers the VEOHRC Review was fatally flawed as it relied upon a survey that did not contain any security measures and as a result was able to be completed by anyone (regardless of whether they had any link with the CFA or MFB), anywhere and as many times as they liked. As the survey was so poorly designed and easily corruptible, any resulting report or recommendations that stem from it, cannot be considered credible or reliable.

Report- key results as provided by the independent analysis include:

- The evidence of this survey does not support a characterisation of the fire services workforce as misogynist, or accepting of uncivil or improper behaviour. Men are supportive of the presence of women firefighters and overwhelmingly intolerant of sexual harassment.
- The repeated public vilification of career firefighters in the media as an industrial relations and political tactic has severely damaged workforce morale, negatively impacting on psychological health, and undermined trust in the leadership of the organisations for their lack of public support.
- The most cited perpetrators of bullying are senior managers (as of Aug 2016), followed by immediate supervisors and volunteers.
- Respondents want more trustworthy and effective procedures for addressing any unacceptable workplace behaviour, at all levels, when it arises.
- Non-operational staff, though a small cohort, report higher levels of bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment than do career firefighters.

Methodology and demographics

All UFU members employed with the CFA or MFB were invited to participate in a secure survey with a random ID system that the UFU was not privy to and that prevents CoffEE from connecting the raw data to the survey respondent. The system precluded anyone else from responding to the survey or responding more than once.

- 885 UFU members responded
- 41.9% respondents were employed by the CFA
- 58.1% respondents were employed by the MFB
- 95.4% were professional career firefighters
- 4.6% were employed in non-operational roles (e.g. administration and corporate)
- 5.3% of all respondents were women of whom 70% were career firefighters and 30% were non-operational

The survey questions encompassed:

- the impacts on morale of the politicisation of disputes surrounding enterprise agreements
- the forms of discrimination staff had experienced or observed during their careers
- forms of bullying they have experienced or observed
- experience of sexual harassment, either as the target or perpetrator.

Gender Balance

- 100% of females and 95.9% of males believed there should be no compromising of recruitment standards.
- 93.6% females and 94.5% males prioritised public safety and firefighter safety above all other issues
- Respondents commented that long term public education to encourage young women to see firefighting as a career option, and preparatory orientation and training programs that gave potential recruits time to

physically and mentally prepare before undergoing selection tests, should be used to increase the number of women applying and meeting recruitment standards.

- A larger proportion of male firefighters (77.2%) than female firefighters (72.2%) thought that “if it can be attained without compromising rigorous recruitment standards, an improved gender balance within the fire services would be a positive step”.

Discrimination

Respondents were presented with the list of 'protected attributes' as defined by the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 2010, and asked if they had experienced adverse (discriminatory) treatment due to possessing any of these attributes.

- The most frequently cited experiences of discrimination overall referred to adverse treatment due to:
 - employment activity' (35.8%),
 - industrial activity (33.9%),
- 25% of female respondents (operational and non-operational) reported experiencing some form of sex discrimination over their career. Common issues include women having to prove themselves capable of various tasks when men are assumed to be capable of them, or communications to people of their rank that began with 'Gents'
- 12.5% of female respondents reported experiencing discrimination due to pregnancy
- The demonisation of career fire fighters during the 2016 federal political campaign, including their vilification in the media “*because they are paid fire fighters*”, led many to stop telling people what work they do, and exposed them to threats and acts of intimidation, including being spat on in the street, being accosted while attending house fires, while some reported their children were bullied at school and their families isolated in their communities.
- Respondents felt they pay a heavy cost by fighting for equipment, staffing and operational arrangements such that they can feel confident their safety is protected and they effectiveness enhanced when coming to the aid of the public.

Bullying

The survey provided for a broad definition of bullying, without limitations as to how long ago or for how long it occurred.

- 31.8% of respondents said they had experienced some form of it, this comprised of 78% of non-operational staff and 29.2% of firefighters.
- 41.2% of CFA respondents and 24.9% of MFB respondents claim experience of bullying, with non-operational staff reporting twice the levels of career firefighters in both agencies.
- Female firefighters claim less bullying than males in the CFA (25% vs 38.7%), and more than males in the MFB (33.3% vs 22.7%).
- For claims where bullying occurred for 6 months or more:
 - 79.4% of MFB respondents report that senior management /executives are the principal perpetrators of the bullying they were experiencing. This comprised 60% of female MFB respondents currently being bullied and 82.1% of MFB males currently experiencing bullying.
 - MFB respondents made up 61.8% of respondents currently experiencing bullying.
 - CFA staff comprised 38.2% of respondents reporting current bullying:
 - 28.2% of whom cited senior management as primarily responsible,
 - 15.4% an immediate supervisor and
 - 10.3% a volunteer was the perpetrator
- Survey respondents report significant distrust with governance processes in place to handle bullying:
 - 79% of bullied respondents did not make use of a formal reporting process, while 21% did so.
 - 83.1% of those who did make a formal complaint felt their complaint was not fairly considered and were not satisfied with the outcome.
 - A larger proportion of non-operational staff were dissatisfied (83.3%) than were firefighters (53.2%), a difference that was more pronounced in the MFB than the CFA.

Sexual harassment

Survey respondents were asked whether during the course of their fire service careers they had ever been 'offended, humiliated or intimidated' by exposure to any of a list of 11 types of sexually harassing behaviours listed by the Australian Human Rights Commission.

According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, 33% of Australian women have been sexually harassed since the age of 15, and 25% of Australian women have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace in the past 5 years.

The Newcastle University survey translates into 19.1% of female respondents believing themselves to have been sexually harassed in one form or another during the course of their careers with the fire services, being 21.4% of non-operational female staff and 18.2% of female career firefighters.

- Of the 885 fire services staff surveyed there are 24 men and women, firefighters and non-operational staff, who believe they have been sexually harassed during their careers, including 19% of the female respondents to this survey.
- Of the 47 female respondents to the survey, 23 (48.9%) indicated that in the course of their careers with the two fire services, they had at least once or twice been exposed to these. The average length of service of the 23 females who experienced them is 12.5 years, with 63% having more than 10 years' service.
- When asked "If you answered that you were offended, humiliated or intimidated 'once or twice' or 'frequently' to any of the above, do you consider this to be sexual harassment?" 47.8% of females who report experiencing any of these behaviours said they did not, 39.1% said they did.